



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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## **DÁIL ÉIREANN**

*Déardaoín, 13 Samhain 2025*

*Thursday, 13 November 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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

#### **Company Closures**

1. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the protections his Department will install for workers to prevent the situation that occurred at a company (details supplied) being replicated at other companies, whereby workers are left without any form of income for prolonged periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62594/25]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Last month, one of Ireland's largest delivery companies went into receivership, leaving 300 direct employees' jobs at risk and impacting a further 600-plus jobs, including subcontractors, franchisees and seasonal workers. These workers have been left in limbo and are still technically employed by Fastway but no longer getting paid. What protections will the Department install for workers to prevent the situation that occurred in Fastway being replicated in other companies, whereby workers and subcontractors are left without any form of income for prolonged periods?

**Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke):** I thank the Deputy for this very important question. My thoughts are with all those affected by the receivership and all of their families because I know it is a very difficult and uncertain time. I also know the news can be very distressing for all of those involved.

Receivership is a long-standing legal mechanism for the enforcement of a security. Usually in Ireland, a receiver is an individual appointed by a lender, such as a bank, to take control of a company's or an individual's assets that were used as security for a loan. In general, a receiver's primary function is to secure the assets of the company, which has been mortgaged or charged in favour of the security holder who appointed him or her, and realise those assets so the secured creditor's debt is repaid as quickly and efficiently as possible. Receivers are independent in the exercise of their functions and I cannot intervene in such matters. Where

employees are affected by receivership, the Government works in a co-ordinated way to assist with income supports and employment and training opportunities for those affected.

I received a collective redundancy notification from the receivers of the Nuvion Group on 31 October 2025. I understand the receivers are undertaking a 30-day consultation with employees' representatives as required by law. It is important to note there is no specific statutory restriction on employees from taking up additional employment during the consultation period in circumstances where they are not expected to attend the workplace. Provided they do not resign from the current employment, there should be no obstacle to them retaining their statutory redundancy entitlements.

Where their employer has become insolvent, employees' entitlements are protected under the redundancy payments scheme and redundancy Act. This scheme guarantees employees' statutory redundancy payments and certain wage-related entitlements such as arrears of wages and minimum notice. The receiver is responsible for applying, under the redundancy and insolvency payment schemes, on the employees' behalf. The processing of these claims cannot occur until the termination of the employment has taken place after the 30-day consultation period concludes. Following the completion of the 30-day consultation process, employees may apply for jobseeker's pay-related benefit or jobseeker's allowance, if their employment ends. Employees in need of immediate financial assistance should visit their local Intreo centre social welfare branch office, where an application for an urgent needs payment can be processed as a high priority.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister and I know the discussions we are having obviously overlap with the Minister for Social Protection. In these situations, it is very important that there is tight communication between both Departments to put in emergency services. The Minister said people can go to their Intreo offices, but in these situations it is important that dedicated are personnel available to people to answer all of their queries. The huge shock that comes with a receivership announcement leaves hundreds of families devastated. There is a lot of confusion. In particular, what workers and subcontractors were trying to find out was whether any of the payments the Minister cited would impact on their redundancy. They would need written confirmation of that because they do not want to find out, months down the line, that they have taken something that has jeopardised that. It is hugely important that we can protect those workers during prolonged periods without income when their employer has gone into receivership.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I have also been in constant contact with the Department of Social Protection on this issue to ensure employees are supported. We have also been in touch with the Revenue Commissioners, particularly for those who are self-employed and linked to this. I am very clear that the approach the Revenue will take will be a very understanding one, considering the stress of cashflow when people get news like this or a company closes urgently. For those protections, provided the employee does not resign from his or her post, the redundancy is protected. That is the key issue. I am obliged to adhere to the EU collective redundancy directive, which is very clear that the consultation period has to be completed before other supports can be given. We have in place urgent needs support from the Department of Social Protection which will be available to assist employees. There is a lot of judicial precedent around that particular directive, particularly in Luxembourg where a number of cases

were taken to ensure Ministers are unable to intervene in that 30-day period. While we are bound by that directive, we are working very closely with employees and their families and any support we can give will be forthcoming, particularly in future. We have to ensure there are huge opportunities in the economy to future-proof their families and get additional income for them at a very difficult time. This is very concerning for families but we are there to support them.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It would be very useful if the Minister and the Minister for Social Protection drew up a definitive list of actions and supports. I will work with them in doing that, so that if this situation happens again, we will have something - almost a pack - to present to workers showing them the do's and don'ts of what they are allowed to do, so people will have clarity around that. Will the Minister consider a number of measures to strengthen worker protections in similar circumstances? The first would be to have enhanced oversight of franchising and subcontracting models. Many of these arrangements blur the line between employment and self-employment. We need clearer legal definitions and enforcement to ensure the people doing the work are afforded the rights and protections of workers, including redundancy notice and holiday entitlements, even where corporate structures try to say otherwise. That is critically important.

The Minister must also remember that workers all over the country are impacted by this, including in my constituency.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Absolutely, and I know there was a Fastway depot in my home town of Mullingar where a number of workers are affected. My thoughts are with them. The Government is here to support and work with them under the current framework. I note again the significant challenges presented by the 30-day consultation period, but it is there to protect workers. Any holiday pay or wages that accrue will be paid by the receiver. It is up to the receiver to take details from the self-employed as well, particularly proof of invoices, etc., which is very important for payment of workers later down the line. We have been in very close contact with families and the Department of Social Protection and we are happy to receive any further ideas on how to deal with these matters in the future. There is a lot of legislation in place to protect workers in this regard. If there are any allegations of any other activity, the Corporate Enforcement Authority and An Garda Síochána also stand ready to investigate, should any issues be raised with them.

## **Visa Applications**

2. **Deputy Charles Ward** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment whether he plans to review the employment permits process, with a view to making the process faster; whether his Department has considered streamlining the process with the visa process, in conjunction with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62597/25]

**Deputy Charles Ward:** I would be grateful if the Minister would let me know whether he plans to review the employment permits process during his term as Minister. The process of

applying for a permit can be slow at times and I would like to know his plan to address this. Has the Department considered streamlining this process via the visa process?

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I thank the Deputy. Over the last number of years, my officials, in collaboration with officials in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, have been working strenuously to deliver a more efficient and streamlined employment permit and visa system. A key element of this is the implementation of a single application procedure for both employment permits and immigration permissions, in line with the single permit directive. It is expected that this will reduce the complexity of the current system, ensuring that the process responds effectively and quickly to meet skills and labour needs into the future.

A programme implementation team, co-chaired by my Department and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, has been established. The initial focus of this group will be on streamlining the existing processes and co-ordinating external communication; scoping the feasibility of technological, legislative and data-sharing solutions; and agreeing and laying the groundwork for subsequent implementation. The expected delivery date for this complex project is 2027. I and my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, recently met with officials from both Departments and we remain actively engaged with regard to driving momentum to ensure progress is maintained and milestones are achieved with regard to work on the single permit directive.

The modernisation and integration of the IT systems in both Departments are integral to delivering this project. I am pleased to report that earlier this year, my Department launched the new employment permits online system. This portal-based system has made the application process easier, more secure and more intuitive, resulting in a more streamlined processing experience for applicants. It sits on a Microsoft Power platform, which is based on similar technologies that the Department of justice will use, and it is expected to move to and support the infrastructure required for a single application process across both Departments.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** I have assisted my constituents in applying and reapplying for employment permits in recent months.

9 o'clock

The process can sometimes be unnecessarily long, particularly in the case of employment permit appeals. At the moment appeals in respect of this permit take around five months via the Department, which is a very long time. The current system of people having to wait for their employment permit to be granted before they can apply for the visa is inefficient and causes unnecessary delays. It does not make sense for the process to be separated. It is very frustrating for people and employers who are waiting for answers. They are left in complete limbo. The current process should be streamlined to allow for faster decision-making. Has the Minister of State considered working with the embassies to ensure that both are granted at the same time to give people better clarity? As it stands, employers are unable to properly plan and accommodate employees.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for his feedback. Our Department has taken significant steps in making the employment permit system faster and more efficient. As I said

in my earlier contribution, we launched the employment permit online system back in April of this year. We have already seen how it has transformed the application process. It makes it easier and more secure. Over 47,000 successful registrations have been completed and the permit submissions have returned to pre-launch levels. Currently the processing times are around 31 business days for general employment permits and 16 business days for critical skills' permits. These timelines continue to improve. It is part of the broader digital transformation project we are undertaking and it allows Ireland to become and remain competitive on a global stage in regard to critical skills and critical skills' employment permits.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** With full employment, employers who are relying heavily on employment permits have found it increasingly difficult in recent years to find people to fill important roles. It is clear that an efficient system is required for employers to address the labour shortage to allow them to plan, recruit and maintain their business. Is the Department working with employers to ensure the current system is workable for them? Can the Department improve communications with employers regarding specific applications? Employers lack efficient communication channels with the Department regarding employment permits. The current application process seems like a box-ticking exercise focused on rigid criteria rather than individual circumstances. The Department needs to work with employers if we are to address labour shortages going forward.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** We have implemented a huge modernisation of the permit system here in recent times. As I said earlier, it was launched in April of this year and, as part of that, we engaged extensively with business representatives and trusted partners. We went out most recently with a consultation process on the updated occupation list. We have also enhanced our learning and engagement to ensure that when employers are looking to make an application, they have the learning and the engagement, so they can get it right first time. That is really important. As part of that digital transformation, it is critical that we get the single application process in place, that we get the employment permits along with the visa application, and that the immigration process is streamlined under the single permit directive. We are very much working together with officials in exploring ways we can expedite the visa process for critical skills. It is really important. The economy is still going strong and there are labour shortages in certain sectors. We need to address that. The next phase of this is to have the single online process in place by 2027.

## **EU Directives**

3. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment how he is taking account of the views expressed by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in its scrutiny of the proposed omnibus directive, in particular the committee's concerns that the proposals extend far beyond the simplification of burdensome regulations for small and medium enterprises and could weaken the due diligence obligations of large companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62596/25]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I want to talk to the Minister about the proposed omnibus directive and in particular the enterprise committee's concerns that the proposals extend far beyond simplification of burdensome regulations for small and medium enterprises and that

these could weaken the due diligence obligations of larger companies. It is really important that we need to know where we stand on it. Is Ireland voting in favour of deregulation or to protect the corporate sustainability due diligence directive?

**Deputy Peter Burke:** As the Deputy is aware, simplification and burden reduction is a key issue at EU level with a view to improving EU competitiveness and ensuring there are no disproportionate burdens on business, particularly SMEs. In this context, the omnibus on sustainability was published in February 2025. I wish to acknowledge the work undertaken by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in relation to the omnibus on sustainability. This included public sessions held on 11 and 18 June, the latter of which included participation by officials from my Department in relation to the implications for the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, CSDDD, and the corporate sustainability reporting directive. I have noted the contents of the subsequent report from the joint committee, dated 18 July 2025.

In line with the call from EU leaders to make early progress on this omnibus, a negotiating mandate was agreed by member states on 23 June 2025 on the content aspect of the proposal. I understand that the European Parliament is scheduled to adopt a position on the proposal today, after which it is expected that trilogue negotiations will shortly commence.

I welcome progress on the proposal, which will significantly help EU enterprises and, most notably and critically, SMEs. While changes have been proposed in the published directive, in the context of the EU simplification and burden reduction agenda, the intention remains to promote responsible business conduct. It is envisaged that in-scope companies will continue to be required to conduct risk-based human rights and environmental due diligence and to integrate due diligence into all corporate policies and risk management systems. Ireland has sought to play a constructive role in the negotiations and I will be mindful of the observations of the joint committee when the trilogue negotiations get under way.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Everybody agrees on what needs to be done for small and medium businesses in particular, and for any other businesses, in addressing the administrative burden, the duplication and a lot of the nonsense around requirements that are made on businesses. Deputy Charles Ward, my Donegal colleague, is here and when I hear about deregulation, I am mindful of what the defective concrete block scandal is costing us right now. We are going to have to pay billions of euro because of light regulation. I really do not want us to go down that road again.

The Irish Coalition for Business and Human Rights, whose members include ICTU, Christian Aid Ireland, Trócaire, Oxfam, Friends of the Earth Ireland and many other civil organisations and academic experts, says that CSDDD will not be effective unless it includes maintaining the CSDDD risk-based approach to due diligence and allowing companies to focus on prioritise those risks to human rights and the environment within their chain of activity. We really need to get this right.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Anyone who saw the Draghi scorecard published a fortnight ago will see it really points out the implementation process of the simplification revolution and how slow it is. We really need to have an impetus on this. I spoke to all the MEPs in our party in

the European Parliament to really get a big push on this. There are six pieces of omnibus legislation currently with the Parliament. We need to see simplification really borne out for our SMEs. We see from the original proposal that 35% of a reduction can be achieved by 2030, with some €37 billion of a saving for SMEs. No one is talking about key regulation that protects our citizens in terms of what the Deputy spoke about in relation to on mica, defective concrete blocks and products like that. That is key for our economy. We have learned a lot over the past decade and previously about our regulatory processes. We have a huge number of regulators in the State now but we need to ensure their interoperability with SMEs can be enhanced, that we do things a little easier, that we are making progress and that we are not putting an unnecessary burden on businesses, which is key for me as an enterprise Minister.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I do not think the two things are contradictory in the sense of what we need to do in this space. Obviously, we need to do everything. Small and medium businesses are really struggling right now but we do not need to sacrifice, for example, how we are going to meet our emissions targets or how we are going to ensure that employees' and workers' rights are protected within this space. Maintaining the CSDDD harmonised civil liability regime to prevent fragmentation and increased legal costs and ensuring justice for victims are really important. We also need to ensure that the CSDDD requirement to put into effect climate transition plans is maintained. We need to protect the CSDDD provisions on stakeholder engagement. The changes brought about by the omnibus proposal not only render the CSDDD ineffective by making sure that companies will fail to identify the most severe risks that take place further down their value chains, but also fail in their stated aim of simplifying legislation. The changes will mean that all due diligence obligations are passed to suppliers. There is a way of getting this right but we need to get the balance right.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** This is about simplification. One of the key issues is the need to support our SMEs to ensure the burden placed on them is not inappropriate. With regard to each of the issues mentioned, a risk-based approach will continue, which is important. Stakeholder involvement will be core to the directive, which is also very important.

With regard to harmonised civil liability, obviously national governments will be able to make a determination on this, which is also very important. With regard to our climate policies, it is key that we look at implementation and this is what the new trial will be focused on. It will be focused on the implementation of climate action and how we support businesses to try to embark upon transition. The key issue is that we have too much regulation. We know from our SMEs and businesses the pressure they are under and we need to ensure we have proportionate legislation and that, as an economy, we incentivise innovative approaches and ensure we are protecting citizens. In no way am I talking about watering down the regulatory requirements of key processes in our State, which are so important. This is about doing things quicker. We saw from the Draghi and Letta reports the work we have to do in a European context. Now is the time to get on with the job.

### **Artificial Intelligence**

4. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the progress being made by his Department on creating an operational AI regulatory sandbox

by 2 August 2026, in line with the EU AI Act 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62583/25]

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** What progress has been made by the Department on the creation of an operational AI regulatory sandbox by 2 August 2026, in line with the EU AI Act?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** As Deputy Geoghegan is aware, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act entered into force in August 2024 and provides a harmonised regulatory framework for AI systems developed or deployed in the EU. It is designed to provide a high level of protection to people's health, safety and fundamental rights, while simultaneously promoting the adoption of human-centric, trustworthy AI. Its provisions will start to apply in a phased manner over the period to August 2027.

Earlier this year, the Government agreed to adopt a distributed model of competent authorities, leveraging the State's established sectoral regulatory authorities, to carry out supervisory and enforcement roles for the purposes of the AI Act. The Department is leading across government on the national implementation of the AI Act, and officials are working closely with colleagues in other Departments to devise the optimal configuration of a national competitive authority for the Act to ensure comprehensive, robust and effective implementation in Ireland.

To date, 13 public bodies have been designated as market surveillance authorities and four as notifying authorities, with some of these public bodies having a dual role. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has also been designated to act as Ireland's single point of contact, as required by the AI Act, to facilitate co-ordination and to provide a number of centralised functions for the distributed model until a new independent entity, the AI office of Ireland, is established on a statutory basis to carry out this role.

As Deputy Geoghegan noted, the AI Act stipulates that member states should ensure their competent authorities establish at least one AI regulatory sandbox at national level to be operational by 2 August 2026. The AI Act introduces AI regulatory sandboxes as a key mechanism to foster innovation. They should aim to enhance legal certainty for innovators and the competent authorities' oversight and understanding of the opportunities, emerging risks and impacts of AI use.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House.*

They should facilitate regulatory learning for both authorities and businesses. The participation in the AI regulatory sandbox should focus on issues that raise legal uncertainty for providers and prospective providers to innovate, experiment with AI in the European Union and contribute to evidence-based regulatory learning.

The AI office of Ireland will act as the central co-ordinating body for the EU AI Act and provide a focal point for the promotion and adoption of transparent and safe AI in Ireland to ensure that we fully capture the strategic opportunity that AI presents. The office will also be responsible for ensuring the timely establishment of the national AI regulatory sandbox.

It is important to note that in addition to preparing practical guidance to support member states setting up national sandboxes, the European Commission is also required to adopt

implementing acts for sandboxes, setting out principles regarding participation, co-operation and procedures. Officials are actively involved in EU working groups related to these matters and we await the first drafts of these proposals from the Commission, which are expected in the first quarter of 2026.

The Department will continue to engage with the European Commission, other member states, industry, the SME sector and our regulators to look for opportunities to help inform and shape preparations and to identify opportunities to collaborate in establishing an operational AI regulatory sandbox.

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** I thank the Minister of State for the reply. He indicated the establishment of the AI office will be crucial in respect of the regulatory sandbox. I look forward to primary legislation being introduced on this and to it coming before the Committee on Artificial Intelligence, of which I am Vice Chair. One of the things that struck me when we were in Estonia recently at a digital summit was just how far ahead some other EU countries are in the adaptation of AI. What the Department is doing in respect of ensuring small businesses in the enterprise sector can stay competitive by harnessing the benefits of AI is a model that other countries could emulate. Beyond the Department of enterprise, we could go a lot further. I am heartened to hear there is a lot of cross collaboration taking place in respect of the establishment of the AI office. Does the Minister of State agree that the forthcoming EU Presidency could create a great opportunity for Ireland, given that we have lot of the large language model, LLM, companies based here, to have an AI summit to promote the benefits of AI and what it could bring to this country?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank Deputy Geoghegan for his interest in the AI Act. There are questions here today and certainly his welcome for the AI office is crucial. The Minister, Deputy Burke, allocated more than €1.4 million for its establishment, with the staffing plan now in place, and to ensure the sandbox is operational by August next year, which is not far away. We are also working with the EU digital innovation hubs and CeADAR to provide technical expertise and support for businesses. We need to continue to ensure the AI office can be functional in this time. For us, the sandbox is not another bureaucratic hurdle; it is certainly a tool that can support SMEs on their innovation journey. They can test AI systems safely, reduce compliance uncertainty and speed up market access. We have a good story to tell in regard to new start-ups in the AI sector. We want to become a leader among many competitive members in the EU to ensure we are at the fore of AI regulation. This initiative is very important on that journey.

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** In the enterprise sector, work is under way and has been done historically in Ireland when it comes to attracting investment and technology companies here. Now we see in Ireland the work Enterprise Ireland has done in supporting the hyper scaling of technology companies and start-ups. We saw some measures in the budget and, hopefully, there are more to come in future to support the emergence of an indigenous technology industry here. Some of the steps we have taken could be adapted in other Departments. Perhaps we could see the leading role this Department is taking in other spheres, such as health and education. We can look at what other EU countries are doing. The hosting of the EU Presidency by Ireland presents a unique opportunity. A number of years ago when Estonia held

the Presidency it created a digital summit. We could demonstrate that we are the lead in class when it comes to the regulation of AI and we could harness some of the benefits that are coming.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I agree with Deputy Geoghegan. It will be an important opportunity when Ireland takes over the Presidency to showcase our SMEs, the work we are doing in the AI sector and the steps we are taking in the Government. The AI office will have statutory independence, reporting annually to the Oireachtas and the AI committee. It will also co-ordinate regulators under a clear governance structure. Ireland has a long track record with regard to regulation and the integrity of the system we implement in many sectors, not only in technology but also in life science and medtech. We are a very attractive place to do business due to our regulations and our principles on integrity, justice and transparency. This is very important from an EU perspective as it gives us a competitive advantage. We want to ensure that participation in the AI Act allows us to have this openness and equal access to treatment among member states.

### Company Closures

5. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the supports his Department is providing to companies impacted by the receivership announcement of a company (details supplied) to prevent further closures and job losses; the steps his Department is taking to ensure the packages held by the company are delivered to their owners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62267/25]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I want to speak further about Fastway because there is so much to be spoken about. The Minister knows that Fastway is built on a network of local franchisees and subcontractors, many of whom have been the backbone of parcel delivery in rural and regional Ireland. These are small family-run operations which have invested heavily, some of them up to €70,000 in recent months, in vehicles, equipment and staff. That has been based on trust in the system. They worked hard during the pandemic to deliver items to homes in lockdown. Many of them are owed significant sums of money, with no clarity on whether they will ever see it. They are left in limbo too.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank the Deputy for this very important question. It relates to a matter which is very close to my heart due to the fact that there is a depot in Mullingar. I very much understand the business model and the pressures that employees and their families face as a result of what happened.

Receivership is a long-standing legal mechanism for the enforcement of a security. Usually in Ireland, a receiver is an individual appointed by a lender, such as a bank, to take control of company assets that were used as security for a loan. In general, a receiver's primary function is to secure the assets of the company, which have been mortgaged or charged in favour of the security holder who appointed him or her, and realise those assets in order that the secured creditor's debt is repaid as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Creditors, including other businesses and self-employed contractors impacted by the receivership, should contact the receivers to submit proof of debt and file a claim regarding

unpaid moneys and invoices. Revenue has confirmed that it will work with individual couriers and businesses and will be pragmatic in its approach where businesses experience cash-flow difficulties as a result of the loss of business or payments. Businesses experiencing cash-flow issues as a result of these developments may wish to also contact the national enterprise hub in our Department, which provides a wide range of supports and is a central, all-of-government service to assist businesses.

The Department of Social Protection provides a number of welfare supports and is also on hand to assist. If a person is self-employed as a franchise holder or contractor, they may qualify for the self-employed jobseeker's benefit if they satisfy PRSI contribution conditions. They can also apply for basic supplementary welfare allowance as an interim payment while their application is being processed, subject to normal eligibility criteria. An employee of a franchise holder or a self-employed contractor who is impacted by the receivership, for example, by being put on temporary lay-off, may apply for jobseeker's pay-related benefit or jobseeker's allowance, depending on their PRSI record and means.

Neither I nor my Department have any responsibility in the treatment of packages held by the Nuvion group. Such transactions are a matter between the parties under contract law. I reiterate that any affected businesses should engage with the receivers.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Some of that information is useful. I thank the Minister for it. I commend my colleagues Senator Maria McCormack and Councillor Claire Murray who are working in the Laois area and who pulled together all the agencies last week to try to get as much information as possible for people. This is not just a commercial issue; it is about jobs and livelihoods. Every unpaid franchisee and subcontractor struggling to keep afloat represents a potential job loss and another business at risk.

I want to ask the Minister about the packages. He stated that they are not his responsibility, but many small retailers and online sellers have valuable stock that is tied up and that cannot be delivered to their customers. For some, this could represent a critical portion of their Christmas trade. We need to do something to protect those people's jobs. Some of these businesses went to an Post but it stated that it cannot manage the deliveries they need. We are coming into a critical period during which small businesses make a lot of their money.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I am fully aware of the gravity of the situation, particularly for franchisees and small self-employed contractors. The delivery of parcels is a matter of contract law. Delivery timelines relating to orders and the position regarding refunds are very much set out in consumer legislation and, from the point of view of the businesses involved, contract law. I have mentioned this matter to my colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, from a transport perspective. An Post has absorbed some of the capacity, but there are also other providers in the marketplace. This is a challenge, but, critically, the matter is governed by contract law.

There are a number of other opportunities with existing providers for self-employed people and those who are involved in the franchise part of the business. A number of companies have taken some workers on, which is very important. It is key for workers and self-employed people to know that once they do not resign, their entitlement to redundancy, accrued wages

and accrued holiday pay - this is important in the context of the consultation period - will not be affected.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** This incident once again highlights the vulnerability of small operators when large logistic firms collapse. We need to examine the environment in which some companies are allowed to operate. Employees and those who are dependent on them, like subcontractors, need to be notified about what is happening at a very early stage. Earlier, the Minister referred to the fact that we need better corporate law and the ability to investigate, particularly where companies are owned by foreign investment funds. We need to have some way of ensuring that businesses that operate in this State do so in a responsible manner to their employees, the environment and the State. I urge the Minister to treat this not just as a single case of corporate insolvency but also as a wider economic risk and one that could hit hundreds of workers, drivers and small enterprises across the country.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** There are huge challenges in our economy in respect of the turnover of jobs, which I, as Minister, can see. There is huge opportunity, but there is also a turnover of jobs every week. The Government is acutely aware of this and is supporting employees through it.

It is clear that the Corporate Enforcement Authority is responsible for policing company law. If there are any issues, they should be reported. We have a very strong statutory context that underpins the operation of companies in this State. An Garda Síochána has responsibility in respect of other matters that have been raised and that should be reported. There have been reports in the media about this issue as well.

Critically, we are here to support the workers, the contractors and franchisees. We will do everything we can to ensure that they are paid. This is a particularly important period for families. It can be very challenging. We will be there to support them with urgent payments. I am aware of the challenges many families face because I meet them at my clinics every week. The Government will not be found wanting in the context of supporting them at this difficult time. I assure those involved that training will be provided as well and that they are living in an economy of opportunity. There are opportunities, so they should not lose hope.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea):** Question No. 6 is in the name of Deputy Gibney.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** The Department recently published the action plan on collective bargaining. The implementation of this plan is an important and welcome step towards better collective bargaining coverage, but there is no commitment to change the voluntary system of industrial relations. That system gives employers a veto on engagement with their workers collectively. Why is this the case?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea):** We are on question No. 6, which relates to the new AI office.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** My goodness, I am so sorry. This is not what I have prepared for. Can I swap the order? I do not have it in front of me. I will have to skip the question.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea):** The question is to ask the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the means by which the transition of the new AI office to a fully independent statutory body will be managed.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I can swap with Deputy Gibney if she wants to take my time.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Would it be okay to take two minutes to prepare?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea):** If that is okay with the House.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Is that okay with the Minister? Many thanks. My apologies.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I am down the list a bit, so I can swap with Deputy Gibney and she can take my slot.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Perfect.

### **Business Supports**

7. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if his Department and Enterprise Ireland plan to introduce a growth equity fund to help scale and co-invest in large privately owned Irish companies with a view to expansion in other jurisdictions; if his Department has researched similar programmes which are operational in other European countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Germany; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62264/25]

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Do the Department and Enterprise Ireland plan to introduce a growth equity fund to help scale and co-invest in large privately owned companies with a view to expansion in other jurisdictions. Has the Department researched similar programmes which are operational in other European companies, such as Denmark, Finland and Germany?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Ireland has a strong start-up ecosystem, but scaling remains a challenge due to limited access to long-term patent capital and finance. My Department is finalising a finance for scaling implementation strategy. This strategy will align with the commitments outlined in the programme for Government and supports the specific actions set out in the action plan on competitiveness and productivity. The purpose of the strategy is to move towards an ecosystem in which firms will have a reliable range of funding options to scale and expand. The strategy will include an SME scaling fund administered by Enterprise Ireland. The exact design features of the fund are being developed, but my Department, together with Enterprise Ireland, intends to have the fund in place as soon as possible. The work to have a fund in place in 2026 will be progressed over the coming months.

It is important to note that the SME scaling fund is only part of a suite of instruments to be delivered across two phases that will work to enhance the ecosystem and, consequently, reduce the gap in the market. For example, policy actions to further incentivise private capital to invest more at the scaling stage will be developed in the second phase of the work which is already under way.

All of this work follows on from the report of the finance for scale-ups working group entitled the Use of Finance as a Catalyst to Develop a Scaling Ecosystem, which was published by the Department in July 2024 and which is available online. The finance for scale-ups working group examined good practices in other countries and established an international subgroup specifically to examine policy interventions in other EU member states, including Denmark, Finland, France, Spain and Sweden. It also looked at the UK and Singapore. The recommendations in the report were informed by the research of the international subgroup and included the introduction of a State-backed scaling fund.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Ireland has a significant number of indigenous companies that have successfully scaled €100 million in revenue and turnover and 250 employees, creating essential local employment and economic prosperity across the country, especially in rural areas. Despite the efforts of many, the majority of the current State supports treats such companies as too large to be SMEs and too small to be public limited companies, PLCs. While Revenue currently provides direct equity to start-ups and high-potential start-ups, HPSUs, larger Irish companies lack the opportunity for direct equity investment to support international expansion, especially through mergers and acquisitions. I have already outlined that Denmark and Germany are providing support to companies to expand outside their jurisdictions. The gap slows down the scaling growth of Irish companies outside Ireland despite the success of some notable exceptions. The lack of direct State equity backing invariably means most end up using private equity. The opportunity for Ireland to cover it is lost and foreign ownership is the ultimate outcome.

That is basically where I am coming from on this. These companies want to expand. There is an opportunity for them to expand but they cannot do so. If they get the equity, it is extremely expensive. In order to expand, they end up getting into ownership from abroad.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for the points he has raised. I assure him that the fund is being designed in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland. We hope it will be operational in 2026. We expect that there will be direct investment in start-ups first. To the Deputy's point, we need to support indigenous Irish SMEs. That will enable Enterprise Ireland, which does tremendous work in the context of co-investing alongside private leads. Enterprise Ireland has a great reputation as being the honest broker in regard to seed and venture capital schemes. We want to sequence this to ensure that SMEs have early deployment and long-term leverage, and that we can give them investment when it is required.

On the size of the equity gap, we estimate that to be in the region of €860 million to €1.3 billion. The State's role is to act as a catalyst as opposed to replacing private markets. We need to support that. The fund will be right-sized within the capital plan.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** This is an important matter, because these companies create a huge amount of employment locally, especially in rural areas. It is important that we help them to expand further, particularly where they already have access to markets but are restricted because they need access to finance in order to expand. One of the companies I know has more than 800 employees, is operating outside Ireland and is bringing finance back into the country in the context of what it is doing. It is also giving employment to people who are working here but who also work abroad for certain periods.

There is a huge opportunity here. Many of these companies are not based in the major population centres like Cork city or Dublin city; they are based in rural areas. They have grown gradually over the years and have made a contribution to local economies and to the national economy. They want to continue to do that. Japan has one person employed for every person who is retired. As a result of its work abroad, Japan is able to get money in to support that system.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I agree with the Deputy. Our Department is very much about keeping Irish companies scaling and ensuring that they continue to realise their export potential and create anchor jobs within the regions and right across the country. The purpose in this regard is to protect vital jobs that are the backbone of our economy. That is why we want the strategy to operate on the basis of their needs. Enterprise Ireland already does tremendous work in this space. There is an expert advisory panel comprising industrial leaders, venture capitalists, Scale Ireland and tax specialists. The panel has met on four occasions since December 2024. We want to ensure we are shaping this, that there is a governance standard in place and that, in the context of the Deputy's point, we can support many companies that need of capital at this time in their business journeys.

### **Artificial Intelligence**

6. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the means by which the transition of the new AI office to a fully independent statutory body will be managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62287/25]

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I thank Members for facilitating me. Will the Minister outline the means by which the transition of the new AI office to a fully-independent statutory body will be managed? Will he provide some details in that regard, please?

**Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank the Deputy. The establishment of the AI office of Ireland is a strategic initiative of this Government. I am delighted to have secured start-up funding of €1.4 million as part of budget 2026 for the office's establishment. The AI office will act as a central co-ordinating body for the implementation of the AI Act in Ireland and will also provide a focal point for the promotion and adoption of transparent and safe AI in Ireland to ensure that we fully capture the strategic opportunity that AI presents.

My officials, in collaboration with Departments across a range of sectors, are developing the general scheme of the regulation of artificial intelligence. This will provide the implementation and enforcement of the AI Act at national level in domestic legislation, including: the

establishment of a new national AI office as an independent statutory entity which will act as the central co-ordinating authority for the Act; the empowerment of designated competent authorities with market surveillance regulation powers in accordance with the AI Act; provisions for co-operation among and the sharing of information across the national competent authorities; and the laying down of rules for penalties and other enforcement measures for non-compliance.

It is my intention to bring the general scheme to the Government over the coming weeks. There are provisions within it which will ensure that the transition from interim arrangements to a permanent statutory structure will be legally and operationally seamless. The general scheme will provide powers to decide on the date on which this will happen post the enactment of the legislation.

The distributed model agreed by the Government means that existing sectoral regulators will supervise and enforce the AI Act, supported centrally by the new AI office of Ireland. The national AI Act implementation committee, which chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, which has responsibility for AI and on which officials from my Department sit, was established in February. In the intervening period, the committee has brought the designated market surveillance authorities, MSAs, together to work on agreeing an approach to prepare for the new enforcement role. Since they were designated in July, additional MSAs have joined the committee.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** It is helpful to hear how much effort is going into the establishment of this office. I held two leadership roles in a State agency that is arguably the most independent. The national human rights institution in any jurisdiction is informed by the Paris Principles. We have to understand how that independence is going to be guaranteed in this instance. If the body originates from within the Department of enterprise, then I have concerns that conflicts exist which may create fundamental issues on the foundation of the organisation that will carry on into its future. It would be really helpful if the Department were to look at the Paris Principles and identify how we can ensure independence.

Across the State agency sector, which is where many competent bodies sit, we have varying levels of independence, of powers of reporting and so on. All of these regulatory functions are challenged by a lack of independence and inconsistency across those bodies. AI and what it is going to do to our society are such fundamental issues that we have to get this right from the outset. Rather than focus on speed, I want to ensure that we look for quality at the foundational level.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** The Deputy makes valid points on this. The Government has not made a decision yet. We are going through a lot of the issues and seeking advice on them. Hopefully, in the coming months, we will be able to go to Government with a memorandum on the final structure. Enforcement and independence are key. It is important we have public trust in artificial intelligence. Some of the areas the Deputy referenced will be looked at in detail. I also note the distributive model we have taken. For example, we have the Health Products Regulatory Authority looking after drugs and products like that, and the Irish Aviation Authority looking after aviation. That model will stand to us because it really goes to the expertise that has been built up in the State and people know the areas they have been regulating in the past.

The AI office will draw all of that together and will look at areas where we can enhance AI and areas where we can work in a safe manner. Obviously, we have our regulatory sandbox as well, which will be brought up. That will provide a key opportunity as will some of the tertiary partnerships. It is an exciting space but the Deputy is right that we do have to be careful and ensure our independence and public trust which is key in the opportunities that will be there in the future.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I am glad the Minister raised public trust because I feel there is this kind of pushback against regulation in terms of losing our competitiveness, missing opportunities and America and China racing ahead with their AI development. The issue I have is that their development will lead to products built in a regulatory environment that will not have public trust. We must look at that regulatory space and make sure that even the requirements Europe is putting forward to us meet the standards we want here. We have heard from colleagues already this morning that they feel we should be best in class. Sometimes I hear from Government spokespeople that we are best in class. I do not believe that is the case. For example, I do not believe the Data Protection Commission, DPC, has proven its worth in the past number of years. Even though it has the powers, it has not enforced them.

Similarly, if we do not get it right from the outset with the AI office - and we already see online all the ways in which AI can go wrong, for example, the slot which is currently generated - it will be mean people will not use AI or trust it. It will fundamentally undermine our democracy and society. It is important we get it right from the outset. I encourage the Minister to look at the Paris Principles.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Absolutely. We will consider them as part of our deliberative process. The enterprise committee will be key in our approach. The private sector has done a lot of good things with AI. Insight is the largest research centre in Europe. It is based in Trinity College and shows us how we can commercialise research based in tertiary education.

We do have a lot to do from a public service point of view and in Departments. That is where a huge amount of Government work needs to be carried out. Public trust is important because general purpose technology comes with so many challenges as well as opportunities. We have to ensure we are managing those challenges and maintaining public trust. That is why it is very important - and I do not say this lightly in terms of that distributive model - we have the expertise built in in those key areas that have public trust. Many of them, in terms of the areas they manage, have a very strong track record. I am happy to work with the Deputy on the areas she referenced. This is a collective approach. There are huge opportunities but there are risks and we should be open to that risk and manage it appropriately to ensure we are building public trust as well.

*Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Tourism Promotion**

9. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will report on his proposals to cultivate cross-Border tourism. [62277/25]

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** Will the Minister outline to the House his work on the promotion of cross-Border tourism?

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank the Deputy for this important question. Enhancing cross-Border co-operation and connections is a key ambition of this Government and tourism is an important asset we have to realise together.

Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a leading holiday destination and works closely with colleagues in Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland. In addition to a commitment to work with Fáilte Ireland to develop a balanced regional spread of tourism throughout the country, further advancing the experience brands, the programme for Government also includes a commitment to support Tourism Ireland to further integrate tourism offerings on an all-island basis.

The Government is also committed to completing construction of the Narrow Water Bridge and to supporting the local authorities on both sides of the bridge in developing the new tourism opportunities it will bring and to collaborating with partners North and South of the Border.

At the North South Ministerial Council tourism sectoral in June 2024, Ministers signed a joint ministerial statement supporting sustainable tourism and agreed to the establishment of a joint strategic co-ordination group for the sustainable growth of the tourism sector across both jurisdictions.

The all-island strategic tourism group, which is co-chaired by officials in my Department and the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, with representatives from the three tourism agencies, provides a strategic approach, aligned to policy priorities, to the development and implementation of all-island initiatives. The aim of the group is aligned with the measure in the programme for Government to support Tourism Ireland to further integrate tourism offerings on an all-island basis.

Tourism is also a central pillar of the shared island initiative. The brand collaboration project to connect the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coastal Route in the north-west region has made significant progress this year with the roll-out of the small grants scheme for destinations on both sides of the Border.

In May, Tourism Ireland launched a new campaign called Coast to Coast: The Scenic Route, which was supported by the shared island tourism brand collaboration project. The campaign reached almost 15 million people across Britain.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I thank the Minister and welcome his response. As Ireland's largest indigenous industry, tourism is a crucial sector and our largest regional employer. It is right that Ireland is marketed by Tourism Ireland on an all-Ireland basis and I welcome efforts to link the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coastal Route. In effect, this is nearly a circuit of the island of Ireland for tourism trails. Will the Minister speak to any plans to complete the circuit and to link and extend Ireland's Ancient East into the North but also in terms of Ulster being a destination? Will he also speak to his work to encourage cross-Border tourism in terms of Donegal, Derry, Monaghan, Tyrone, Armagh and Cavan?

**Deputy Peter Burke:** We are working closely with our partners in Northern Ireland to expand our brands, particularly Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. There is ground for expansion there. I met with Minister Archibald in London last week. We were doing an expo together. It is great to see everyone together trying to push Ireland as a destination. We have discussed a number of areas which we will be supporting through the shared island initiative but also through Tourism Ireland, the all-island body.

There is a huge amount of opportunity. We currently have approximately 46,000 SMEs in the tourism sector. One in every ten jobs is supported in that sector. It is key that we grow its value proposition. I also want to reflect that tourism is now at the heart of the Department of enterprise. There are so many SMEs right around our country that depend on that authentic offering that is really valued all over the world. We will be doing a huge amount to develop business models on our SME side to support the opportunity that there is in the market. I believe we have very bright days ahead. We will hopefully launch our new tourism policy in early December. It will be a big opportunity to show the vision we have as a Government to enhance the product and brand as well as to grow revenues and jobs sustainably. It is also critical that we develop career pathways that are important for people working in the sector.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I look forward to seeing that tourism policy. I hope the Minister incorporates a rail network that runs through Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal. If you look at the top of Ireland on the map, we have no rail network up there. I know it is not the Minister's Department but I hope he is working with the Department of Transport to ensure that happens. It is not on at this stage.

The maximum potential across the avenue of tourism will require an accurate understanding of how the tourism sector is performing. For some time now there seems to be some confusion on that point. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, has been recording a decline in visitors this year, which some stakeholders have refuted. Any confusion should now be put to rest given the latest tourism barometer from Fáilte Ireland. It shows that 43% of all tourism businesses reported a fall in income this summer. The situation seems to be worst outside the coastal tourism trails. Will the Minister outline his response to this and his efforts to support the industry and promote jobs in the sector? Will he also speak on the rail network and whether he has discussed it with the Minister for Transport?

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Last year was a bumper year for tourism and it is a big challenge to replicate that. However, we have to look at the evidence and the facts. Some 12% fewer seats came into our country because of the airport cap. That was a very significant challenge for the tourism sector. That will not be the case for the winter ahead. I think there will be approximately 9% more seats in the winter ahead, which will provide capacity for well over 1 million people to come into our country. This will provide a huge amount of additional opportunity.

The plan that we will hopefully launch in early December will show how we are going to grow revenue sustainably and grow the number of visitors coming in, which is critically important. We will also outline career pathways as well as looking at extending the season from St. Brigid's Day right out to Halloween. There is a huge amount of opportunity in those areas. We will have a very exciting culinary strategy looking at food and beverages. I am going to do that on an all-island basis, which is important, working in co-operation with our

colleagues in Northern Ireland. That is a huge opportunity, particularly for markets, like in Europe, which are under pressure in terms of how they view the authentic offering from artisan food producers and distilleries right around the country. We have a lot of opportunity there. I will raise the other issue of rail with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

### **Small and Medium Enterprises**

10. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the position regarding supports for any SME that will not benefit from the planned VAT reduction in July 2026; if targeted supports for small businesses that are facing increasing costs will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59971/25]

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I welcome the VAT 9 proposal which will come into effect in July of next year. However, I am wondering, particularly in the case of small and medium enterprises that will not benefit from the scheme, if there could be targeted supports for them in respect of increased costs of doing business.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank Deputy Ward for this very important question. The Government recognises that the cost of doing business has been an issue for firms in recent years arising from both the wider inflationary trends and Government-mandated changes in the form of improvements to working conditions across a range of areas. It is important to note that costs for firms, as measured through the CSO's wholesale price index, are declining and are down 2.6% in the 12 months to September 2025.

Most recently the Government has taken action to address business costs through the publication of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity and the convening of the cost of business advisory forum, which are both commitments in the programme for Government. The focus of the action plan is on actions that can be taken to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness and productivity which, in turn, will lead to improvements in our economic performance. A core theme of the plan is regulating for growth and controlling costs, with 18 actions, including five priority actions, focused on addressing this issue. Key action areas include better regulation, which will decrease the regulatory burden for business, addressing Ireland's high legal costs, and improving competition in our markets. The establishment of the cost of business advisory forum delivers on the commitment regarding supports for small business, enterprise and industries. The first meeting of the forum took place on 11 June with representatives in attendance from across Ireland's enterprise sector, including SMEs, joined by officials from a variety of State agencies, regulators, and Government Departments. The forum is a tripartite collaboration bringing together a broad selection of representative bodies spanning multiple sectors as well as multinational corporations. The purpose is to jointly consider those issues that can lead to higher costs for businesses in Ireland, any associated regulatory or infrastructural issues that merit a changed approach and those steps that could be taken to mitigate these issues. The forum is scheduled to report to Government in the first quarter of 2026.

Budget 2026 has provided an overall package of €9.4 billion, with €8.1 billion provided for public spending and €1.3 billion for new taxation measures. The latter measures will benefit SMEs.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I acknowledge what the Minister has done in relation to small businesses and business supports. I also recognise that there has been a reduction in the cost of doing business, which is well and good. I support the VAT 9 scheme because it is important to provide that leg-up, particularly for small businesses who need it. The reality is, however, that it is a blunt instrument. It is a universal benefit and, therefore, it benefits those enormous companies and even those large companies that do not need the support. I recognise that it is difficult to construct a mechanism that allows us to give the benefit to one group of companies and not to others but the reality is that large companies do not need that VAT reduction. They will survive. They welcome it but they will survive without it. There are small businesses in every town and village in this country, including businesses in my own community and constituency which have been in contact with me, that need that reduction but they will not get it for whatever reason. They are outside the scheme because they are not providing certain goods. Small businesses are not all getting that benefit but are still facing increased costs of doing business. I am wondering if there could be targeted supports specifically for those small businesses.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** First, I would robustly challenge the premise that big businesses in the economy are not good. They employ people. Many franchises provide huge employment in many rural parts of our economy. Let us focus on what we are doing as a Government in the sector the Deputy referenced. First, we increased the PRSI threshold for those on the living wage. We brought forward moderations to the living wage and additional sick pay. We introduced an energy efficiency grant under which businesses get a 75% rebate. We have also extended the 9% VAT rate for gas and electricity to support those businesses the Deputy referenced. We have doubled the innovation voucher to €10,000, again supporting small businesses. We have increased the microfinance liquidity loan threshold to €50,000 for small businesses which will be very important for them. We are also working on an additional loan scheme to provide low-cost finance right into the heart of our SMEs. We have brought forward a change to our research and development regime which benefits small businesses. We also have our SME test which is very much about thinking small first in the context of how changes to statutory instruments and primary legislation affect the smallest businesses in our economy. Those are the areas we want to continue working on as well as on a heap of digitalisation grants supporting businesses to grow more revenue. The Government is very much focused on all of our SMEs and the reflection of that is the growth in our job numbers in our economy.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I acknowledge all of that and in no way want to suggest the Minister is not focusing on SMEs. I acknowledge all of the work that is being done. I know SMEs are the backbone of the economy. The quibble I have in relation to the VAT 9 reduction is that it is across the board. That does not mean that big businesses are not valuable - of course, they are - but they do not need the reduction in the way that small businesses do. We have had this conversation previously and I would much rather see a targeted relief for small businesses. Whether one picks a metric of turnover, profit, number of employees or something else, there is a metric that can be picked to do this. Let us take McDonald's as an example. McDonalds is a franchise and is owned by business people all over the country who run good businesses. They will survive without the reduction to 9%. Next door to them there might be a small café that might not survive without it. The point I am making relates to the cost of this measure.

As I have said, I support the measure but in terms of its cost, we would be much better off spending the bulk of that money on the SME sector than on those parts of the hospitality sector that do not need it, the large and very large companies that still provide huge value in the economy but that do not have the same reliance on the scheme.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I note the Deputy's concerns but I have not seen any workable framework under the European VAT directive that allows for differentiation on turnover. I have not seen it yet. I have not seen any workable proposal in relation to that. My point is very clear. There are 228,000 jobs supported in our hospitality sector. Many of them are in regional parts of our country and the vast majority of them, well over 90%, are small businesses. That is why as a Government we have taken a view that we are supporting them very robustly.

We are going to have a new tourism plan next month. That is going to look at numerous issues. The Government is giving the sector a big incentive in taxation now. What is the sector going to do for us as a country to grow as a sector, to create jobs and to grow the value proposition and ensure we can absorb the opportunities presented by tourism? We will be working very closely with the sector. As I said, we will have a new culinary strategy. We are growing the season, growing capacity and ensuring that we develop businesses in this country. This is the key issue. We have a unique opportunity now to really develop the model that businesses operate in, to make them more sustainable and ensure they are in a position to take advantage of the huge opportunity. We are in a very exciting time, particularly for tourism and hospitality. We have a lot of work to do in making businesses viable and this is a viability measure to ensure jobs can be retained. So many workers going up through the system get their first job in hospitality. They learn what it is like to be in society, to work and contribute as they go through. It is very important that we stand by all of those areas.

### **Regional Development**

11. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if his Department and Enterprise Ireland are reviewing current policies with a view to expanding opportunities in areas outside of the Dublin region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62265/25]

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank Deputy Burke for his very important question. Balanced regional development is a Government priority and a central component of the White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030 is to support balanced regional enterprise development. My Department and its agencies work to support this agenda in several ways, including through the work of Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, local enterprise offices, LEOs and nine regional enterprise plans.

Enterprise Ireland supports over 4,000 Irish companies across every region in our country and during 2024, these businesses created more than 15,000 new jobs bringing employment at Enterprise Ireland-supported companies to 234,454, with 66% of those jobs outside Dublin. Enterprise Ireland's new strategy, Delivering for Ireland, Leading Globally, published earlier this year, sets out a comprehensive roadmap to support Irish businesses to grow and thrive at home and abroad. This will help to drive economic growth and regional development right around the country.

In addition, Enterprise Ireland supports businesses directly through its regional offices and in collaboration with the 31 LEOs around the country. As the first-stop shop for any Irish business seeking development support, the LEOs play a key role in supporting the growth and development of businesses across every town and community in the country. Published last year, the LEO policy statement outlines how the LEOs work to foster a strong entrepreneurial culture and promote enterprise nationally, through a mix of programmes, supports and campaigns.

Foreign direct investment has a significant impact in realising balanced regional growth and IDA Ireland has continued its strong commitment to regional development as one of four key strategic objectives of its 2025 to 2029 strategy, Adapt Intelligently.

10 o'clock

Published in February this year, this ambitious strategy aims to secure 550 FDI projects outside Dublin, amounting to 55% of all planned investments. The overarching goal is to create 75,000 new jobs nationwide and generate a projected €250 billion in economic impact. IDA Ireland has also set an ambitious target for regional Ireland. To support regional opportunities, IDA Ireland also offers eight regional locations, providing local support to clients, working closely with local stakeholders, including councils, to attract new and maintain existing investment.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Where I am coming from is that in the Cork area, the land bank IDA Ireland has in Ringaskiddy is now totally built on and there is very little space available for new companies to come in. Likewise, many of the private business parks have been developed, such as Blarney Business Park, which has seen huge growth in the past five to eight years and is running out of space. My question is about the Cork region and the identification of a land bank that could be made available for new companies to start up on or for companies coming from abroad to start up on. It is extremely important. We have had huge growth in the pharmaceutical and medical devices sectors, and in a lot of other sectors, in Cork. That is because we have the support of the third level colleges, which are producing the graduates to work in those companies. The question now is about a land bank that is needed outside Dublin for companies and we need to deal with it fast.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank Deputy Burke for all his work in this area. I was with him recently in Cork. We had a great meeting looking at all the opportunities there and met many people from the community.

I will say three quick things. First, the Department is working on a scheme for small manufacturing sites for businesses. There is huge demand, particularly for manufacturing and engineering businesses, for small units. Second, Cork will be key in looking at our next generation site. We will have a next generation site in the south of Ireland and Cork would be a fantastic location. It will be over 1,000 acres. That will be where the next generation Intel, semiconductor company or life science company is. It will be important for Cork. Third, working with IDA Ireland, we are happy to work on the options. A lot of negotiations are going on about acquisition of land in that area and we will be happy to work with the Deputy and his office to try to ensure there is space for opportunity. Lead times are critical and if we can have large sites for bigger corporations, the lead times will be shorter. The sites should be utility

rich so the companies can get working quickly. That will be important. Cork will be earmarked for one of those in the south.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** There is continued expansion. I visited one company recently that was doing a €60 million expansion and a number of other companies have plans to grow. The challenge is that some of them need to move to bigger sites. I welcome what the Minister said about a land bank because it is extremely important and also because of the port facility. The Ringaskiddy bypass road is now being built. It will take another two years. With the development in the Tivoli Docks area, the port facilities will move to Ringaskiddy and while land will be opening up there, it will be for residential development and other potential development. There are a lot of opportunities in Cork now. It is interesting how, by the local authorities - the city and county councils - IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the Minister's Department and other Departments working together, we can make sure land is available and the infrastructure is developed so that companies can come in, create employment and grow the local economy further.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I am happy to work with the Deputy on all those areas. He has been a firm advocate for business competitiveness, which is key. In the new infrastructure proposals the Government will be bringing forward in February, it will be key to look at our ports and such authorities to ensure we are quickly able to get the key infrastructure enhancements into those areas. On the national planning framework for businesses expanding, it is key to ensuring they can do so, because there have been impediments to that in the past. Some exciting companies are expanding in the Cork area. I saw it first hand in Mallow with the Deputy recently. We met many good business owners and the chambers of commerce. We have subsequently done our best to resolve the issues they have. I spoke to the chief executive of Cork County Council subsequent to Deputy Burke's meeting. It is important we progress things in some areas where there have been blockages. We need to ensure we value employment and the risk takers. The businesses that are coming forward are key and the Deputy is a firm supporter of them in Cork.

### **Business Supports**

12. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measures being taken by his Department to support the retail sector; the initiatives in place to assist small and independent retailers facing cost pressures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61547/25]

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** What additional supports is the Department considering to help small and medium enterprises to manage current cost pressures and restore business confidence and will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government acknowledges that the retail sector contributes to the economy of every city, town and village in Ireland. The sector provides highly important employment with over 220,000 people directly employed in retail. The programme for Government is clear on the intention to support small businesses

and as the Minister of State with responsibility for retail, I am aware of the issues facing retailers.

The broad range of supports for the retail sector, including training programmes and funding to help retailers adapt to new challenges and opportunities in retail, can be found on the national enterprise hub, NEH. The NEH is an all-of-government service staffed by expertly trained advisers and is focused on helping businesses to access a range of Government supports. The hub brings together information and resources of over 250 Government supports from 32 different Departments and State agencies. The grow digital voucher offers up to €5,000 to small businesses, including retailers, to invest in technology such as e-commerce software, online booking systems and stock control, which are designed to enhance productivity and competitiveness.

The energy efficiency grant provides up to a maximum of €10,000, with a 75% contribution rate from the Government to support investment in technologies and equipment identified in a green for business, GreenStart or Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, energy audit. The aim of the scheme is to reduce the impact of enterprises on the environment, thereby increasing the agility and resilience of these businesses.

In 2024, the Government introduced the power up grant and the increased cost of business, ICOB, scheme, which paid out over €400 million to businesses. Included in this was a second ICOB payment and a €4,000 power-up grant for businesses in the retail sector. The Department opened a reclassification appeals process this July, which allowed businesses in the retail sector that had initially misclassified their business category an opportunity to reclassify.

The cost of business advisory forum has been established, comprising SME and industry representative organisations, and the forum held its inaugural meeting in July. A report is due to the Government in the first quarter of next year, which will outline the forum's findings and highlight the steps that can be taken to mitigate rising costs.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** While Ireland's balance sheet looks good on paper and the country is doing well at the moment, some small- and medium-sized businesses, including in retail, are anxious. They are doing their best to keep their doors open, but margins are tight. All the schemes the Minister of State mentioned need a bit of investment from the businesses, which is just not there at the moment. Many tell me that they are not looking for handouts, but a bit of help to steady the ship, practical supports and clearer direction. Schemes like the power-up grant the Minister of State mentioned earlier made a real difference in the past. Will he outline what fresh supports or initiatives are being considered to help small businesses invest, grow and feel confident about the year ahead, particularly in rural counties such as Offaly where SMEs are the backbone of the local communities?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Retail is evolving rapidly. We have seen significant changes in consumer habits. Shoppers now expect an online channel or experience, not just the physical presence on our high streets, as the Deputy experiences in Offaly, but also for them to offer multiple touchpoints, such as the implementation of websites, the digitalisation journey, mobile applications and in-store options. The Government is supporting businesses in that. There is a grow digital voucher of up to €5,000 for e-commerce platforms. We are also supporting business with consultancy advisers in digital transformation and local enterprise offices, LEOs.

The Offaly office provides mentoring training and grants for lean, green and digital initiatives. We need to continue to support the retail sector, because we know how important it is. We are working with other Departments and with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, on planning statements around a retail strategy. That will ensure we have a balanced retail presence of physical stores and digitally integrated ones.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** That is encouraging but it is not what I am hearing on the ground. The feedback that I am getting from business owners is that they often do not know where to start. The Minister of State mentioned the local enterprise offices, which do great work in County Offaly and other counties around the country. We need to make sure that people know about these places. Whether they are applying for funding, going digital or managing rising costs, this needs to be made clearer to them. Would the Minister of State consider developing a more hands-on, locally focused SME guidance programme where trained mentors or advisers could visit businesses directly, offer tailored advice and connect them quickly to the right grants or supports? That kind of practical, person-to-person guidance could make a real difference in helping SMEs to build confidence and plan ahead.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** We are undertaking a review of the local enterprise offices to streamline them, reduce the administrative burden and make it easier for SMEs and businesses to access supports. We are conscious that we need to strengthen the role of the local enterprise offices because they have the local knowledge and are the touchpoint for many of these businesses in towns and villages across the country. They need that expert advice and mentoring to ensure that their businesses remain resilient and sustainable into the future. Through the work that we are doing in the cost of business advisory forum and the immediate financial relief that we are providing through the green transition and energy efficiency improvements, we want to support that because we know how important the retail sector is. As I said earlier, there are 220,000 jobs nationwide and we want to continue to support the Deputy's constituents in Offaly through sustainability and the competitiveness agenda, but also see how we can make it easier for businesses to access supports.

### Foreign Direct Investment

13. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his Department's timeline for identification and servicing of the large-scale regional next generation sites for future FDI and enterprise; in which counties these will be located; the means by which local enterprise offices and regional agencies will be involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62203/25]

**Deputy William Aird:** I welcome the opportunity to raise this important question with the Minister. Ireland's success in attracting world-class investment has depended on our ability to offer fully serviced, high-quality industrial and enterprise sites. As we look to the next generation of investment in manufacturing, green energy and digital innovation, we must ensure that every part of the country, including the midlands and County Laois in particular, is ready to compete. My question to the Minister is what the Department's timeline for identifying and servicing large-scale regional next generation sites for foreign direct investment and

enterprise is, where they will be located and how local enterprise offices, regional agencies and local authorities will be involved in their development.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** Developing next generation sites is essential for Ireland to remain competitive if we wish to attract further large-scale, high-value manufacturing opportunities such as major semiconductor and biopharma investments. The next generation site approach will be plan-led, streamlining development and reducing planning risks, and provide pre-permitted, utility-intensive sites, enabling swift development and certainty for investors. Each site will be developed in stages over a number of years to facilitate incremental investment in the necessary infrastructure. Funding for land acquisition for the first two sites, planned for the west and east of the country, is coming from my Department's capital allocation under the revised national development plan. A third site is planned for the south in future years.

Each next generation site development will be undertaken in consultation with local authorities with sites of either 1,000 acres or 500 to 600 acres for tier 2 proposals, in line with the programme for Government and our semiconductor strategy commitment. The IDA will engage with relevant local authorities throughout the process. The sectors targeted by next generation sites will provide quality, skilled employment that pays high salaries, thereby contributing to our corporation tax, PAYE and PRSI receipts. Additionally, further returns on investment will come from site rental or sale.

At a local level, Irish-owned enterprises will benefit from site development opportunities as well as ongoing sub-supply to and spin-outs from the large-scale FDI envisaged, as has been confirmed in many studies of past FDI gains, including through the recent mapping of semiconductor sites in our next-generation strategy. Next generation sites will demonstrate that Ireland is a suitable location for establishing new large-scale operations as well as for winning future large-scale foreign direct investment. We are clear that we will not continue investments on yesterday's terms. We need more ambition and to get that next wave of investment. The next generation initiative will sit alongside the IDA's regional property programme, which, during the 2025 to 2029 lifetime of its current strategy, will deliver 23 projects across 21 locations in eight regions, primarily focusing on manufacturing buildings. The IDA will also plan to continue to invest in its existing property portfolio, including land banks, business parks and industrial parks.

**Deputy William Aird:** I thank the Minister for his response. The next generation sites initiative represents a real opportunity to prepare Ireland for the industries of tomorrow. In Laois, we have the location, the infrastructure and a workforce ready to go. What we need now is clear prioritisation and early investment so that we are fully prepared to deliver for the new enterprises of the FDI projects that come on stream. Laois, as the Minister knows, is strategically positioned, with the M7 and M8 motorways, strong rail connectivity and proximity to Dublin and the south-east ports. Laois offers a skilled workforce in manufacturing logistics and technology, and growing potential in green energy. I know the Minister is committed to balanced regional development, sustainable jobs and giving every county, including Laois, a fair chance to attract the next generation of investment. I am asking his Department to continue to engage with Laois County Council, the local enterprise offices, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland to ensure that Laois and the midlands are represented in the first wave of large-scale, next generation sites.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I am happy to work with Deputy Aird in Laois to ensure that Laois continues to grow. We have our advanced planning permit, which we are now working with IDA Ireland and Laois County Council on for our advanced building solution. It is important that we can reduce lead times and give certainty in that regard. We had a great day at Midland Steel, where we have 70 jobs. It is a good example of where Laois is at the cutting edge of innovation in areas that are critical to the supply chain of our economy. There will be significantly more opportunities. About 145 people are employed by IDA companies in Laois, which I know Deputy Aird is a strong supporter of. I am happy to work with the Deputy in the future to ensure that we grow our footprint of foreign direct investment. I am clear that Laois needs to get more. It is absolutely an area that needs to be enhanced and have further growth of employment opportunities. We need to put in the infrastructure, reduce the timelines and reduce uncertainty, as we are planning to do with our advanced permit. I look forward to working with the Deputy in those areas.

**Deputy William Aird:** We have the lowest job creation from IDA Ireland in the State at the moment.

I wanted to talk to the Minister about Leprino. I thank him for visiting Leprino in Portlaoise and working with me and the other people. The announcement that Leprino Foods will close its facility in Portlaoise is a huge blow to us in Portlaoise, to County Laois more widely and to the 130 skilled workers who are working in Leprino, their families and the wider local community. We need urgent and co-ordinated action on this. Will the Minister confirm whether a dedicated task force will be established to bring together the Minister's Department, Laois County Council, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and all relevant stakeholders to safeguard the jobs, support affected workers and attract new investment to this site, which as the Minister knows, is a state-of-the art site? It is a site where huge investment was put in for all new builds and equipment. This site would be available for many different workforce skills and opportunities. It is just to ensure that the building continues in operation.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank Deputy Aird for raising Leprino Foods and the 132 jobs there, which are valued. I know it is working under a timeline at the moment. We are working so hard with Enterprise Ireland and the IDA, looking at a prospectus for a site, because it is a highly valued building. It is highly regulated and utility-rich. It provides a significant offering for a company. We are working really hard to get another buyer and a company into it because it provides a unique location. It has the infrastructure, the connectivity and the talent, and I know it is important to those 132 families who rely on those jobs in Leprino that we get a future for the site. I know Deputy Aird is very much engaged in it. I met the management there. I went through all the options regarding how we got to this stage. I know it can be frustrating to lose high-value jobs like that but we will work so hard to get them replaced. We will work closely with the Deputy. I met and briefed him after our meeting and he has been centrally involved in trying to ensure that we get more services and high-valued jobs and, critically, look out for the futures of those 132 families who are really dependent on the Government getting a response here.

### **Small and Medium Enterprises**

14. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the supports in place for small companies and businesses to enhance their understanding of profit and loss and cash flow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62194/25]

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** Like the Minister, I have worked in and for small businesses in this country. The highest number of employed people in the country is in small businesses. Many of these businesses are an intrinsic part of their communities. They are also a crucial part of the economy and the social fabric of this State. What supports are in place for small companies and businesses to enhance their understanding of profit and loss and cash flow?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for his question. It comes from an accountant and, with the Minister being an accountant, I feel less qualified to answer it but I will do my best.

The local enterprise offices, LEOs, are located in 31 local authorities to promote a suite of supports designed to assist small businesses to reduce their costs and become more productive and competitive. The LEOs provide consultancy and grants to small businesses across all sectors in the areas of lean, green and digital. These supports focus on enhancing productivity while improving competitiveness, and they can help business owners identify opportunities to save money, time and energy. The LEOs also play a crucial role in supporting small businesses to build financial capability, including a practical understanding of profit, loss and cash flow management.

Training programmes are scheduled based on local demand and delivered on a tailored basis to meet the specific needs of small businesses. LEOs are consistently encouraged to prioritise financial literacy when designing their training calendars. This year, the LEOs delivered a wide range of targeted courses to enhance the financial understanding of SMEs. Each course is designed to equip small businesses with practical skills in financial planning, cash flow forecasting and understanding profitability. Among the courses delivered were financial foundations for small businesses, managing cash flow in business, managing your cash flow, fundamentals in business finance and bookkeeping and accountancy for small businesses.

The LEOs also offer a start your own business training programme aimed at those who have a business idea or have recently set up a small business. This programme includes a dedicated finance module to ensure new entrepreneurs gain essential financial knowledge.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I thank the Minister of State. That covers a lot of what I was looking for. These businesses include retail, restaurants, pubs, small family businesses and the self-employed. In my experience, many of them have a poor understanding of profit and loss. They do not understand the basics of gross profit and fixed overheads. If they understood them, they would know their break-even sales figure. This is fundamental to understanding viability. If they understand this, they can know using a weekly turnover figure how well they are doing. This means they can take corrective action before it is too late. Unfortunately, many only know they are not doing well when they see they cannot pay their VAT bill or their suppliers. Even then, they do not understand what the problem is.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I absolutely agree with the points the Deputy raises. Financial literacy is a cornerstone of competitiveness and that is why we have the LEOs ensuring small

businesses have the tools to manage their finances effectively. They are on hand to assist at county level, including financial mentoring, training workshops and management development programmes. It is important that owners who want to advance their financial planning skills are supported, that any perceived challenges around financial management are demystified and that business owners make informed decisions and avoid common pitfalls. For start-ups, we have the start your own business programme. That has a specific finance module wherein the LEOs provide specialist mentoring to entrepreneurs and owners on strategies around pricing, cash flow and profit and loss.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** In relation to taxes, we have a similar problem. Many businesses think the VAT they receive is part of their business cash, not fully understanding it is cash they collect on behalf of the State. I came across a business selling coffee. They thought the €4 they charge for the coffee was their income and the VAT was a cost. Similarly with PAYE, USC and PRSI, they sometimes use these taxes as cash flow for the business. Can the LEOs provide a basic tool to help small and not-so-small businesses navigate this apparently simple issue, which has driven many potentially successful businesses to the wall? Can such workshops be a regular offering by the LEOs? Can Revenue do the same? Can they inform small businesses of these supports?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I appreciate the concerns the Deputy has raised. For any business owners, it is incumbent on the Government and the LEOs to ensure they are sustainable, have resilience built into their business plan and have access to the mentoring, training and advice that are essential to keeping businesses afloat. Raising the importance of financial literacy and ensuring businesses have access to training workshops is part of the local enterprise offering. They have peer-to-peer learning and engagement with key advisers within each local authority. We want to continue to support this through tailor-made programmes. The start your own business programme has an important financial module. Enterprise Ireland also invests in early-stage leadership development to ensure companies on that journey are supported.

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

### **Pension Provisions**

71. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the provisions that have been made to ensure that agencies, organisations, charities and service providers funded by his Department will be able to meet their obligations under the new auto-enrolment scheme. [62181/25]

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** My question, as is often the case, is very straightforward. I am looking for information about the provisions that have been made concerning agencies and organisations which deliver services on behalf of the State, are funded by the State and have workers who want to be part of the auto-enrolment scheme but are concerned they are not funded to be able to do that. The Minister will well know the last time there was a cut to the budget of these agencies, they were told to find the savings from within their own envelope. That really did not work out well.

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary):** Gabhaim buíochas as an gceist. The auto-enrolment savings system, known as My Future Fund, will commence on 1 January 2026. My Department has had extensive engagement with employers, including those in the community and voluntary sector, and with Government Departments, since the release of the automatic enrolment strawman public consultation in 2018. Its impending implementation has been well flagged to all those groups since the enactment of the auto-enrolment Act in 2024 and extensively throughout this year. Therefore, employers have been given a substantial lead-in period to budget appropriately for its introduction, including through budget negotiation with sponsors where appropriate.

It is worth mentioning that, in response to feedback from that consultation, the design of the auto-enrolment system provides for phasing in of contribution rates over a decade. Employees will be required to make initial contributions of 1.5% of gross earnings, rising by 1.5% every three years until they reach a maximum contribution rate of 6% in year ten. These contributions will be matched on a one-for-one basis and on the same timeline by employer contributions and topped up by the State at a rate of €1 for every €3 contributed by the employee. That phased approach has arisen as a consequence of the consultations the Department has undertaken in the design of the system. For community and voluntary groups and employers generally, this approach gives clear certainty on the rates that will be applicable so as to facilitate the gradual absorption of labour costs.

My Department has been very proactive throughout this year - and indeed previously - in advising other Departments, including the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, about this issue. I will be taking the opportunity again to remind my Cabinet colleagues in coming days. Automatic enrolment is starting on 1 January and no worker should be disadvantaged as a consequence.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** However, they are going to be disadvantaged if the Government does not fund them. Bearing in mind the hands-off approach that the Government takes to these agencies, we should remember that although it caused the homelessness crisis with its policies, it has asked people to come in to shore it up. Some of the agencies are funded only by the State, and if they do not have additional funding – I have checked in the budget and I do not see that there is any – it will simply mean they will have to try to find it from within their existing budgets, which means either pay cuts or cutting back on services. Neither of those options is viable.

I would like to hear from the Minister confirmation that he believes all those funded by the State will be in the desired position. As the Minister said, the contributions from the worker have to be matched by employer contributions. They have no capacity to raise money on their own. Therefore, is the State going to fund it, and can the Minister confirm that this morning?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The position is that automatic enrolment is a legal requirement. Therefore, the employers will have to give access to My Future Fund to employees aged between 23 and 60 and earning over €20,000 who do not have an existing payroll-connected pension.

We have made it very clear in the Department that this is happening. The point has been made at official level, including to the Department of public expenditure, that this is happening on 1 January and that people need to make provision. We have also made the point to all employers across the State.

We have worked closely with groups such as ICTU in relation to this. I attended a really good seminar with ICTU a few weeks ago, on 23 October. ICTU is fully behind this and is very aware of it. In fact, it was very frustrated that we did not introduce this in September. It has been engaging with its members across the country to get ready for it.

I want to make it very clear that this is not an opt-in for employers, regardless of who they are. If there is an employee who fulfils the criteria and who is not linked through payroll to a pension at the moment, he or she will be covered.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Minister and I know they are covered, but my question is on whether they are funded. The Minister of State says he has had extensive engagement, and I absolutely do not doubt that for a moment. I would say his engagement was exceedingly extensive; however, as a result of his engagement, have his Department and other Departments confirmed that the agencies they fund to deliver services will be in a position to meet their obligations to all of their workers without having to cut back on services or wages? If they have not been given extra money and do not have the capacity to generate money, we are back to where we were at the time the Minister's party crashed the economy, when it gave the instruction to people that they did not necessarily have to cut pay but had to cut back. The Government told them not to cut services, so in the end they did cut pay.

We can imagine that people who were burned before are very anxious to know if they are going to be in a capacity to join the scheme. The employers are anxious to know if they are going to be funded. My fear is that they are not funded at the moment and that we are going to end up in a situation where some people may be excluded or some agencies may have to make decisions that we do not want them to have to make.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** All employers have had seven years to get ready for and get used to this. We listened to their feedback on stepping the contributions and not introducing big contributions from the beginning.

I confirm that in the Department of Social Protection, the Estimates in respect of payments to the organisations do include costs for, say, community employment and Tús where they arise. We have engaged at senior official level and with the Secretaries General of other Departments advising them that automatic enrolment was coming in on 1 January and that they needed to ensure provision. I cannot account for every other Department, but, on the back of this discussion, I will be reminding all my colleagues this afternoon that this is happening.

It is a huge event for 750,000 to 800,000 workers who currently have no pension provision. This is not a silver bullet. I want to be very clear that My Future Fund is not going to be the answer to everybody's problems, but it is happening on 1 January.

## **Fuel Poverty**

72. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will consider granting a fuel allowance to those that have had an application refused or revoked due to an adult child or family member moving back home. [62019/25]

**Deputy Mark Wall:** This is a case of *déjà vu* in that we mentioned this yesterday, but I want to ask the Minister of State once again if he will consider granting a fuel allowance to those who have had an application refused or revoked due to another child or family member moving back home.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Deputy. The criteria for the fuel allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources that are available to my Department in as targeted a manner as possible.

To qualify for the fuel allowance payment, a person must satisfy all of the qualifying criteria, including a household composition test. This ensures that the payment is targeted at those who are more vulnerable to fuel poverty, including those reliant on social protection payments for longer periods and who are unlikely to have additional resources of their own.

Disregarding an adult household member who is not reliant on a long-term social protection payment and who is in employment would change the targeted nature of the scheme. In practice, it would not be feasible to distinguish between households where adult children have moved back home and households where other adults have always lived.

I understand exceptional needs will arise, and this is the reason we provide additional needs payments as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. Anyone who considers they may have an entitlement to an additional needs payment is encouraged to contact their local community welfare services.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, a special heating supplement may in certain circumstances be paid to assist people who have special heating needs, such as in cases of ill health, infirmity or a medical condition.

We have extended fuel allowance eligibility to working family payment recipients this year, and it is to be paid in March and backdated to January. Once again, it is targeted at people on low incomes who are working, to support them. If there are specific cases that do not meet the criteria – I see the Deputy nodding – I will be more than happy to discuss them.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I am nodding. The Minister mentioned household composition tests and people working, but the problem I have is where a person who returns to a house is not working and is getting a social welfare payment. These are low-income households and these are the people who must be targeted. I mentioned last night that I have come across three or four cases of this in the past two weeks alone. I asked last night whether we have targeted these people. Today, the Government will announce with triumph a new housing plan, the fourth in recent years. There is a housing emergency. There are parents taking back their loved ones – their sons or daughters – under their roofs again because they have either fallen out with a partner or cannot afford rent, yet the Government is taking €38 from the fuel allowance. Many of those affected are older people who need the €38 to heat their homes. What is happening is wrong, as I have said several times. Particularly where the person coming back

under the roof is in receipt of a social welfare payment and is not working, we should be considering targeting. This is the kind of targeting the Government should be employing.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I will be raising the issue the Deputy raised last night. I do not believe there is any targeting of any group. There will always be controlled measures, but I do not believe there is any specific targeting. Once again, I point out that in relation to any particular case, additional supports are available, particularly where there is an illness or disability.

We have extended fuel allowance eligibility to working family payment recipients, and that is a big change. Over 50,000 families will now become eligible for fuel loans who currently are not. We have a commitment within the programme for Government to enhance supports for lone parents. Two thirds of the recipients of the working family payment are in single adult households. I am constantly focusing on the rate of the fuel allowance and seeking to ensure it is relevant. The changes we have made in this budget will be permanent; they do not comprise a year-to-year measure, so people will be able to plan in relation to that. If there is a specific issue, I will certainly discuss the case. We do not want anybody to be cold or without fuel as a consequence of somebody in receipt of social protection coming back into their household.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I take the Minister's reply. I acknowledge the fact that the fuel allowance has been extended to working family payment recipients, because they are in low-income families who need all the help they can get in what are housing and cost-of-living crises. I hope that if I can give the Minister three or four examples of what has been happening over the past two weeks in Kildare South, he will examine the matter again. I am sure it is not just happening in Kildare South. Maybe we are just targeting Kildare South. The affected families are genuine families. In many cases, a loved one, a son or daughter, will have left home to make a life for himself or herself but, for whatever reason, has come back under the roof again. They are in a housing emergency. Who is going to turn away their son or daughter? By putting a roof over the head of their son or daughter again, they are losing the payment. It is causing a lot of strife and concern in families and it is hitting the lowest income families in my area. I hope the Minister, when I bring some examples to him, can look at this further.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I will certainly engage with the Deputy in that regard. We also have a commitment in the programme for Government to examine key benefits such as the fuel allowance, households benefits and the living alone allowance. That is an ongoing activity to make sure they are as relevant and targeted as possible.

The household benefits package is specifically targeted at older people. It is paid at a rate of €35 per month for 12 months of the year. I wish to ensure it is as effective as possible and people get the benefit of it.

We are also looking at how much in carbon tax revenues we can use to fund and expand measures such as this. In expanding them, however, I want to keep them targeted and focused on those who need it the most. We will work with other Departments on energy efficiency awareness, investing in the energy efficiency of housing stock and giving people a chance to do that, as well as expanding the warmer home scheme so that we can reduce long-term fuel

expenditure. I have asked for an update on any control measures around fuel allowance. I am surprised at the issue raised but I will engage with the Deputy on it.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

73. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an estimate of the number of new people who will be eligible to receive carer's allowance following budget 2026; if he will explain to carers who are currently excluded by the means test exactly when they will be made aware of when they will become eligible; the amount his Department is prepared to spend on the relaxation of the carer's means test, given that this was not made clear in the budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62427/25]

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** This relates to the commitment given in the programme for Government to phase out the means test for the carer's allowance. I am genuinely struggling to understand the timeline the Minister has in his head. He told me, via a parliamentary question, that it will cost more than €600 million. He has only budgeted €10 million for next year, which is a partial year, so it works out at €20 million. By that logic, it would take 30 years to get to €600 million. I am interested in finding out how many additional people will benefit from the 2026 measures so that we can have an idea of how it is going to work going forward.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The programme for Government, as the Deputy knows, commits to increasing the carer's allowance disregard, with a view to phasing it out over the lifetime of the Government, which is another four years. Removing the means test is a significant shift in policy direction and, therefore, this is a prudent and sustainable approach for us to take.

I announced further improvements in budget 2026 to the carer's allowance means test. They will be introduced in July 2026. For carers who work, the weekly income disregard will increase by 60% from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of couple. This means, for example, that a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €110,000 will still retain their full carer's payment. Even those with an income of €138,000 will gain a partial payment.

There have been a number of changes to the scheme in recent years that have resulted in significant growth. The number of carers on the scheme has increased by 65% in the past ten years and the expenditure on the scheme has doubled to over €1.2 billion. The scheme is demand-led and it is also likely that many people who are currently outside the means threshold may not have previously applied for the carer's allowance. On that basis, it is difficult to estimate potential inflow from this measure. I assure Deputy O'Reilly and other Deputies that the number of payments being made under the scheme is not budget capped. We are looking at a range of figures, including census figures and other declarations as to who is a carer, to monitor the potential inflow into the scheme. We will consistently publish data on take-up in quarterly statistical releases.

As in previous years, when there has been an increase to the disregard, if people are on a reduced rate of carer's allowance due to their means, they are due an increase in their weekly payment. Their rate of payment will be automatically increased.

The change of the disregard will come into effect in July 2026. This gives my Department ample time to raise awareness of the changes and give the kind of detail ahead of the changes the Deputy is looking for.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Forgive me but I am still none the wiser. Following on from the budget announcement, I submitted a parliamentary question to the Department. It told me that the budgeted €10 million only covers existing recipients. By implication, the 3,000 people the Department estimates will benefit from the measure are people who are already in receipt of carer's allowance. Am I right on that?

Presumably, the 53,000 people the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation says could potentially be eligible will all have to be brought in the system when the means test is abolished. How many of them will come into the net? How is the Minister going to do that over the next four years? Has he set a target? What the Minister is telling me is that the €10 million is not a fixed amount and, somehow, it can be expanded upon. That is not budgeted for, however. Can he explain, given that the 3,000 people coming in as part of this tranche are already in receipt of carer's allowance, how many of the 53,000 who are not in receipt of it, will come in and in what year will they do so, from now until the end of the Government's term?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I cannot give the Deputy that breakdown immediately but I will try to get it to her. I think she is just looking for a breakdown. It is hard to know because many people, who are not currently in receipt of carer's allowance and never submitted an application because they did not qualify, will now apply. As I said, expanding the threshold to include couples with an income of €104,000 means there will be a lot of people, who never engaged with my Department before, engaging with it for the first time. We will give the Deputy an estimate of the number we expect to come from that.

We will also be able to give the Deputy an estimate towards the end of this year as to how many extra people have come in as a consequence of the changes introduced in July 2025. It is difficult to estimate potential inflow with precision, but we will give the Deputy the figures based on the changes to date. I will try to give the Deputy as much information as I can regarding that figure. I am not fully sure where she is getting that figure of 53,000. I did not hear it.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** It is from the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I will engage with the Deputy in that regard. I want to abolish the means test over the course of this Government and during my time in this Department. I am also focused on those existing payments and ensuring those who are existing carers are properly rewarded for their extraordinary work. I am trying to reach a balance. If I have four years in this Department, I will abolish it, but I am also trying to work with the carers' organisation on those existing carers.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I know the Minister's ambition is to abolish the means test. I am not disputing that but if he cannot tell me how he is going to do it, he will forgive for being

somewhat sceptical about the commitment. It is a little bit like the however many thousand houses the Government was going to build. That was an ambition as well. Ambition is not going to put money in the bank account of carers or bring those carers who are not currently eligible into the net.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has said he will provide me with some of the information. The figure of 53,000 comes from the Department of public expenditure and reform. The question those 53,000 people currently not in receipt of carer's allowance, who may potentially benefit, would like me to ask is when they will be included. They are currently not getting compensation for the care and work they do. I know the ambition is to abolish the means test by the end of the Government's term, but there has to be a plan. It cannot simply be the case that everyone suddenly comes into the net five minutes before midnight on the day before the Government ends. There is a need for a plan, targets and figures. I am asking for them to be shared with me and the House.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** This is not just words and ambition. There was a 60% increase in the budget for the carer's allowance income disregard. That has never been seen before. That means that households with an income of €110,000, and up to €138,000, become eligible for a social protection payment. That is actually happening. It will happen from 1 July next year. That is real and I want to continue with those kinds of levels of increases.

As I said, I also have an eye to existing carers. I wish to ensure they are properly regarded. That is why we work closely with the carers' organisation in relation to this and other issues. That is why we have a carer's forum every year well in advance of the budget process. First, it helps alert people to the fact these changes have happened because we want to ensure people have the information. Second, it allows us to work with the carers' organisations in a partnership way as to how we get this done.

An increase of 60%, combined with the fact that people with an income of €138,000 are now eligible for a payment under the Department of Social Protection, shows my seriousness and intent. It is not just ambition; this is actually happening.

### **Pension Provisions**

74. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection when his Department will establish, and make publicly available, the administration fees and charges being imposed as a part of auto-enrolment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62261/25]

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** My question is about administration fees and charges being imposed as part of auto-enrolment. My understanding is that these fees have not been agreed or released publicly. I have some reservations more widely about whether it is still the case today that the Department and Government are sufficiently prepared when this scheme goes live, which is just a few short weeks away, as the Minister said yesterday.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Deputy. I take this opportunity to wish him well. I look forward to working with him. This is his first time attending parliamentary questions as his party's spokesperson for social protection.

We will introduce automatic enrolment, My Future Fund, from 1 January 2026. The aim is to address the pension coverage gap that exists in our country and to provide workers with greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income.

There will be two separate fee elements. First, there will be an administration fee, which will cover the collection of contributions, the allocation to the investment plans and the provision of account management services. Second, there will be a separate fee for investment management services. The administration fees associated with automatic enrolment are under active consideration as we speak and will be finalised following consultation with the new chief executive of the National Auto-Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation. I have written to the Minister this week in relation to this issue.

As previously announced, the administration fee will take the form of a flat weekly fee rather than a commission based on a percentage of funds under management. In this way, the administration fee will reflect the actual costs of administration, which do not vary with fund size. They will be the same for all participants regardless of their income or the size of their retirement fund and will, ultimately, provide much better value for money for the participant over the course of a standard retirement planning horizon.

In addition to administration fees, there will be some fees for investment management services. These services have been procured through a competitive procurement process conducted under EU rules. That tendering process required fees to be less than 0.1% of assets under management. In this regard, I can confirm that the prices attached to the bids were significantly below the maximum ceiling and represent very good value for participants.

I am committed to ensuring that the fees in My Future Fund are kept low and that they are transparent, accessible and understandable, especially as the prospective participants in the system will be lower- and medium-income earners.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I thank the Minister. I very much hope the fees will be under 0.1% of assets under management. It would be extremely concerning if they were anywhere near that. My understanding from the Minister's answer is that the fees have not been detailed, and this goes to the heart of the question of whether the State is adequately prepared to introduce auto-enrolment on 1 January as the Minister said today he would be doing.

As it stands, about €100 billion of pensions are in private occupational pension schemes. The Minister is planning on the State mandating a significant increase to that without there being any clarity on the fees for those affected. Importantly, in the UK, about 75% of the accounts of the national employment savings trust, NEST, scheme are dormant. If these fees are charged on the dormant accounts, it will compound the reduction of the contributions the individuals have made. It would be very concerning if this were to be the case here as well. If the My Future Fund mirrors what is happening with the NEST fund, it would create a huge problem for individuals. The fund in the UK currently has a deficit of £1 billion and we have lower economies of scale here. Does the Minister have any comparison with the UK experience and does he understand whether the fees will be applied to the dormant accounts?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Ireland is the last country in the OECD to introduce auto-enrolment. This is not a good thing. The only good thing about it is we can learn from other products and countries and look at what we need to change here to make sure we do not end up with their problems. We have looked closely at NEST, given its proximity to us. We will observe it and ensure, through NAERSA, which will be independent of the Department and the Minister of the day, that it keeps us relevant. Most importantly, it is necessary to ensure it is as efficient and as accessible as possible.

It is not the State's money but each individual's money. It is money belonging to each of the 750,000 people who are a part of this scheme. They will have access to information through the My Future Fund app online to see where their money is going and its investment. They will also have the choice to make whatever investment suits their stage in life, be that high-risk, medium-risk for low-risk investment. Through all that, we will ensure the fees associated with this are understood and transparent. Many people do not have that accessibility or availability in existing pension arrangements.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** That goes to the heart of the question here, which is around the digital literacy of the individuals we are putting into this scheme. I am very concerned there is no plan for what we are going to guide people with in terms of the lump sum they will get at the end of the scheme. For those people in their 50s or 60s approaching retirement age who will get that lump sum, there seems to be no pathway to how they would account for the pension provision or ensure they are not taking risky decisions or making inappropriate use of those funds.

There is also a question around the overall structure of the fund and I want to keep an eye on that over the course of its implementation. I completely accept the NTMA could not handle 750,000 individuated pension scheme accounts. There is a question, however, around the pooling of risk. How will it be possible to ensure those 750,000 individuated accounts would be treated as a larger pension scheme guided by the State so it will be possible to ensure there will be lower volatility for investment returns for those individuals and the pension provision is secure for the future?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That is exactly why we have established the structure of NAERSA, which is independent of the Department, with a very successful and experienced team of staff that we are building up now. It has an independent board that represents the interests of workers, employers and the public. Those kinds of operational decisions will be made by NAERSA. In relation to people exiting the scheme, it will be some years before that happens. NAERSA will take full operational control of the scheme and be able to provide that level of information. My focus now is getting it up and running. It is about trying to get an understanding that this is happening and this is why we have information resources available on [gov.ie/autoenrolment](http://gov.ie/autoenrolment).

I share the Deputy's concerns and I will be discussing these NAERSA, including around digital literacy and ensuring that people who do have digital challenges and do not have that access to digital will be able access their information. This is something I try to do right across the Department. The establishment of an independent authority separate from the Government is in the best interests of those 750,000 people to make the best possible return for their future. I am confident it will make those decisions in the best interest of the citizens.

## Social Welfare Payments

75. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will reintroduce a cost-of-disability lump sum payment before Christmas to reduce the negative impact of budget 2025 on disabled people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62432/25]

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The programme for Government promises a permanent, annual cost-of-disability support payment, with a view to incrementally increasing this payment. Instead of doing that, we have just had a budget in one of the richest countries in the world, with a substantial budget surplus, that did not introduce this payment. Instead, it made disabled people poorer to the tune of more than €1,000. This question is an appeal to the Government to introduce an emergency winter payment to offset the extra cost of disability.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Deputy. As he said, the programme for Government commits to introducing a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. We will introduce and incrementally increase this payment. These commitments will be advanced over the lifetime of the Government, having regard to the policy and budgetary context.

In budget 2026, I provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures. We were clear from early this year that there would be no one-off measures in this budget. Not everything, however, in terms of our programme for Government commitments will be done in the first budget. The budget package contained significant targeted measures to support disabled people. These measures include: a €10 increase in the weekly rates of payment, bringing the personal rates of payment to €254 per week from January; a Christmas bonus double payment to all persons getting a long-term disability payment, to be paid in December 2025; a €20 increase in the rate of domiciliary care allowance, bringing the rate to €380 per month; and a €5 increase in the fuel allowance, bringing it to €38 per week. Those moving from disability allowance or the blind pension to take up work will now be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for five years. The back to work family dividend is also being extended to this group, where they have children.

From January, we are extending the wage subsidy scheme to people who acquire a disability while in employment and increasing the rates paid from April. As I said, we are increasing the earnings disregard for carer's allowance by record levels. Across the disability allowance, invalidity pension, blind pension and domiciliary care allowance, over €250 million in additional funding has been made available when comparing the Revised Estimates for these schemes between 2025 and 2026. In addition, the recently published National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 takes a whole-of-government approach and includes a commitment to establish a strategic focus network on the cost of disability, led by my Department. My officials have already held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss the possible structure and content of this network. I will be meeting those organisations during December and I have asked my officials to ensure that I will have a proposal to bring to Government next year in relation to the cost of disability payment ahead of the budget process.

11 o'clock

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I presume the Minister is not disputing the fact that the budget made disabled people poorer, despite the measures he is announcing. The disability support grant was cut by €400. In respect of the living alone allowance, the lump sum of €200 was cut. That is another €200 gone. The fuel allowance was reduced for disabled people, resulting in a net loss of €160. The October double payment of €254 was cut. The electricity credits of €250 were cut. The total value of one-off supports taken away from disabled people is €1,404. Even when you take into account the small increases the Minister announced, disabled people will still be worse off to the tune of over €1,000. That is in nominal terms as opposed to real terms. In real terms, namely in the context of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, it is even worse. We know that the cost of having a disability in this country back in 2021 was over €10,000. Today, it is around €15,000.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** What we have already done and what we are going to do over the course of Government is turn those one-off payments into permanent supports in a way that people can plan on a year-to-year basis. This year, as I have said, as a result of the weekly increase in the rate of payment relating to the domiciliary care allowance and the fuel allowance and other changes, there will be an extra €250 million going into permanent supports that will not have to be reviewed every year. That will continue in the next series of budgets. That is why I have started the work on what a permanent cost-of-disability payment will look like. I want it to be annual and incremental, but I am not going to impose a model without consulting with the various disability groups. I look forward to consulting with the Oireachtas committees on social protection and disability matters as to what that might look like, who should qualify for it and how it should be paid. That is a commitment we have under the national human rights strategy for disabled people, which was published on 3 December last.

I have begun the work already in relation to the strategic focus network. In December, we will begin the work to engage on what the payment will look like. We are very focused on introducing that payment. It will be a key priority as we come into the next budget sequence.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The cost-of-living crisis is now. The cost-of-disability crisis is now. One in four households with a disabled person experiences deprivation. That is going to be worse next year as a result of the budget. Again, we live in one of the richest countries in the world that has record national surpluses. The Government has made repeated commitments to equality and inclusion, but it has introduced a budget that will make disabled people poorer. They cannot wait until next year. As already stated, the Department of Finance report from 2021 referred to the average annual cost of disability at that stage of more than €10,000. It is €15,000 now. Disabled people are appealing to the Minister and the Government to introduce an emergency winter payment to offset the cost of disability. The Minister can continue the process of consultation, but they need this payment now, particularly if the Government is not going to force more disabled people into poverty and deprivation over the coming months.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That is happening. As I said, from next year, €4 million per week extra will be going into permanent payments in various support and payment schemes for those with disabilities. The means test for the disability allowance has one of the highest capital disregards. A recipient can have up to €50,000 in savings and still receive the full rate of payment.

During the debate on the social protection Bill yesterday, the Deputy's colleague Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned a cliff edge in this area. That is something I want to work with the Deputies on separately in the context of the annual cost-of-disability payment. I am also trying to work with various groups with regard to encouraging businesses with regard to employing people with disabilities. That is why there will be €250 million extra next year, or €4 million per week. These are permanent payments. They will not have to be renewed every year. Next year, I look forward to expanding those, expanding the eligibility criteria and, most importantly, working on an agreed model, as far as we can, of what a cost-of-disability payment may or may not look like.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

**76. Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will consider reviewing the income disregards for carers and people with disabilities in light of the increased cost of living to ensure that social protection supports do not act as a disincentive to work or education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62187/25]

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Bhí an tAire ag rá rud éigin ansin faoi bheith ag caint faoi dhaoine le míchumais, or people with disabilities. One of the things we could definitely do in this House would be to allow the wage subsidy scheme to be taken on by Deputies and Senators, in a sense that it would give people with disabilities easier access to policymakers. My parliamentary assistant, Michael Reynolds, has a disability. We tried to get the wage subsidy scheme but were told "No". If we could allow people in this House to employ people with disabilities in an easier way, we would have them closer to policymakers. That does not relate to my question, but the Minister mentioned the cost of living and ensuring that social protections do not act as a disincentive for people with disabilities to work.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Is tuairim shuimiúil é sin agus b'fhéidir go mbeimis in ann é a phlé. That is certainly an interesting idea. I commend the Ceann Comhairle's predecessor, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl, who did a huge amount of work to introduce people with disabilities into employment roles within the Oireachtas.

On the question the Deputy asked, the Government recognises the challenges faced by disabled people and family carers and is committed to supporting them. For example, with regard to carer's allowance, the programme for Government contains a commitment to increasing the disregard with a view to phasing out the means test over the lifetime of this Government. As I discussed with Deputy O'Reilly earlier, that process is well under way.

In budget 2026, I announced further improvements to the carer's allowance means test that will be introduced next July. For carers who work, the weekly income disregard will increase by 60%, from €625 to €1,000, for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of couple. This means that means a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €110,000 will still retain their full carer's payment. Even with an income of €138,000, they would retain a partial payment. Those changes have been generally acknowledged as very positive.

As we just discussed with Deputy Murphy, the targeted measures to support disabled people, include a €10 increase in weekly rates, the Christmas bonus and a €20 increase in the monthly rate of the domiciliary care allowance. Across the disability allowance, invalidity pension, blind pension and domiciliary care allowance, over €250 million in additional funding has been made available when you compare the Revised Estimates for these schemes between 2025 and 2026. Sin €4 mhilliún gach seachtain don chéad bhliain eile.

The Department's disability-related schemes and employment supports are structured to support recipients to pursue employment opportunities. I will come back to discussing that in the next round.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus gabhaim leithscéal leis, bhí orm sin a rá tar eis an comhrá sin. The reason I posed my second question is because many families and people with disabilities in my constituency have been telling me that even a small amount of work or training can push them over the threshold, which creates a barrier rather than an incentive to work. Saoirse Smith, who I have met multiple times, is considering not working because she thinks she will be better off. She is currently planning her wedding and is worried about losing her medical card or travel pass because of the amount of work she is doing. Will the Minister consider a review of the income disregards in order that people will be supported rather than penalised. I appreciate the update he gave. I know there will be some coming in over the coming year, but in relation to what Deputy O'Reilly said, it is not being felt on the ground. I understand the body of work the Minister has ahead of him, but this matter needs to be dealt with urgently. The winter months are coming. Inflation and the cost of living are all there for people with disabilities, and it is being felt on the ground.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** We are very focused on that. As stated, there will be €4 million per week extra in payments and supports to the various schemes for people with disabilities.

As discussed with Deputy Murphy, we are beginning the work on introducing a permanent cost-of-disability payment, as committed to in the programme for Government and I have begun the consultation process on doing that. I have asked my officials to ensure we have that process completed with a proposal ready to Government well in advance of next year's budget.

In relation to the issues the Deputy raised regarding the person he mentioned, I have started the work. For instance, in this budget, we have brought in a change whereby somebody who is moving from disability allowance or a blind pension who wants to take up work will be allowed to keep their fuel allowance for up to five years after they enter employment.

I have asked my Department to ensure that for somebody who moves into a work situation from disability allowance and, for whatever reason, it does not work out, there should be no time lag in getting them back on their payment. I am really anxious that people can take the leap and, though for lots of reasons it does not work out, they know they have the security of accessing that payment quickly and they do not have to go through the forms again. We will be formalising that approach as well.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I appreciate the update on the work the Minister is doing and the meetings we have had. The issue is that the existing threshold does not reflect the hidden cost of disability, which has been mentioned by Deputies across the House this morning, or the

medical, transport and energy costs people face. I welcome the fact the Minister has been carrying out a consultation. We need to modernise the system but we also need give people confidence that taking up work will not leave them worse off. I would welcome the provision of any clarity on that matter as soon as possible.

Correct me if I am wrong, but the increases to electricity and gas prices since 2017 have been fixed at €35 per calendar year. It would be really welcome if the old rate of 300 units per month for the four winter months could be increased. The Minister has been speaking to representatives of EnergyCloud. With the amount of renewable energy we have in this country, there will be a huge surplus. That is being used for households experiencing poverty, but it would be great if people with disabilities could be added to that. I hope my Bill on private wires will enable the Government to use that surplus energy to power households and give people free gas boilers full of such energy. This is something the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has been working on. I urge the Minister opposite to work with his colleague.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Our focus in this year's budget was on the fuel allowance, in terms of energy support, and on making permanent changes to it and extending it to people on the working-family payment. There are 55,000 families on that payment. We have also made changes in order that those on disability allowance who move from that to work will keep their fuel allowance for five years. That addresses some of the cliff-edge concerns to which the Deputy referred.

I will certainly discuss Deputy Heneghan's proposals around EnergyCloud and energy costs with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. The exact costs he referred to are going to be the focus of how we ensure the cost-of-disability payment will be permanent. It also has to be relevant in the context of the costs people incur as a consequence of their disability in order to ensure they will have the support they need. I want to make sure we get it right and that we get some sort of agreement around what it might look like in terms of the level of the payment, but also who should be eligible for it. There is a lot of work to be done, and I am very focused on getting it done in advance of next year's budget.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

77. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current annual cost of the disability allowance and invalidity pensions schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62284/25]

**Deputy Martin Daly:** My question relates to the annual cost of the disability allowance and invalidity pension schemes. These payments are essential supports for people living with long-term illness or disability. They represent a significant and growing component of the Government's budget and also that of the Department. I am seeking clarity around the current annual expenditure, the trends over recent years and the pressures that might be driving increases in demand. It is important to understand how these schemes are evolving and whether the funding remains aligned with need.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** My Department provides a suite of income supports to people with disabilities, including disability allowance, DA, blind pension, invalidity pension and partial capacity benefit. DA is a means-tested payment for people who are substantially restricted from working because of their disability. Invalidity pension is a weekly social insurance benefit payment made to people who are regarded as being permanently incapable of work because of a long-term illness or disability.

As is the case with the majority of my Department's schemes, expenditure on DA and invalidity pension is demand led. All applicants who meet the criteria of the schemes are entitled to a payment. There is no budget cap. If necessary, I bring forward Supplementary Estimates to address any situation where demand and costs exceed that set out in the annual Estimates. In the Revised Estimates for 2025, expenditure allocation for DA is just under €2.4 billion and the allocation for invalidity pension is €817 million. The total between the two is about €3.2 billion. Looking ahead to 2026, the equivalent figures to be presented to the Oireachtas are €2.6 billion for DA and €800 million for invalidity pension, which is a total of about €3.4 billion.

As part of budget 2026, I was pleased to secure an increase in funding of nearly €200 million across both schemes compared with the 2025 allocations. These increases will provide for: a €10 weekly increase to the maximum personal rate of payment on both schemes, with proportionate increases for qualified adults and those on reduced rates; the largest ever increases to the rate of the child support payment, at €8 per week in respect of children aged under 12 and €16 per week in respect of children aged 12 and over; the extension of the back-to-work family dividend scheme to people on DA and blind pension; and people moving from DA or blind pension to take up work will be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for five years.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I appreciate the figures the Minister outlined and the reference to the growing caseload and broader demographic change. While expenditure is rising, so too are the challenges faced by those depending on supports. Is the Department examining any reforms, either administrative or structural, that would protect recipients while ensuring that schemes remain sustainable? If we are moving towards a cost-of-disability payment, it is important we focus our resources on people and on the actual costs of disability. Not every disability or every person claiming a disability or invalidity payment are the same. The concern lies with the experience in the UK where there has been an exponential rise in claims, especially from young people aged between 16 and 24, in the areas of social phobia, anxiety and mood disorders. Sometimes we have to consider this in the round in terms of access to services and getting people back to work, particularly young people.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** It is important to constantly keep all of the Department's schemes under review and also review what the demand factors are. Work is under way into what a permanent cost-of-disability payment will look like, both in terms of the level of that payment and those who will qualify for it. People's experience of disability is not uniform. There is a challenge in the context of ensuring that those who need it are getting the most accurate payment and most accurate service from the Department. That is what I want to investigate over the course of the coming weeks and months in terms of our negotiations at our strategic

focus forum. That will allow us to come back to the House with proposals for a permanent cost-of-disability payment.

I am also very focused on increasing opportunities for employment for people with disabilities. I am looking at new models in that regard. I saw a really interesting model with the NOW Group in Belfast a number of weeks ago. The NOW Group has prioritised and pioneered the just a minute card initiative for people with disabilities to help them to access services. We have increased the opportunities for those with disabilities to access employment. They are people who bring extraordinary talent and skill to any workplace that is lucky enough to have them.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** As a result of being on the disability committee and having witnesses come before it over the past 11 months, I am struck by the quite variable needs of some people in terms of their disability. I am concerned that if we sometimes provide supports that are too thin to too many people, we need to have some nuance in order that we support people, especially those who have considerable needs that are not being addressed. There is a need to get these people into employment because, as we know, the level of poverty associated with disability in this country is quite considerable, as is the unemployment rate among people who are disabled. That is where my concern lies. In the longer term, it would be good to have a cost-of-disability payment for people who have considerable needs because it would enable them to re-enter the workforce, which would be good for their sake, most importantly, but for our sake as well.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** In relation to poverty, the cost-of-disability payment is going to be very focused on addressing that. As stated, there will be a need to make it as relevant as possible. I want to see us open up our imagination in the context of employment opportunities for people with disabilities and that we offer more opportunities in the digital space and in the creative space. That is why we have made some changes to the wage subsidy scheme to make it more efficient and attractive. We are constantly working to provide opportunities for people with disabilities. During the most recent work and skills week in October, we had a specific careers fair in partnership with AsIAM. That focused on people with autism and the skills and talents they can bring to any organisation. There was a really good response, and I intend to expand on that next year. In that context, Deputy Heneghan just made an interesting proposal regarding employment opportunities here in the Houses.

We need to reimagine what the employment opportunities are for people with disabilities. We are too reliant on older models and I look forward to working with any organisation that can bring solutions to the table in that regard.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

78. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason so many applications for the domiciliary care allowance are rejected; the plans in place to deal with this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62262/25]

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I am taking question No. 78 on behalf of Deputy Ardagh. She has been called to another meeting in her constituency.

I want to raise the issue of the high rejection rates for the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, applications. Families caring for children with disabilities are under immense pressure and when these applications are refused, it adds enormous emotional and financial strain. Almost one in three applications are being turned down, with many only succeeding on appeal. A considerable number of the rejected applications are being overturned on appeal. I recognise, however, the decreased waiting times for appeals.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank Deputies Ardagh and Daly for this question. DCA is a non-means-tested payment of €360 per month and is payable in respect of a child aged under 16 who has a severe disability. The child must require continuous care and attention substantially over and above that required by other children their age.

Applications for DCA are decided by a deciding officer on an individual case-by-case basis and based on the details provided in the application form by the applicant themselves and by the child's GP or specialist. All new applications for DCA are referred for the opinion of a medical assessor in the Department. The medical assessor considers the severity of the child's condition, the expected duration, and the child's associated care needs, and then provides his or her medical professional opinion in relation to the child's eligibility for DCA. This is to aid the deciding officer in making a fair and accurate decision on the eligibility of the child for the scheme.

The main reason, to date, for an application for DCA to be unsuccessful is that the application does not show that the child satisfies the medical criteria for the scheme. Eligibility for DCA is not based entirely on the child's disability or diagnosis, but primarily on the impact of the disability or diagnosis in terms of the associated care and attention required by the child compared to another child of the same age without their disability. Where decisions are overturned on review or appeal, this does not mean that the initial decision was incorrect. A decision can be overturned because the person requesting a review or appeal provides additional information that was not previously made available. Applicants are asked to provide as much detail as possible at application stage.

My Department's officials and I are committed to providing a quality service to applicants for DCA. Earlier this year, we extended the MyWelfare service to provide for an online application process. As part of this process, the opportunity was taken to explore the design of the application form to make it easier for applicants. This involved consultation with relevant groups.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** Between 2020 and 2024, 52,541 applications were made, with 35,234 granted. Out of the 17,695 that were not allowed, 11,087 were appealed, with 60% of the appeals seeing the original decisions overturned and DCA allowed. Out of 67 cases that were taken for judicial review, 50 were won. I absolutely accept the Minister and the Department's bona fides in this regard and that we must have a robust system so that the DCA goes to the people who need it most, but we have to be careful that the system is not too rigid and does not leave people behind.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I want to talk to the Minister about the filling out of these forms. The parents of children with additional needs are the exact same as every single parent in the

State. They want the best for their kids, they want their kids to be given a chance, and they want their kids to be able to thrive. They celebrate the milestones for their kids the same as every parent. In order to be able to fill out a DCA form, they have to write about their children on their worst day, about the implications for the families, about the care needs, about the impact of the disability, and all of the things that are negative about their children. They must write all of the things that they do not want to think about. Like every parent, they want to think about how their children does well and the milestones they hit. Instead, the parents have to talk about not hitting those milestones, about the negative impacts on the families, and about the negative impact on their homes. I was with a mother in my clinic on Monday morning and she described having to fill out the DCA form. I was encouraging her to appeal on the basis that 60% were overturned on appeal. She told me that it was exhausting and very hard to have to describe her child like that. I promised her that I would take the opportunity, if I could, to make that known directly to the Minister.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** In our discussions last night on the social welfare Bill, I asked the Minister about increasing the eligibility of the DCA from the age of 16 to 18. I also mentioned difficulties a lot of families were having with this particular application. In his reply today, the Minister mentioned the criteria of "care and attention required by the child compared to another child of the same age". This is so hard for a parent to get their head around. Some of the applications are going to a GP who has not seen the child. The GP is filling out the form, ticking the matrix box, and putting down that the child is okay. This goes back to a discussion I had with the Minister about appeals. It is when people get one-to-one meetings with the person across a desk that they are able to describe what is happening on a daily basis in their families. We need to look at this again. I appreciate that the Minister has looked at it but we need to look at the application form. It is way too restrictive. We need to encourage people to look at those 60% of appeals that have been successful and encourage people to do a day-to-day diary of how this affects their family, day in and day out. That is where we need to get to. I appeal to the Minister to go back and look at the restrictive nature of this form.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I have actually started the process of looking at all the forms in the Department. This entire office probably engages with all the forms on a daily basis. I would certainly like to get feedback from all the Deputies. We looked at the DCA form during the year. We engaged with DCA recipients and carers' advocacy groups, which improved the process. We provided additional information and online videos. I want to make the process as seamless as possible. I am very conscious of this and I keep reminding the officials in my Department that parents who are applying for DCA are going through really difficult journeys and that we have siloed them and are making their lives very difficult. We want to try to make this as easy a process as possible, bearing in mind that there need to be controls. We need to make this process as easy as possible.

We have prioritised DCA appeals throughout 2025. There are currently 420 DCA appeals in hand. That figure in January 2025 was 1,700. Of the 420, 92% have been received since August 2025. I have made a very direct decision to focus on DCA appeals. It is going to kick out some other appeals but I really want to make sure that we do these forms properly and that they are not re-traumatising parents who are already in very difficult daily situations.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I thank the Minister for the tone of his reply. It was really important because this is about compassion, fairness and efficiency. The fact that such a high proportion of decisions are overturned on appeal suggests that the initial assessment process is not working as it might. It does create unnecessary stress and pressure on parents who are already under additional pressure. I also want to recognise the increase in the income disregard in the carers' allowance. For a long time and for many of those families in that situation, this was the only payment they were getting from the State to support the children with disabilities. With the Minister's initiative on the income disregard, many more of those families will hopefully receive more support.

Perhaps the Minister has already done so, but will he commit to publishing regular statistics on approvals, refusal rates, processing times and appeal outcomes? Perhaps the Minister will also establish a working group with parent representatives and disability advocates so that we deal with this issue in a humane and compassionate way.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** We made a lot of changes in recent years to DCA. In fairness to the Department, there were 29,305 people receiving DCA in respect of 31,628 children in 2015. In 2024, there were 57,319 people receiving DCA in respect of 64,676 children. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that people have that support. We want to make further changes where possible. We have also expanded the payment in relation to DCA to parents of children or babies who remain in hospital immediately after birth. We have doubled the periods for which DCA has continued to be payable for a child who has been admitted to hospital on a full-time basis. As Deputy Daly has said, the changes in income disregard for carers' allowance will also ensure that people get a lot more support.

We are committed to supporting parents. The Department is committed to doing that. We will bring to the table the feedback we get from discussions like this about those forms and the application process. We are constantly ensuring that the appeals process in particular is as efficient as possible. This is why the online process has made a big change.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

79. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons who will gain from the changes in the means test for the carer's allowance announced in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62283/25]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan is taking this question on behalf of Deputy O'Connor.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank Deputies O'Sullivan and O'Connor for the question. The programme for Government contains the commitment to abolish the means test for carers over the life of the Government. Budget 2026 increases the earnings disregard for carer's allowance by €375 to €1,000 per week for a single person and by €750 to €2,000 per week for a couple from July 2026. These are the largest ever increases in the carer's income disregards. They are evidence of my commitment and determination to deliver on the programme for Government commitment. Since 2022 the disregards will have increased cumulatively by €667.50 per week for a single person and €1,335 per week for a couple.

The budget 2026 measure will benefit those current recipients who are on a means-reduced rate and who will see an increase in their payment rate, and those people making new claim applications subject to a means reduced rate in 2026. On foot of the increases in the carer's allowance income disregards, a single person who provides full-time care but also does part-time work will next year be able to earn just over €54,000 and receive a full carer's payment. Similarly in a couple household, a person who is providing full-time care and where their partner might earn approximately €108,000 per annum will receive a full carer's payment.

There are wider implications of departing from a means-tested approach and for this reason the income disregard is being abolished in a measured way over a number of budgets in line with the programme for Government commitment. Given that the scheme is demand led, and given also that it is likely that many people who are above the means threshold will have not previously applied for carer's allowance owing to this, it is difficult to estimate potential inflow from these measures. However, as with other schemes, the number of payments to be made under the scheme is not budget capped and the Department will closely monitor the inflow into the scheme to assess any change in trends. Data on take up will be published in all of our quarterly statistical releases.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** In budget 2026, recognition was given, as the Minister just outlined, to the massive contribution that family carers made in Irish society. Progress has been made, albeit not as quickly as some may have liked. Nonetheless, I know that more needs to be done. I have listened to the Minister intently this morning and over recent months. I welcome the fact that the Minister has reiterated here once again that his ambition is still to end the means test for carers in the lifetime of the Government.

Will the Minister outline further his plans for income disregards for carer's allowance? I know he said it would be difficult to forecast it, given the variables he is dealing with, but I ask him to outline his approach and how he intends on doing it in this staged fashion. Will it be in four equal parts over the four years? Will it be a lot more complex than that? He has probably already indicated that it will be. I will revert to the question and ask whether the Minister has any estimate on the number of people who have benefited from the specific measure introduced in budget 2026.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The context of the commitment in the programme for Government is to do it in a progressive manner as part of the annual budget process. We are still finalising budget 2026 in terms of passing the Bill and we have not given a huge focus to 2027 yet. In terms of abolishing the carer's allowance, the Department has estimated a cost of approximately €600 million. This is based on administrative data. It is derived from the number of people on a reduced rate payment due to means, the number on a half-rate payment perhaps due to an overlap with another social welfare payment, and those who are in receipt of the non-means tested carer's support grant. This cost, however, could stretch to a potential €3 billion per annum if everybody who self-declared as a carer in census 2022 were to qualify. This latter figure is a very high-level estimate but it gives a sense of the range. This gives a sense of the implications of departing from a means-tested approach. That is why we will be abolishing it in a measured way over a number of budgets. This year's increase of 60% gives a sense of my ambition and determination in that regard. I certainly will be pursuing further increases. To

give a little bit of leeway, we must also bear in mind that we have to look after those who are on existing carer's payments to ensure they get support as well.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I know it might not be popular to say it with some people inside here, but the €600 million VAT exemption given to hospitality might have been better devoted to this area in the budget.

To finish, I want to highlight a particular concern I have about people providing full-time care to more than one person in their homes. Will the Minister please outline how we are going to help these people in particular, as I believe they are a cohort under the most pressure? Will the Minister update us on plans to introduce a pay-related carer's benefit for individuals who have to give up work suddenly in order to provide full-time care for their loved ones?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I will revert to the Deputy on the first point regarding multiple people in a home. With regard to pay-related carer's benefit, and as Deputy O'Sullivan knows, we introduced a pay-related jobseeker's benefit earlier this year. I am waiting to do a full 12-month evaluation of the impact of this scheme. It will give me guidance on introducing it for carers and for parental leave.

Once again, I emphasise my determination to abolish the means test. The income disregards we increased this year mean that people who have never before engaged with the Department of Social Protection will have the opportunity to receive a full carer's payment. That is why it is challenging to estimate the number of people who will be involved. An income of more than €108,000 for a two-adult household is substantial and it will now get a social protection payment. The same carer with an income of €138,000 will retain a partial payment. We are determined to get rid of this means test and to ensure proper supports are given to those on the payment.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

80. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection to advise on the efforts underway in his Department to decrease social welfare appeal waiting times; the average time it takes an appeal to be decided on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [61989/25]

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank Deputy O'Sullivan and I acknowledge his ongoing engagement on this issue. In 2024, the Department's deciding officers and designated persons made almost 3.4 million appealable decisions. Of these, 174,000 claims were disallowed or rejected, representing 5% of all decisions, and 40,684 appeals were registered. This represents just over 1% of the overall total decisions. At current registration levels, it is projected we will again exceed 40,000 appeals by the end of 2025. This contrasts with appeal volumes of just over 20,000 in previous years.

The increase in appeal volumes is believed to be attributable to two factors. These are demographic factors leading to higher demand for pensions, disability and carer's payments, and the introduction of a simple-to-use online appeals process. Recognising that neither of these two factors is likely to change, the chief appeals officer has put in place measures to deal

with the increase in appeals registered. Twenty additional appeals officers were assigned in 2025. Considerable progress has since been made, with 44,307 appeals finalised by the end of October 2025. This is a 96% increase in productivity on the 22,610 appeals dealt with by the end of October 2024. As a result, pending appeals volumes have been more than halved from over 22,000 in January this year to about 11,000 currently. They are continuing to fall and I continue to monitor them on a monthly basis.

Inevitably, reported processing times increase as the office clears the backlog. However, the average time to process an appeal at the end of quarter 3 of 2025 was 21.2 weeks, which is lower than the average of 23.5 weeks for 2024. Processing times are continuing to fall and once the backlog is reduced, I expect they will fall back to between ten and 12 weeks, which, given the complexity of the issues the appeals office deals with, is a reasonable timeframe.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I have tabled parliamentary questions in the past, and I have always said that in terms of dealing with day-to-day stuff from TDs, the Department of Social Protection is probably one of the most efficient Departments and I want to put this on the record. Nonetheless, I have asked this parliamentary question on a number of occasions, as have a number of other Deputies in the past while. The Minister's answer is similar to previous responses about the 20 additional appeals officers put in place. Are they 20 permanent staff who have been reassigned or is that just temporary? If it is temporary, when does that reassignment cease? It is inevitable that there will be waiting times and backlogs but is there any kind of prediction as to when we will get back within that 12-week period? I know I can cherry-pick certain welfare appeal processes, but the one that always sticks with me is the supplementary welfare allowance. That can take in excess of a year. I am particularly interested in hearing whether there has been a reduction in the waiting time for that.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** They are 20 permanent staff for the appeals office. You do not just drop somebody into an appeals office. They need training and experience and there is a process in place within the appeals office to do that. It would have taken time for those 20 to be trained up and get stuck in but they are definitely getting stuck in. I also point out that we introduced new social welfare appeals regulations from 28 April. One of the key changes under those regulations is that the time limit to lodge an appeal has increased from 21 to 60 days. A lot more appeals are coming in as a consequence of that. There is also provision for the chief appeals officer to accept late appeals of up to 180 days in certain circumstances.

The chief appeals officer continues to monitor the appeals on hand and the appeal processing times. I continue to monitor that work in terms of ensuring we get the appeals back as efficiently as possible. There is always a balance between processing appeals and dealing with them. I want to try to make sure we get to a good balance with that and there is no particular scheme that is an outlier. That is why, this year, I have focused predominantly on domiciliary care allowance appeals. We have it down to a situation that I referred to in reply to the previous question.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I welcome the Minister's statement about the domiciliary allowance in reply to the previous question. Specifically, could he address the supplementary welfare appeals in his answer if he has a moment?

In relation to processing times, I am not trying to be unfair or harsh, but I look at the response that the chief appeals officer continues to monitor the number of appeals on hand and that appeal processing times take extra effort to ensure decisions are consistent and timely and I just wonder what the definition of "timely" is in the Department. Somebody who is in dire need of this payment - some more than others - does not have the facility to wait what is often 20, 25 or 30 weeks. Is there any kind of guide as to what people need to be aiming for or are there any targets the Minister could share with us this morning?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Every appeal is different and every scheme is different. Given the complexity of some of the schemes, getting to a ten-week turnaround time would be good for some of the schemes. I will revert to the Deputy, as I do not have the detail about supplementary welfare appeals.

Appeals will also depend on the detail provided. It is not always easy to get the level of detail we need to do an appeal. At the end of quarter 3, the average processing time for all social welfare appeals was 21.2 weeks. I want to get that down. That is why we have made changes, such as assigning the 20 extra people. We have an appeals modernisation project. That was completed in quarter 1 2025, which brings in the online side of things and enhances the experience.

I continue to work with the chief appeals officer, who has put in huge effort, along with the appeals office generally, to try to get these backlogs reduced. Up to the end of quarter 3, we had 29,751 appeals registered. We have reduced the processing times for those appeals. While the volume continues to grow, I want to focus on reducing the processing times as much as we can.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

81. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the employees of a company that has entered receivership (details supplied) can apply for new employment, jobseeker's allowance, supplementary welfare allowance or any other social welfare payment during the lengthy receivership period without this action having a negative impact on their redundancy entitlements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62270/25]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Guirke is taking question No. 81 for Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** This question relates to the employees of Fastway.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Deputy. I also thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for tabling the question and her engagement over recent days about the Fastway workers. All of our thoughts are with the workers affected by this receivership. It is very concerning for all of them and I assure Deputy Guirke that my Department's priority is to support all the workers who are affected and ensure they receive their statutory entitlements and appropriate income supports in a timely manner.

When a company enters receivership, employees are typically placed into a statutory consultation period lasting 30 days. An employee remains in employment during the 30-day consultation period. They continue to accrue an entitlement to wages and holiday pay. That can then be claimed via the insolvency payments scheme if they are unpaid due to the employer's insolvency.

There is no statutory restriction on employees taking up alternative or additional employment during the consultation or receivership period, provided they do not formally resign from their current employment. Accepting other work does not affect an employee's statutory redundancy entitlement as long as the employment contract with their original employer is still in place. Employees should not apply for jobseeker's payments during the consultation period, as they remain employees until employment terminates. Applying prematurely could affect entitlements under redundancy and insolvency payments schemes. Once the consultation period ends and the employment is formally terminated, affected employees may apply for jobseeker's payments.

I assure the Deputy that, in the interim and if immediate financial support is needed, it will be made available through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. As of yesterday, 45 supplementary welfare allowance scheme urgent needs payments had been issued to people in this situation with Fastway. Other people affected, including the self-employed and franchise and direct employees of contractors, can apply for jobseeker's immediately. As of yesterday, 56 jobseekers claims had been awarded to people in this regard.

My Department has established a dedicated team to work closely with the Fastway liquidators, workers and their representatives to provide guidance, ensure efficient processing of claims and provide opportunities to resolve any queries collectively, where possible. Our local Intreo and employment services offices are available and are assisting affected Fastway staff as we speak.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** In the run up to Christmas, many of the Fastway workers do not know how they will cope. Rose Conway-Walsh, Senator Maria McCormack, Councillor Claire Murray and I have been meeting every few days and more on these issues as well as on the issues arising that franchise owners are experiencing. Councillor Murray spoke to a franchise owner and issues are coming up regarding the franchise agreement. The way these franchise owners have been treated could be a national scandal.

This receivership announcement is devastating for all affected workers, subcontractors and their families. The timing of this decision could not have been worse. Families are already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis and many now face the real fear of losing their income in the run up to Christmas. I recently met the affected Fastway workers who were protesting outside Leinster House. I heard first hand from the employees. Can I ask the Minister to meet all those affected and listen to their concerns?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I am listening to concerns directly through the Deputy, Deputy Conway-Walsh and many other Deputies. I have met workers myself in my own constituency. That is why we have put the processes in place that have ensured 45 urgent needs payments have been made and 56 jobseeker's claims have been awarded. The offices are available to the Deputy to process any specific claims he has. I absolutely agree with him about the pressure

this is putting on employees and franchise holders. I want to ensure that the supports we can make available at this time can be made available, albeit there this a redundancy process underway. I do not want to see people without an income at any time of the year, but particularly at this time of year. That is why we set up a dedicated team to deal with Fastway workers. Every Intreo office and local employment office in the areas most affected have processes in place to deal with them efficiently and quickly. If there are specific cases the Deputy wants to raise, the team in the Department are more than happy to engage with the him or any Member of the Oireachtas directly in relation to that.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** As the Minister knows, these workers and all those impacted deserve clear communication and support from both the company and the Government. Some franchisees have invested heavily to establish their franchises. This must be taken into consideration. Workers need an income and certainty. The Government must engage with the receiver and ensure that all avenues are explored to safeguard jobs, protect workers and ensure those owed money are not left behind.

Senator Maria McCormack and Councillor Claire Murray hosted a public meeting for the workers and subcontractors affected by the closure of Fastway's Portarlinton depot. People travelled all the way from Cork, Donegal and all over Ireland to join a jam-packed room. Franchise owners who recently bought into the franchise with Fastway have bought vans on finance and spent €50,000-plus on the franchise. Now they are left with repayments they cannot meet. Those affected feel like they are being left in the dark. They are fearful that red tape will stop them getting fair payments. Will the Minister ensure the Government does all to support the workers and franchise owners to make sure they are not forgotten about and to protect workers rights throughout this receivership process?

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I thank the Minister and his officials for creating a task force for the Fastway workers. I am conscious that we are not just talking about people who are in typical employment situations. We are talking about people who are self-employed, who are contractors and who are franchisees. According to the information I have, about 1,000 people are in that category as opposed to the 300 who were employed by Fastway directly. When we think about the self-employed provision that is available from the Department for people who will never be paid again, who are out of pocket, in some cases by tens of thousands of euro, there is a huge shift in our employment more generally towards the self-employed population. Having appropriate social protection provision for those people is a key issue we need to solve in this phase of employment. I am also particularly conscious of the fallout for those franchisees. Are any legal routes for them in recouping the moneys that they spent as a result of the franchisee arrangement they had with Fastway? If the Minister can give clarity on that, it would be helpful.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank both Deputies. As I said in relation to the franchisees, the self-employed and the employees of contractors of Fastway, they can apply for jobseekers' payment immediately. We have processed and awarded 56 claims already in relation to that group of people. The work my Department team is doing at the moment is working with receivers, getting records of who is an employee and who is not and who is a franchisee, and getting that level of detail. That has been under way since the company entered into

receivership. I thank the staff in my Department who are working on that team. They engaged with this immediately when this issue arose. That team is in place. The offices in the relevant areas are being given resources to deal with this quickly and, most importantly, as they always do, empathetically, particularly given the circumstances of this and to ensure we get decisions turned around quickly. We have done 45 urgent-need payments and 56 jobseekers' claims. That gives a sense of the focus and attention this is getting within the Department.

### **Pensions Reform**

82. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on the guidance and information he is providing to employers in relation to My Future Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62073/25]

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** Will the Minister provide an update on the guidance and information he is providing to employers in relation to My Future Fund. Will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank Deputy McCormack, and Deputy Brennan for tabling this question. The implementation of My Future Fund from 1 January 2026 will fulfil a key programme for Government commitment to ensure that more than 750,000 workers are brought into a retirement savings scheme for the first time, giving those workers more security in their retirement. There has been extensive engagement with employers and representative organisations from the very outset, including during the early design phase of My Future Fund. The phasing of the roll-out, the incremental approach to levying contributions was, for example, specifically designed in response to employer feedback.

Over the past 18 months we have hosted thousands of employers and related professions through many webinars, conferences and in-person stakeholder meetings, with more planned over the coming weeks. We have also implemented an extensive advertising campaign aimed specifically at employers to show them how easy it will be to implement auto-enrolment. In fact, it is as easy as enabling a health insurance or credit union deduction.

Separately, over the past year, my team in the Department has worked incredibly hard and held weekly project meetings with payroll providers who provide payroll services to many employers. We have worked closely with them to ensure that deductions can be implemented in a streamlined manner. We have also made a wealth of information available through our AE hub at [gov.ie/auto-enrolment](http://gov.ie/auto-enrolment) and brought this to the attention of all the representative organisations. This material includes a large range of YouTube videos to explain the system and how it will work. More than 300,000 companies are registered with the Companies Registration Office. They were issued a My Future Fund mailshot in April this year. The Department will be writing to all companies and tax agents that are registered on the Revenue ROS system in early December. That mailshot will be supported by the NAERSA contact centre.

It is important to note that, unlike other pension schemes, employers will have very little to do to facilitate auto-enrolment being implemented because the new State agency, the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, has been established to

oversee and operate the system which will include taking care of all the administrative processes around auto-enrolment, contribution collection, investment and providing access to accounts and information.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** This is a significant reform. I acknowledge the work that the Minister and his Department have undertaken in developing My Future Fund. It represents a real step forward in helping workers to plan and save for their retirement. However, as with any major change, the real test will be how it is rolled out. We have had well-intentioned schemes in the past that began strongly but then faded from view, leaving uncertainty around what was required and how to comply. I know the Minister is conscious of that. Clear, consistent communication will be key. Employers need straightforward forward guidance, plain-language information and ongoing support as the system beds in. If My Future Fund remains simple, practical and easy to follow from the start, it will stand the test of time and deliver real value for both employees and those administering it on the ground.

**Deputy Paula Butterly:** I would like to ask the Minister about community groups, essential youth services that provide vital services in the community, particularly those in County Louth. Has provision been made to combat the cost of auto-enrolment and the increase in the minimum wage? Have they been factored into their budgets and will there be additional budgets for them in 2026?

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank Deputies McCormack and Butterly for their questions. It is our intention to keep it simple. That is coming from the feedback that was under way for seven years now. We have started a strawman consultation. Employers have asked us to keep it simple and to keep the administration costs as minimal as possible. Most importantly for the approximately 750,000 people, they will have access to their money because for each person in My Future Fund, it is their money and not the State's money. They will see the top up from their employer and the State contribution and have access to that. I have no doubt there will be teething problems. There is going to be but we are trying to minimise those and get information to people inasmuch as we can.

On Deputy Butterly's question, we have advised other Departments that auto-enrolment is starting. They were advised early this year to ensure that groups and funding was properly in place. Within our Department, we have provided extra money for groups such as the rural social scheme, RSS, Tús and CE to ensure that auto-enrolment is covered. However, that is an ongoing communication in place with all the Departments and that we discussed earlier.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** I appreciate the Minister's commitment to ensuring that My Future Fund is implemented effectively. The focus now must be on consistency, keeping the guidance visible, practical and accessible beyond the initial rollout. Regular updates through payroll providers and local enterprise offices and clear online resources will make a real difference in keeping the process smooth and understandable. With that continued engagement, I have every confidence that under the Minister's leadership, this reform can strike the right balance, strengthening long-term retirement savings for workers while ensuring the administrative side remains straightforward and workable for employees throughout the country.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** We have already provided debate opportunities in the House. We have provided guidance in the audiovisual room. We are providing more technical guidance for Deputies and Senators in relation to auto-enrolment so that they can provide information in their constituencies. I would direct every Deputy to [gov.ie/auto-enrolment](http://gov.ie/auto-enrolment) where there are videos and supports in place for all organisations to give people an idea of what is coming and the kind of work that will be involved. It is my intention that work will be minimised for employers, in particular.

*Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie).*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

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

12 o'clock

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** After months of delay, it is finally here. Almost a year into this Government, it is only now publishing its housing plan. Given the amount of time this has taken, we can be forgiven for expecting something bold and new, a plan, as the Tánaiste once said himself, to once and for all tackle the housing crisis. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Anyone who will take the time to read the plan will know the emperor has no clothes. In fact, this is not a new housing plan at all. It is nothing more than a reheating and repackaging of the failed housing plan of the last Government.

Today should have been a moment of hope for all those in need of affordable housing. Instead, it is another punch in the gut for all those without a home of their own. Once again, the Government is underestimating overall housing need and, as a result, the housing deficit will continue to grow. There is no increased funding or targets for the delivery of social homes. The result will be even longer council waiting lists and ever more adults and children experiencing homelessness. There is no increased funding or targets for the delivery of genuinely affordable homes. Instead, the Government is brazenly trying to rebrand unaffordable private homes as somehow affordable. There is also no plan to fix the Government's broken affordable housing schemes. This week, we learned so-called affordable apartments in O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin will cost €500,000. So-called affordable rental homes in the same development are expected to cost €1,900 a month. This is on land once owned by the council and gifted for free to a developer by the Tánaiste's Government.

The Government's failure on affordable housing will mean that the locked-out generation will continue to be locked out, forced to choose between their parents' box bedroom or emigration. The only promise the Government is keeping in this plan is its promise to attack renters. From March of next year, tens of thousands of renters will face even higher rip-off rents for the privilege of being forced to live in smaller and darker apartments. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's housing policy was written by and for big investors and developers to benefit their private interests. The needs of ordinary people, workers and families have once again been ignored. For ten years, the Government has starved our councils of the resources and staff to deliver public housing on public land at scale, all the while showering investor funds, corporate landlords and big developers with subsidies and tax breaks like confetti. Today's plan does not move a single inch from that disastrous approach.

Despite what they are going to say on the radio and television, the Government's backbenchers must be privately reeling. In fact, even the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, is not hanging around to defend his own plan. Instead of debating with Opposition spokespeople on television and radio this evening, he is fleeing the country to speak - believe it or not - at a housing conference in England.

It did not have to be this way. The Government could have taken on board the recommendations of its own Housing Commission or adopted the many solutions promised by Sinn Féin and others. It could have included actual, measurable targets year on year for all of its schemes, but why would it bother doing that when it knows already it is going to miss them? Instead, it has decided to do nothing different and nothing new. Given the Government's decade of failure, why should anyone believe anything is going to change now?

**The Tánaiste:** Today is a significant day in terms of housing policy in Ireland. It comes after a number of decisions the Government has already taken. This plan today needs to be seen in the context of the national development plan published this summer, where we significantly increased the level of investment directly in house building. After listening to people across the country, local authorities and people who build our homes, we also significantly increased the funding for the enabling infrastructure, investing more than €50 billion between water, transport and energy to enable housing supply. The plan also needs to be seen in the context of a piece of work that will conclude at the end of this month, which will speed up the delivery of infrastructure. Something we can all agree on is that we need to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure. There are too many communities in which it is taking too long to deliver vital projects. We were very clear during the election that fixing this would be a key priority for the Government.

It is also important to say that, yes, we are living through a housing emergency, and the purpose of the plan today is to make real progress and deliver 300,000 more homes during the lifetime of the plan, but it is also important for people watching at home to know there are some encouraging signs too. In the first half of this year, we saw completion of new homes at the highest it has been since 2008. We saw the number of new dwellings completed in the first three quarters of this year increase by 13% on the same period last year. These are additional new homes completed compared with the same period last year. For quarter 1 to quarter 3 of this year, we saw the highest completion figure of apartments for any time since 2011 when data started to be gathered. Something that is never said in this House from the Opposition benches is that we have seen the highest number of first-time buyers draw down their mortgage since 2007. We have seen more than 11,000 properties being approved under the vacant property refurbishment grant. The scale of challenge in relation to housing and ramping up housing supply is real and acute, but these are also real statistics that are having real benefits in the lives of people across our country.

The Deputy said today, as I expected him to say, no matter what was in the plan - I could have said it for him - that there is nothing new in the plan. Of course, that is not true. There are many new things in this plan, including a new €1 billion infrastructure investment fund to help to de-risk the development of sites in towns and cities to maximise their potential opportunities. There are measures to enable developers to deliver new stand-alone wastewater treatment plants in rural Ireland. Across my constituency and the country I have heard of parts

of our country where it has not been possible to build any homes because of the inability to allow a developer to deliver a wastewater treatment plant, albeit to an Irish Water standard.

There is a new fund, which I presume the Deputy will welcome, of €400 million over the next three years for small developers. I do not think he does welcome it.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is not new. It already exists.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** That is welcome news.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It has existed since 2023.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** There is also an additional €100 million, specifically in 2026, to get families out of emergency accommodation, particularly children-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It has existed since 2023.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** -----and into homes. It is new money of €100 million that has not yet been spent in 2026. Do not mislead the people. The Deputy will accept it is €100 million for 2026 that has not yet been spent. That will need to be repeated each year during the lifetime of this plan. There is a new performance fund to incentivise local authorities to exceed their annual own-build social house targets. Targets are not the ceiling. They need to go further, drive on and do more.

There is a starter home programme delivering an average of 15,000 affordable home supports per year for families, including many schemes which, quite frankly, the Deputy would scrap. Under Sinn Féin, the help to buy and first home schemes would be gone, first home owners would be abandoned, restrictions would be made to the vacant and derelict property grant, the Land Development Agency would be abolished despite the fact it is now delivering real homes for real people across our country. Restrictions Sinn Féin would put in place would mean a garda married to a nurse in the fourth year of their jobs would not be able to access supports under Sinn Féin's so-called affordable home scheme. We had the election and Sinn Féin's proposals were rejected. We are getting on with the job.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Tánaiste has been in government for more than ten years-----

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** I have.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----and he has been telling us the same story over and over again. In 2016, Simon Coveney's plan had all of the same promises, all of which were broken. In 2021, Darragh O'Brien's plan again had all of the same promises and all were broken. Today, all we are getting is more of the same. None of the things the Tánaiste has just described as new are new.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** They are.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The €100 million for vacant social housing acquisitions for families who are homeless has existed every year since 2020. In fact, this year the Government cut the funding for that scheme from last year. The €400 million equity fund has been in place since 2023. Yes, it is going to be extended but it is not new. The only thing that is new is the Tánaiste refusing to tell us and the public how many new-build social, cost-rental and affordable homes the Government will deliver each year and how it will make them actually affordable. The Government failed in 2016 and 2021 and it is failing again today.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** I agree there is certainly one fundamental difference between Sinn Féin and the Government when it comes to housing. Sinn Féin wants this plan to fail because it believes it will do well if our housing plan fails. We intend to work every night and day to build housing but Sinn Féin thrives on the misery-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It has been the same story for a decade.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** -----and exploiting the intergenerational anxiety of others.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The same story for a decade.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** It needs this plan to fail-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Government is creating the intergenerational anxiety by its failure over and over again.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** -----so it can exploit the challenges people face. Of course, the Government is not going to fail because the Government has already delivered. The Deputy talks about my record in government. We delivered over 137,000 new homes during the lifetime of Housing for All.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** You missed your social housing targets every year.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Ó Broin, please.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** We will deliver 300,000 homes-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** You missed your affordable housing targets every year.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** You will not shout me down.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Allow the Tánaiste to answer.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** You will not shout me down. You will not bully me.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** You cannot deliver homes at genuinely affordable prices.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** You will not shout me down. Let me speak, please.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am speaking in a very reasonable tone of voice.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** No, you are shouting me down when it is my time to speak.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am reminding you of your failures.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** The people at home actually want to know what we are going to do and what we are going to do is very clear. We are going to deliver a plan that has a record level of funding, that breaks down silos, that puts a new focus on starter homes, and that sets targets for local authorities. The Deputy tells people there are no targets; that is simply untrue. The target is over 300,000 homes in the lifetime of the plan.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Where is the annual target to measure progress?

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** When we had an action plan on jobs, we did not set an annual target-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Where are the annual targets?

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** -----but we exceeded that target, delivered jobs and got our country back to full employment.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** They are not there because you know you will not meet them.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** We will exceed the housing target as well.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** You know you will not meet them.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** Your plan was rejected-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Ó Broin, please.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** -----and you want this plan to fail so you can politically thrive.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I do not want this plan to fail. The future of our country, particularly for people my age, depends on it. At last this morning, we have a new housing plan but I have never seen any government take so long to come up with so little. This time last year, the Government deliberately misled the electorate in terms of the housing targets.

During the election, the Government never publicised its plans to hike rents, change the rental rules and shrink apartment sizes. This new plan tells us that the Government will deliver 300,000 homes by 2030 but it will need a minor miracle to deliver that. The Government has abandoned targets for the private sector and it is very clear that it has done this to shield itself from accountability because what one cannot count, one cannot measure.

The overall targets for this plan are wrong. They are too low and do not consider inbuilt demand due the housing deficit. The previous target for over 40,000 homes this year was a fiction so how is anyone expected to believe the Government will deliver 300,000 homes by 2030? The Central Bank projections are clear that only 36,000 homes will be delivered in 2026 and 40,000 in 2027. That leaves 200,000 homes to be built in the second half of this plan. That is a doubling of current delivery, with no sense that the private sector can or will do it. Construction activity is falling month on month. Developers are on the go-slow because they know they have the Government on the hook. The target of 12,000 social units is only a 20% increase on current targets when what is needed is closer to 15,000, as we proposed in our manifesto and as the Housing Commission, which the Government continues to ignore, stated.

In the section on promoting affordable ownership, there are no new measures, bar prize bonds, to make ownership a reality for people my age. In fact, the Government talks about new schemes but what it has done is mainly just a PR exercise of repackaging existing supports or renaming them. The Government's previous plan for affordable homes never delivered on its targets and its solution is to effectively put all of the supports together and rename them. There is nothing in this plan to show how the Government will build the tens of thousands of extra affordable homes we need or how house prices will come down, which they need to do.

We are told the LDA will have an expanded role but only €2.5 billion of additional funding is being provided and there is no clarity around what specific powers the agency will have. What is needed is a massive ramping up of State capacity to directly build social and affordable homes.

I have several questions. Why has the Government abandoned its annual targets? What is the Government's measure of success for this plan in year one? Will homelessness fall? What new specific measures are in this plan to make home ownership affordable again? What does the Government say to any young person, to people my age? Is it, as the Minister said, that they just have to hang in there and for what? Will it be for another 15 or 20 years?

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** First, I want to extend my deepest sympathy to Deputy Sheehan's colleague, Deputy George Lawlor, on the passing of his mum, Betty. I understand he delivered a very heart warming tribute to her yesterday and I join Members across the House in extending my sympathy to him and all of his family at this difficult time.

I thank Deputy Sheehan for raising these issues. I accept that he does not want the plan to fail. I also accept that generally our engagements in relation to housing are constructive. We have different perspectives and different views on occasion but I appreciate that point.

I have to reject or disagree with a number of the assertions the Deputy has made. Yes, the State needs to do more in terms of direct building but there is no way the State is going to build all of the homes that our country requires. I think the Deputy and I can agree on that. There is a target of delivering 300,000 more homes over the lifetime of the plan. Roughly speaking,

from memory, around 162,000 of those homes will either be social homes, local authority homes or will be homes that are part-funded through a variety of Government schemes. That is a very significant proportion. In fact, I would argue that this country is investing more Exchequer funding relative to the market than many, if not most, other European countries. Even doing that, I think the Deputy and I will also agree that we are still going to need the private sector to build more homes as well. That is where we are going to get the bulk of delivery. To do that we have to open up sites and listen to those who build homes and the local authorities in terms of the feedback they are getting as well. That is why I reject the assertion that there is nothing in this plan that is going to make a material difference. We are investing hugely in the enabling infrastructure around water and wastewater. We are enabling small developers on small sites to put in their own infrastructure which will help rural and regional communities right across the country.

In relation to the targets, just to be clear on this, the target is very clear. It is 300,000 more homes over the lifetime of the plan. When we were in government with Deputy Sheehan's party, we had a target for the action plan on jobs of 100,000 new jobs. We did not break it down every year, and the Labour Party did not look for that either, but we exceeded the target. We have got to be clear here. I do not accept this idea of arbitrary deadlines, whether something is finished on 31 December or 1 January, or the idea that somebody can sit back and say they have done their bit for this county for this year and will wait until next year. We need a constant pipeline over the lifetime of this plan and we need people hungry to do more. That is why, as the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, have made clear, we are putting a fund in place to reward and incentivise local authorities that go above and beyond their so-called target in terms of either social or starter homes.

In relation to children, and child homelessness in particular, we are taking two very significant steps. One is the fund to help get families out of homelessness, with €100 million next year to be ring-fenced. I am being clear that this is going to need to be repeated each year. That needs to really ramp up, to resource and fund our local authorities in a ring-fenced way to help to get children out of homelessness and get a roof over their heads. The second step - and I have heard Focus Ireland and others seek this - is changes to the social housing allocation scheme to prioritise homeless children. That is also in the plan.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** In his reply, the Tánaiste did not address any of the specific questions I asked. The fact of the matter is that there are elements in this plan that I welcome. Some of those elements are things that we already proposed, such as amending the law to ensure the best interests of children are taken into account by local authorities when families become homeless. Former Deputy Jan O'Sullivan had that in a Bill in 2017.

The fact is that the State is not doing enough in terms of directly building social and affordable housing. Most of the homes that the LDA delivered in recent years were turnkey units. The State is investing significant sums in housing but a lot of it is going into inflationary schemes. When I talk to local authorities, they do not want financial incentives. They want the Department to engage with them properly and work with them constructively, not to stand in their way. They are very keen to get on with the job of building the homes we need.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** Some of them are, and some are better than others. I do not think it is uniform across the country. I have got to be very honest. I have a league table that

the Minister for housing has published, which shows some local authorities well exceeding their council targets for social housing, including the county of Wicklow that I represent, and others making a paltry contribution. When national targets are missed, they are not missed at a national level. They are missed by local authorities. I do not believe that every local authority is doing everything possible. I do not believe there is a consistent approach, whereby every hospital equally performs and every council equally performs. That is why we should incentivise good behaviour, good practice, good policy and political courage to do more and deliver more in communities.

I do not agree with the assertion around the Land Development Agency. I have just come from Donore, a site here in Dublin city, where we are delivering with the LDA, in partnership with Dublin City Council, one-, two- and three-bedroom units. I would ask the Labour Party to reflect on this. We are trying to make changes to apartment standards so we can have flexibility to deliver more accommodation and one of its elected representatives-----

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** To make them smaller and darker-----

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** -----is going to court. One of its elected representatives has rushed to the courts to try to block those changes to apartment standards.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Fine Gael's lord mayor is not in favour of it.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** I ask Deputy Sheehan respectfully, as his party's spokesperson on housing-----

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Your own lord mayor is not in favour of it.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** -----to pick up the phone to his councillor and tell him to stop weaponising the use of the courts to try to delay changes we need to make to apartment standards. There will be students in Limerick who need more apartments and student accommodation to be built and the Labour Party councillor is actively delaying that in my respectful opinion.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** That is completely disingenuous.

**Deputy John Cummins:** It is not. It is true.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** On behalf of the Social Democrats, I extend sympathies to Deputy Lawlor.

Fine Gael has been in government for nearly 15 years. That is 15 years of promises, plans and press conferences with Ministers donning hard hats, 15 years spent turning the housing crisis into a housing disaster. Under the Tánaiste's watch, house prices have almost doubled, skyrocketing rents have more than doubled and the number of people who are homeless has increased by more than 400%.

This morning Fine Gael's fourth housing plan was launched. This time, we are told, it will be different. How can it be? The plan contains the same recipe for failure. There is no sign of the radical policy changes called for by the Housing Commission. Worse, there is no hope for the locked out generation that anything will get any better.

The housing crisis is a daily struggle etched into the lives of tens of thousands of people. Generations of families are crammed into overcrowded houses. Entire families are living in box rooms. Toddlers are growing up in homeless accommodation without the physical space to learn how to crawl. Adults are stuck in their childhood bedrooms, putting their lives on hold year after year. The mental toll this is taking is immense. Stress, anxiety and hopelessness are becoming the norm for people who are stuck in this housing limbo. People's lives are being ruined.

In the run-up to the last election, Fine Gael promised that 40,000 homes would be built last year. This has been exposed as a complete and utter fabrication. What is the Government's response? It has scrapped annual targets from its housing plan. All of a sudden, it thinks they are a bad idea. I have news for the Tánaiste. The latest desperate attempt to disguise the Government's terrible record in housing will not work. No sleight of hand can hide the mess Fine Gael Governments have made. That annual targets have disappeared from this plan is damning. If the Government had any confidence in its plan, or in its housing Minister, that would not have happened. The housing Minister who has delayed the launch of this plan for almost a year will not even hang around to debate it this evening. He is running scared.

This plan could have been different. It could have been radical. The Government could have announced plans to build a modular homes factory to turbo-charge the delivery of affordable homes. It could have given the Land Development Agency, LDA, the power it needs to assemble land banks and deliver homes quickly. It could have fast-tracked a vacant homes tax with teeth to get tens of thousands of vacant homes back into use. Instead, the Government has reverted to type with sweetheart deals for developers, tax breaks for investment funds and a doubling down on failure. Given Fine Gael's track record of failure in housing, why should people believe this plan will be any better than the ones that came before it?

**The Tánaiste:** I always think phrases such as "donning hard hats" are a bit pejorative. People put on hard hats when they visit building sites because of health and safety. It is the law of the land. Ministers go out and about to meet people who build homes. I am proud to do that and to listen directly to the people who build homes, including at the LDA site I visited with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Taoiseach this morning, where more than 500 homes are being built, which will come on stream in 2027. It is a real partnership between Dublin City Council, a developer and the LDA, making a real difference. We will not be prisoners of ideology. We will work in every pragmatic way we can to increase the amount of housing and, as a practical example of that, I will always wear a hard hat on a building site.

The Deputy said it was the fourth housing plan. Of course, it is because the housing plan needs to be replaced every few years. It has a deadline. He also suggested that Fine Gael and Fine Gael alone wrote the last four housing plans. Fine Gael has been in government during that time with Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, the Green Party and Independents. Many political parties in this House have had an opportunity during that period to feed in their constructive

suggestions to the housing plan and this is the latest instalment. On the one hand the Deputy criticised us for having an fourth housing plan while on the other he said it was delayed.

I am genuinely intrigued by the Deputy's political position on tax. Perhaps it is his view that tax should not be used as a viability measure in housing. I disagree but it is a legitimate political view to have. Perhaps he believes that when we look at the ledger we should only use the spending side. We in the Government do not. We believe we should use the spending side to invest massive amounts of the people's money in building infrastructure, whether it be for water, wastewater, electricity or the transport projects that are needed in all our constituencies to open up sites, and directly in housing, including social housing that is being built at record levels. However, we also believe we should use the tax side to reduce the cost of building and there have been encouraging signs since we made that change only a few weeks ago in the reaction of the market.

I value the market. It has an important role to play in the delivery of an increasing supply and I am encouraged by what I heard from those responsible for building apartments; that the decision we took, which we voted for and the Social Democrats voted against, will make a real difference in reducing the cost of building an apartment. If we are to reach or exceed 300,000 units we need a lot more apartments to be built. I am also encouraged by the fact that while we have a long way to go, we have seen the highest completion figure for apartments this year so far between the first quarter and third quarter, in any time since 2011 when my party first came into government in the midst of a financial crisis.

On targets, let me clear. All the data points will continue to be published.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** No accountability

**The Tánaiste:** Deputies will continue to see the quarterly commencement figures, the completion figures, the planning permission figures and the mortgage drawdown figures, which show there are more first-time buyers now than at any point since 2007. However, just like the approach we took on the action plan for jobs, we will provide an opportunity for a pipeline over the lifetime of the Government and we will be judged on that. We have been clear in our commitment for 300,000 homes over the lifetime of the plan. That is the target. It is the commitment and it is not the ceiling.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Fine Gael promised 40,000 homes in the last election campaign. That was a complete and utter fabrication and now it is making its annual housing target disappear because it cannot stand over its record and it does not want accountability on it. Since Fine Gael took office, rents and house prices have soared to record levels, home ownership levels have collapsed and now more than 5,200 children are growing up without a home. That is more than the overall number of people who were homeless when Fine Gael took office.

At the same, it has given away billions in tax subsidies to developers, with no link to affordability measures. Last year the CEO of Glenveagh Properties, one of the largest developers in Ireland, saw his salary balloon by 80% to €2.7 million. That is where some of these subsidies are going, to those kinds of outrageous levels of remuneration.

Why should anyone believe anything the Tánaiste says now will be different?

**The Tánaiste:** We will be judged on the delivery of this plan. It is a good plan and it is only part of the jigsaw. The national development plan is an equally important part in which we took the decision this summer to significantly increase investment. From memory, there will be over €50 billion extra for the enabling infrastructure such as transport, water, wastewater and energy. That will be key. The next instalment will be at the end of this month, when the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will bring forward proposals to accelerate infrastructure delivery. I hope the Deputy will support proposals that require emergency powers to deliver critical infrastructure more quickly. There is too much running to the courts. People have a right to access the courts. It is not a natural extension of the planning process. There is a thing called the common good or the public good and we need to deliver infrastructure much more quickly and I look forward to debating those points.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Why will the Minister for housing not be here this evening?

**The Tánaiste:** The Minister for housing is attending an event. He will look forward to having a debate with the Deputy because he looks forward to hearing how the Social Democrats will build all this stuff.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** You would think he would turn up then.

**The Tánaiste:** It is easy to come in here and say they are against everything.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Where is he going?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Where is he gone?

**The Tánaiste:** What does the Deputy think I am, his secretary? I do not know where the Minister is going.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Tánaiste. Surely, you know where your Minister for housing is on the day he launched the housing plan.

**The Tánaiste:** I have missed Deputy Gould's interruptions. He was very quiet. I was wondering why he was so quiet.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I was waiting for the Minister.

**The Tánaiste:** Perhaps it has been a tough day at the Sinn Féin office.

*(Interruptions)*

**The Tánaiste:** Sinn Féin TDs were a bit quieter with the heckling today.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Did he not get enough training from Ivan Yates to debate people this evening?

**The Tánaiste:** I do not know who trains Deputy O'Callaghan but he would want to get well trained before the next debate on housing.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This Government is a record breaking Government for all the wrong reasons. There have been record rents, record house prices and record numbers of people who are homeless. The average price of a residential property sold in 2025 was €426,000. I could not believe the figure when I saw it. It is eight times the average income at the moment. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is now more than €2,000 per month and the availability of homes to rent has halved since pre-Covid-19 pandemic times. Some 16,600 people are currently languishing in homelessness; 5,200 of them are children and 402 people have died in homelessness in Dublin in five years. For much of the rest of the country that figure is not even measured.

The truth is that the Government is going into reverse in housing. Only 30,000 homes were built last year. That was a reduction on the year before and left the Government well short of the target. Planning permissions are falling. Planning permissions for apartments have collapsed. Last year, the Government said that it was going to build 12,930 social homes. It missed that target by 2,300. The key problems are not being tackled. Those problems are Government bureaucracy and red tape, a lack of viability, a lack of key infrastructure and a lack of serviced zoned land.

One of the big shocks is that in the middle of a housing crisis, so many construction companies are idle. Many are placing their staff abroad because they cannot work here. They say that no proper pipeline of work is coming through for them here, which is absolutely incredible. The planning situation in this country is mental. It is completely crazy. I heard about a 30,000-page planning permission application for a particular project that the fact that vans were needed to transport it. In the context of another planning permission application, four separate versions of the same plan were required in order to suit four separate agencies. The greater Dublin drainage project, the purpose of which is to help service 100,000 homes, has been in planning for the past ten years. It is now in judicial review again, and is likely to be tied up for many more years. In Ireland, there are 26 judicial reviews per 1 million people. In Britain, it is five per 1 million. Judicial reviews are becoming a national sport in this country.

The issuing of permits and licences in this country under the Government is the slowest in Europe. The tendering process under the Government is one of the slowest in Europe. This has not evolved out of thin air. It has been created by the Government. The lack of infrastructure is hammering the building of homes. Representatives of Uisce Éireann were before the infrastructure committee recently. I asked them how long it is going to take for Uisce Éireann to fill the gaps that are currently acting as a block to the building of homes. They said, proudly, that they will have it done by 2050. That is an incredible situation. At present, Uisce Éireann can hardly keep the water in the taps of houses in County Meath. Thousands of homes are waiting to be built in my county. There is a lack of electricity, water and roads, and that is the Government's responsibility.

I have a different view from those in other Opposition parties. The Government's plan is a tweaker's charter. In other words, it is a case of a little bit here, a little bit there, a grant here and a grant there. The Government does not have the ambition that is needed to fix this problem. When it deliver the radical change that is needed?

**The Tánaiste:** As is often the case, I agree with the Deputy on some things and disagree with him on others. I will try to take him through that. Rents in this country are too high. That is why we have taken a number of measures to try to increase supply. I am of the view that when you increase the supply of housing, there is a demand-and-supply effect. I also believe that we need to do other things in the here and now. That is why we have took the decision in the budget to extend the rent tax credit for the next number of years. It is also why we rolled out the rent pressure zones nationwide. When this Government came to office in January, parts of this country were not covered by rent pressure zones. Donegal comes to mind in that regard. We fixed that as well. I do not think many people thought this Government was going to do that. However, that was the decision we made.

The Deputy referenced a variety of statistics. I am not disputing them, but, of course, it is a case of lies, damned lies and statistics. The Deputy picked some areas of challenge in the context of the statistics. He referenced planning permissions and the like. I can reference the fact that completions are up and that we saw a huge number of commencements happen when we made the changes to development levies. Our job now is to work with industry to make sure that these are converted into actual homes for people to live in.

The number of first-time buyers is also up. The Deputy will accept that as a statement of fact. The cost of a home is expensive, but we have seen the highest number of first-time buyers this year since 2007.

I agree with the Deputy about the planning issue. Again, I would point to some reforms we have brought in that are bearing fruit. If we were having a debate in this House on this matter not that long ago, we would have been talking about huge backlogs in An Bord Pleanála, as it was then. we are seeing real progress with An Coimisiún Pleanála. There is real progress in decision times and the reduction in wait times. I am hearing that, and the Deputy must be hearing it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is still too slow. It is not meeting the targets.

**The Tánaiste:** I am not saying that we are there, but the position is much better than it was. I am putting the House on notice that this Government intends to bring forward legislation in respect of the delivery of critical infrastructure in an emergency manner. I remind people at home that we did that before. We did it in relation to Brexit in the context of port infrastructure. We did it in Rosslare and at Dublin Port. We certainly did it for temporary gas storage. It can be done, and we need to do it. Not everything can be classed as critical infrastructure, but there are major projects, such as those the Deputy referenced, that clearly are critical in nature. We will bring proposals to Government before the end of the year. We will bring proposals to leaders by the end of this month as well, because we need to make sure that where there are projects that are of national significance and there is common good, we speed up delivery.

I have significant concerns about the use of judicial reviews and environmental law. I cannot understand environmental law being used to slow down the delivery of wastewater treatment plants. Wastewater treatment plants improve our environment. In Ireland and in Europe, there is overregulation in this regard. We need to make sure there is not a brass plating or a gold plating of regulation in this country. We also need to ensure that people cannot have an each-way bet with judicial reviews. The Deputy can expect changes from Government in that regard.

Uisce Éireann has made progress. It ran a successful public relations campaign in the context of looking for significant additional funding. I have said this directly to it. We provided that funding on the proviso that there will be a link between it and housing supply. Uisce Éireann cannot be the answer to everything. It has to empower developers involved in small or reasonably small developments in rural and regional areas to put infrastructure in place once it is to the Uisce Éireann standard. That has now been agreed and it will be in place by February.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is quite incredible that if a farmer is building a slatted shed in Cavan, a person in Cork can submit an objection in respect of it.

**The Tánaiste:** Yes.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** We have a Bill that would bring that to an end.

There is a massive issue with serviced land and serviced zoned land that has been ignored over the past while. The Government talks about an audit of that land. Is it not startling that the Government does not know how much zoned land there is in the country or how much serviced zoned land there is? The Tánaiste is saying that there is not enough, yet we have people at the head of county councils and local authorities saying that they have enough. It is incredible that we have had a housing crisis for 15 years and there is no agreement about where this zoned land is. There is serviced land that is not zoned residential. That is the low-hanging fruit when it comes to building houses quickly, and yet the Government still does not know where that is.

In the context of taxes, it is incredible that €3 billion worth of VAT was taken in from the construction of houses last year. Some €50,000 of the price of a normal house at the moment comprises VAT and other service charges. The Government reduced the VAT on apartments. Why did the Government not do that in respect of houses? There is a viability crisis. We have to make those houses viable. Why are so many builders at home sitting on their hands, unable to build in the middle of a housing crisis?

**The Tánaiste:** I am only smiling because the Deputy is the first voice from the Opposition that has actually suggested-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There are different voices in the Opposition.

**The Tánaiste:** I really appreciate that because this united Opposition thing gets presented a lot, but there are different voices and different perspectives. The Deputy is the first Member of the Opposition who has critiqued the Government for not going further with our VAT reduction measure. The rest of them have slated us for doing anything at all in respect of it.

That is a point of difference. When you are in government, you are trying to get these balances correct.

We made a decision that the acute viability issue related to apartments. We had to make a balanced decision about the composition of the overall package of what was available with regard to tax, and we continue to monitor that. We are encouraged by what we are seeing and by what the industry has said to the Government and to the Oireachtas housing committee in recent weeks.

On the issue of serviced and zoned land, with the residential zoned land tax, which has not been without challenge by farmers and others, issues which we are working through, as the Minister, Deputy Heydon knows, we have seen a significant increase in transactions. In other words, people are not sitting on residential zoned land. That is encouraging. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, with the Minister, Deputy Browne, has issued section 28, which is basically to instruct our councils to zone enough land for at least 83,000 houses. This is not rocket science. You have to over-zone because, obviously, not every zoned site converts into homes. It took a little too long for some local authorities to get that point. That is why the Taoiseach, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I are meeting each of the local authorities' chief executives in small groups. We have met four so far.

### **Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions**

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** In the week when the two-week COP30 summit started without, regrettably, the involvement of the USA, it is vital that we remain steadfast and committed to and that we redouble our efforts to hit our climate targets.

The Joint Committee on Climate, the Environment and Energy has been looking at this topic. In that context, I want to raise the issue of decarbonising home heating. Perhaps the most challenging barrier that we see is the need to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing homes by 2030. This is a huge challenge, especially in light of the disruption and costs involved in fitting heat pumps in older and, in particular, rural homes. The grants and the various VAT changes relating to heat pumps have been in place since 2021, but we are still way off what we need to hit by 2030. The reality is that for many homeowners, it is not practical to replace a working oil or gas boiler with a heat pump, particularly when it comes to the need for a sealed house. We can look to our counterparts in Europe to see what we can do to make heat pumps more attractive. Ultimately, however, we may have to face the reality that it is simply not economically feasible to roll out heat pumps to our older housing stock. As a result, we may need a realistic alternative. District heating is another key pillar that we need to accelerate in line with the programme for Government. In the context of the Dublin district heating system, with which I was familiar as a city councillor, to use heat from the waste energy in Poolbeg to serve the Docklands, 90% of the infrastructure has been in place for years but the scheme has never been activated. District heating is capital intensive and the payback is long, so strong Government support is needed, particularly early doors, at the feasibility stage. The SEAI raised the need for some changes in a review in 2024, which I welcome. District heating is a good win for the country. We can leverage waste heat from data centres, dare I say it, and use waste to energy and anaerobic digestion. If done properly, a lot of it involves low-carbon

heating. It would be very positive if we could use it. The waste energy in Poolbeg is just waiting to be used.

On liquid fuels, 400,000 households have liquid fuel delivered to their homes. We need to make sure they are in the net for decarbonisation. Introducing biofuels is part of the mix, but what is the long-term solution for those 400,000 homes, many of which are in rural areas and which have fuel delivered by trucks to their homes?

**The Tánaiste:** Go raibh maith agat for raising this matter. I thank the Deputy for the work he is doing on the Oireachtas committee and as our party spokesperson in the area of climate action. He triggered a number of thoughts on my part in relation to this. The overriding priority has to be that the perfect is not the enemy of the good when it comes to homeowners being supported. The Government and I consider the current system to be too rigid in certain areas. There are many people who want to do more in relation to making their homes warmer, cheaper to heat and more environmentally friendly. However, there can be logistical and practical considerations, including the age of the housing stock and the age and well-being of homeowners. We need to take that on board. I will ensure that this matter is discussed and considered by the Government. I welcome the work of the Oireachtas committee as to how we can be more flexible and innovative in how we use what is a significant level of public investment in trying to put in place grant schemes and incentives to help people make the transition. There might be a little too much ideology or perfection as opposed to pragmatism in relation to some of these schemes. That is my starting point.

I welcome the fact the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, our colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, yesterday launched his Department's sectoral capital plan under the national development plan. The encouraging news, at a time when COP is ongoing, is that this provides for a total capital funding envelope under the national development plan of €5.64 billion in investment in energy, climate and our circular economy sectors over the next five years, together with planned electricity grid investments that will be leveraged by a separate equity investment of €3.5 billion. That is a significant scale-up in investment in climate, in energy and in our circular economy.

A key priority in the sectoral plan and for the Government will be to make sure that gets channelled into investment in energy efficiency programmes. In fact, the largest single programme in the plan, up to €3.7 billion of the €5.6 billion, will be invested in residential energy efficiency programmes through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. I know, because they write to me, that there can sometimes be a frustration from our constituents and the public about, perhaps, the length of time or the rigidity involved. I want them to know that the largest investment in that Department's capital plan now, over €3.7 billion, is specifically for how we help to upgrade, from an energy efficiency point of view, homes in our country.

Considering that is a fact, it is now time to answer the questions that Deputy Ó Muirí has asked in terms of how we can perhaps be more pragmatic or innovative in relation to that and, indeed, in respect of how we target the homes that are more dispersed. This is a relatively small island with a relatively small population, although there is very fast population growth. We have a very dispersed population, and that poses significant challenges. I will ask both the Minister and the SEAI to consider the proposals, and perhaps the Oireachtas committee could also give further consideration to this.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** As the Tánaiste says, the enemy of the good is the best. There is a risk that we will go down that road. The barriers are not insurmountable but they require a bit of thought and some practical, sensible solutions to build on what has been done already. When it comes to climate work, what often happens is that affordability for the punter seems to play second fiddle to the work that is being done. I am not denigrating the work that is being done, but we have to keep an awareness of affordability for the punters out there if we are going to try to bring them with us on this journey.

The unit price of fossil fuel gas today is €50 per megawatt hour plus a carbon tax of €20, which brings it to €70 per megawatt hour overall. Biomethane is €120 to €220 per megawatt hour. There is a huge difference in the cost, and we just need to square that up. Nobody wants to retain fossil fuels, least of all me. We just need to be straight up with people that if we are going to do biomethane, there will be a cost associated with that. Let us be upfront about it. Let us try to find ways for people to be efficient, to come on the journey with us, but let us not kid ourselves that there are no economic implications. We need to do it but we need to make sure it is affordable for the punters. That is how we will bring them with us.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy is entirely correct. People are fundamentally good, and they fundamentally want to do what is good for them, their families, their kids, the next generation and their communities. Everybody wants clean air. Everybody wants a better environment. Everybody wants a better climate. We instinctively want to pass on our planet to the next generation in better shape than we inherited it. That is how people work,. Government and State schemes need to comprehend that as well.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Deputy is correct that there are people who want to make changes in how they live, how their home is heated and how they operate their farm, perhaps, but who still worry or who find that there are barriers in relation to that. As a Government, we have put our money where our mouth is, with a very significant increase in funding for energy efficiency schemes for homes, to use the example the Deputy has given. The challenge we face is to make sure that this is matched by a flexibility, rather than a rigidity, and the understanding, as the Deputy rightly says, that there is an affordability issue for many people, who are perhaps watching this today. They will say, “I would love to change the car to an EV” or “I would love to do the retrofitting but I am worried about affordability.” We are very conscious of that, and we intend to take steps.

It is not about lecturing people on climate. They do not need to be lectured. They understand it. They get it. They need to be supported in making the transition. That is in all our interests.

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

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Tánaiste, I have a document here that is 107 pages long. I read it this morning. It nearly put me to sleep ten times. There is nothing in it. I swear to God Almighty. Has the Tánaiste read this document? I have read it.

**The Tánaiste:** I helped to write it.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Do you know what I could not figure out? There are tens of thousands of boarded-up houses across the State that people are looking at every day. There is nothing in this for them. Do you know what I will tell you? There are thousands of houses owned by local authorities that are destroying communities because they are boarded up for years. There is nothing in this document for them. The Government gives local authorities €11,500 towards repairing vacant properties when the average cost is €31,000. Where is the extra €20,000? Will the Tánaiste commit? I am asking him and the Minister of State sitting next to him a straight question. Will they commit to funding local authorities to repair all these boarded-up houses that are destroying communities?

Can the Tánaiste imagine walking down the road and coming across people sleeping rough? I know a woman who is going to be evicted next week. There is nothing in this for people who are being evicted or who are sleeping rough. I know a woman who has her toddler and her mother in the same bedroom.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I have one last case, and I will leave it at that. I know a woman who does not qualify for social housing because her job is too good but who does not earn enough to get an affordable home. Where is she going to go after Christmas? She has an eviction notice now.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy Gould.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Can the Tánaiste tell me that? I tell him that there is nothing in this. It is a waste of paper.

**The Tánaiste:** I admire the Deputy's passion, but I question his accuracy. For the people listening in and the-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What page?

**The Tánaiste:** I will tell you now.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Tell me the page.

**The Tánaiste:** I am about to. There is information on page 52, page 53, page 54, page 55, page 56-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I read it. There is nothing in it.

**The Tánaiste:** -----page 56, page 57 and then a nice summary on page 58. Please do not mislead the people of Ireland.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** There is no money for councils.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** No, it is not there.

**The Tánaiste:** Please give me a chance to speak. Deputy Gould is right in relation to dereliction and vacancy. It is also factually correct to say that we are making substantive factual, statistical progress on that. It is also that we have now appointed and funded vacant housing officers in each local authority. It is also that we are planning in this plan-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I suggested that three years ago and you told me I was wrong. Then you adopted it. That is my policy. Myself and Eoin Ó Broin brought that to the House three years ago.

**The Tánaiste:** Then I am sure you welcome it.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Why are you giving out about it? You are giving out about your own suggestion.

**The Tánaiste:** For the Deputy from Cork specifically, we have a commitment in relation to a Cork city centre task force, which will also make a real difference in looking at issues like vacancy, dereliction, over-the-shop living and the regeneration of the beautiful city that he represents.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** The Tánaiste appreciates the role community groups and community sports complexes play in communities across this country. I want to speak about the Mayfield Sports Complex and the urgent need for funding for it. When originally opened, the complex was designed to serve the local community and the school in Mayfield, as well as the wider public on the northside of Cork city. It was a joint project between the then Department of Education and the then Cork Corporation.

As a former teacher in Mayfield Community School, I am absolutely aware of the role the sports complex has played in the community. Over recent decades and despite the efforts of staff and local volunteers, Mayfield Sports Complex has become a relic of what it once offered the people of the community. There are severe roof leaks, outdated electrical and lighting systems, safety regulation issues, outdated facilities and below-standard changing rooms. The complex received €50,000 in funding through the Community Recognition Fund but it is simply not enough. I ask the Tánaiste, the Minister for education and the latter's Department to engage with the operators of Mayfield Sports Complex. The complex has sought engagement, and the Department has not responded, on the urgent need for funding, redevelopment and a renewed commitment to the original objectives set out for this vital amenity. The Tánaiste appreciates that such infrastructure is vital to communities and should be maintained and protected at a sufficient standard.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Kenny. I agree with him on the importance of community infrastructure. We talk frequently about building homes, which is vital, but having community infrastructure in place is also vital, as the Deputy will know as a public representative and teacher. I am pleased to hear that Mayfield Sports Complex received some funding from the

Community Recognition Fund, but I hear the Deputy loudly and clearly that this is not enough, given the scale of the challenges it faces.

I will ask Deputy O'Donovan, as Minister for sport, and Deputy McEntee, as Minister for education, to engage with the Deputy on this matter. I am aware of the significant funding we have committed for sports under the national development plan. There will be new sports calls opening early in 2026, but I will ask both Ministers to determine how they can support the Deputy.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Two incredibly disturbing cases this week have further highlighted the dangers that children face on social media. Alexander McCartney spent years grooming children, mainly on Snapchat, before abusing them. He was jailed in the North last year but a review of the case found he was free to continue to use the Internet and abuse children online while on bail. One of those children, twelve-year-old Cimarron Thomas, died by suicide during that period. In a separate case, a man was jailed in Dublin yesterday for the rape of two children, one of whom was just ten, after he met and groomed them, also on Snapchat. Snapchat, like other social media platforms, is supposed to have a minimum age requirement of 13.

Children engage with the online space differently than we do, but the laws and policies we expect in real life are not replicated online in any way that meets similar standards of safety. Social media companies must be regulated, but it is not just a legal framework alone that is required. We need to empower regulators and the Garda so there is adequate enforcement of those laws.

The last time we had an exchange on this, the Tánaiste invited greater discussion, but can he tell me what active steps the Government is taking to improve enforcement specifically? Is he satisfied that bail conditions in this jurisdiction that require defendants to stay off the Internet are properly enforced?

**The Tánaiste:** No, I am not. I have three points. First, I agree with the Deputy on this issue and I am quite alarmed in terms of online media, including social media. We talk a lot about the positive impacts, but not about the negative and detrimental impacts in many areas, most particularly child safety. To use parliamentary language, I am irked – this is a very weak word – by some of the advertisements I see from social media companies in national media telling us they are doing this, that and the other. That is not what we want. I do not wish to speak for the Deputy but it is not what I want. It is not what we are talking about here; we are talking about a minimum age below which children do not go on social media. Not anything else, not any sop. I just wanted to say that.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** That is not a panacea, though.

**The Tánaiste:** I am not disagreeing with the Deputy on that, so just let me finish.

Third, the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O'Donovan, is engaging with the Attorney General and others across government to examine what is possible within domestic law to take further action. I expect he will have proposals on that very shortly, and I hope within this calendar year.

Fourth, since entering this House in 2011, I have never called for a debate on any issue, but I actually think having one on this is something we would really welcome. We should have it. The Government will support the Deputy at the Business Committee in trying to find time to tease through what our practical proposals would be in this area.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** The Taoiseach delivered a strong speech to an international audience in Belém last week, yet back home today, the Climate Change Advisory Council concluded Ireland would overshoot its first carbon budget by 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. The report has really highlighted Ireland's addiction to fossil fuels as a key reason the carbon budget will not be met. This Saturday, thousands of people will join the national climate demonstration, focusing on how Ireland's fossil fuel addiction remains a huge risk to affordability because it leaves Irish householders exceedingly exposed to spikes in gas and oil prices like those we saw after the Ukraine war.

The Climate Change Advisory Council has a clear recommendation: the Government should conduct a full review of national energy taxes and fossil fuel subsidies and reform the system fairly in advance of budget 2027. There is a year in which to do this work. Will the Government listen to the recommendation from the climate council?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy O’Gorman. The Climate Change Advisory Council has acknowledged today that progress has been made, particularly on the roll-out of retrofitting and the use of renewable energy and solar in our homes, but it is also crystal clear that the progress being made is not enough and that we need to do much more. It is important that we not be fatalistic about climate change. The Deputy is certainly not fatalistic about what we can do. There has been significant progress. Ireland's emissions have fallen for the past three years. We now have the lowest level of emissions in 35 years, despite our population having grown by 50% over that period. That is quite a startling statistic. However, the Climate Change Advisory Council's annual review highlights the scale of challenge to remain within the carbon budget envelope. We are taking steps to implement the renewable energy directive. It is complex and wide-ranging, but it is a really important element.

Meeting our targets will be very challenging and that is why we are now strengthening governance arrangements. The climate action plan programme board has already met three times, involving senior officials from all the main sectors, including energy, transport and agriculture. Its remit now is to focus on the delivery of the action required to accelerate delivery and close the emissions gap. We will be taking very seriously and, of course, reflecting on today’s report of the Climate Change Advisory Council.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I congratulate President Catherine Connolly on her remarkable success and wish her well as Uachtarán na hÉireann. However, there has been a crisis of democracy - a huge democratic deficit in democracy - in this election. Three hundred and seventeen thousand people either spoiled their votes or voted for a withdrawn candidate. In some constituencies, the proportion of spoiled votes was north of 20%. Many boxes across the country showed that the number of spoiled votes was actually higher than the number of votes received by the candidate who came second. This was not an accident, nor was it the result of apathy. This was frustration. These people went to their ballot papers to voice their frustration over the huge deficit reflected there. The Tánaiste himself dictated to his councillors so as to

prevent independent voices and members of smaller parties from gaining access to the nomination paper. The number of spoiled ballot papers in 2025 was almost as high as the combined vote for the Social Democrats, the Labour Party and the Green Party. That is the level we are talking about. It points to the biggest democratic deficit in the history of the State. In fact, the biggest democratic deficit in the history of European elections was registered here last month, yet nothing has been done about it.

Aontú has already introduced a Bill seeking to reduce the threshold. What have we and the Government learned from what has happened? What is the Government going to do to reduce the threshold to ensure rich and vibrant democracy in future presidential elections?

**The Tánaiste:** I am not going to comment on our President, because we do not do that in this House, other than to congratulate her on her election and wish her well. I also thank all of those involved in the inauguration this week. It was a moment of immense pride in our country. We have had only ten Presidents. The inauguration was done very well. We have our elections, we have our ruaille buaille and then we pull together as a country. We all send every best wish for strength, resilience and joy to our President. I thank the Defence Forces, the Garda, the ushers and everybody involved in making the inauguration such a memorable occasion for our country.

I reject out of hand the diktat comment but I do not have time to get into it now. I wish we had the overall majorities on local authorities that the Deputy thinks we have. There are six Fine Gael councillors out of over 30 on Kerry County Council, for example. Our councillors decided, through our democratic structures, how they wished to engage.

The Deputy is not wrong, however, on the issue of spoiled votes. Just to be clear, I do not ignore that. People got in their cars, got on their bikes or walked to turn up at their polling stations - they did not sit on the couch - and they took a decision to spoil their votes, which is a democratic act that they had every right to do.

1 o'clock

I do not think there is one homogenous reason people did it, but people found the field narrower than they expected. Quite frankly, it was narrower than I expected. We are happy to reflect and engage on that. We will not have another presidential election for another seven years. Aontú has put forward some proposals. If anything were to be done in this space, it would require Government and Opposition support. Some of Aontú's suggestions are interesting and I am happy to constructively engage in that regard.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** An Post is one of our core public services, one that has many fantastic people working within it. Over the past two weeks, I have had the opportunity to engage with two groups of people who have concerns about our post service. The first group relates to post delivery. The Grove Park and Glasnevin areas of my constituency have had significant disruption to their post services as a result of issues around recruitment, rosters and so on. As the Tánaiste knows, people rely on their post services. I have had examples of bank cards arriving late and people missing oncology appointments as a result. It is really important. It is important that An Post is able to respond to that challenge as well.

I met with a group of urban postmasters, which is a group that is often forgotten, about the viability of urban post offices. Local post offices in villages right across the northside of Dublin are having viability issues, but it is their rural colleagues who are often talked about. If we do not have a reliable postal service and post office network, we will suffer. I welcome the viability funding that was provided by the Government. That is important. I ask the Tánaiste to assist me in trying to improve the post service in the local Grove Park and Glasnevin areas. He might contact An Post on my behalf. Will he assure me that we will support urban postmasters?

**The Tánaiste:** I will certainly do those things on behalf of both the Deputy and his constituents. I will make contact, via the Minister, with An Post regarding the local postal service disruptions that people are experiencing. When I think back to the Covid period, which was a difficult period of time in our country, some of the unsung heroes I think of are the postmen and postwomen. I remember that we did not even have to ask them. They contacted the Government to say that they knew where the vulnerable people lived in their communities because they went to their houses every day. They offered to do things and they did them. There was no talk of terms and conditions. They just rolled up their sleeves and got involved. They represent the very best of our community spirit.

The Deputy is also right, in that it is important when we have these conversations that they do not neatly divide between urban and rural. I am proud that we are in a Government that has a good track record in supporting the postal network. I will certainly raise the specific issues the Deputy has raised with the Minister for communications, Deputy O'Donovan, and ask that he raise them with An Post.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** In Australia, there are high numbers of people affected by flu. Likewise, the UK is expecting the same thing to happen. Here in Ireland, the take-up of the vaccine is very low. For instance, take-up of the vaccine stands at 17.5% of healthcare workers, 53.7% of fair deal residents, 42.6% of adults 60 and above, and 11% of those aged between two and 17. As we face into the winter months, there is always a new strain of flu. Taking the flu vaccine is important. When it comes to the Covid vaccine among healthcare workers, for instance, there is only a 5% take-up. What are the Tánaiste's Department and the Department of Health going to do to raise the importance of taking the flu and Covid vaccine in order to avoid adverse outcomes? Now is the time. I know we have had good weather in the past number of weeks, but we need to get the message out there. We need to get a greater take-up.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Burke for raising this matter and his work on promoting vaccination during his time in the Department of Health. I know it is an issue on which he worked very hard. I am told that we generally have one of the highest flu vaccine up-take rates for older adults in Europe. That is positive. I join the Deputy in reiterating to everyone the importance of getting that vaccine. Based on the trends he has referenced, we could very well have an intense flu season. Vaccination provides people with important protection, as does the Covid vaccine. I am also pleased to say that we now have the children's flu vaccine. I know the HSE is seeking to expand the provision of the children's flu vaccine into schools. I am told the HSE has launched an extensive communication campaign, which will continue throughout

the winter season across national and local media, targeting people who are eligible to receive the flu and Covid-19 vaccines. In fact, I think I heard one of those ads this morning.

The specific issue in relation to healthcare professionals and others is an important one. It is an issue that the Minister for Health is focusing on, as is the Chief Medical Officer. I understand the Minister recently wrote to a number of training bodies to request their support in the promotion of flu vaccination among their trainees, members, fellows and staff. There is work under way through the HSE national immunisation office in terms of peer-to-peer champions in our hospitals and community healthcare settings. I will follow this up with the Minister of Health on foot of the Deputy raising it here today.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Today, the Government launched its housing plan. To be honest, the failure to date and the failure to mention any additional funding in the plan for voids leaves me with huge concern. I have raised this specific issue on a number of occasions in the Dáil. My council in Limerick is probably one of the better ones in dealing with voids, but it still cannot deal with the voids if it does not have funding to do it. A total of €11,000 on average is allocated per house to do voids up. Many of the houses are over 90 years old and some of them could be 100 years old. They need a lot more than €11,000, so they lie vacant for years.

These are not just homes that could be used to house families because when they are boarded up, they become magnets for antisocial behaviour. They lead to criminality and dumping, which often continues for years. Would the Tánaiste live next to one of these voids? I do not expect anyone to have to live next to one. They would not be tolerated in middle class areas across the State but they are put into local authority, working class council estates and often left for years because the council does not have the money to do them up. The Government's plan today does not have any additional money to deal with the voids. It is an average of €11,000. I have spoken to my local authority, which is beyond frustrated because it does not have the money to do it itself. It is the simplest way to put people back into homes.

**The Tánaiste:** We fundamentally agree with the Deputy that turning around vacant homes in a quicker manner, particularly turning around council stock in a quicker manner, is really important. It is one of the specific items we bring up each time we meet with local authority chief executives. We had four meetings in the past couple of weeks. We will meet with the Deputy's local authority very shortly. I am happy to have a conversation if there are funding issues we can assist with, but I would make the point that the figure of €11,000 does not include, obviously, additional money that is available through retrofitting, for example, which a lot of the voids might require.

There is a significant discrepancy, both around cost and time, across the country. In a country as small as our island, we are seeing some councils taking over one year to turn around a void, while some - I take the Deputy's point that his council is very good in this regard - have it done in less than 16 weeks. I will specifically engage with the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, with regard to Limerick on foot of the Deputy raising it and I will come back to him.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** The issue I wish to raise today is the whole issue of ownership of IPAS centres and, indeed, who exactly the beneficial owners of those centres are. In the public

accounts committee recently, it was highlighted that €1 billion was spent on commercial providers, of which €230 million was given to seven providers, with one of those receiving close to €50 million. As one of my following questions, I asked a straightforward question of a senior departmental official about whether the Department always knew who the beneficial owners in these companies were. The answer given was that the Department did not necessarily always have that detail. Separately, I asked whether it was possible that someone with a criminal background could have a beneficial interest in a centre and I was told that the Department "could not say for sure on that." For me, that was not good enough and I immediately sought a recommendation that any owners of IPAS centres who applied to house IPAS applicants must declare and confirm as a legal obligation who the beneficial owners of the centres applying were. This would ensure full disclosure and transparency of ownership. I ask the Tánaiste that this be actioned immediately.

**The Tánaiste:** I agree with that. Let me first say that none of my comments is in relation to anyone in an IPAS centre. Everyone who comes to our country deserves to be treated with dignity and respect and to be safe. We all condemn some of the callous, disgusting and despicable criminal acts we have seen in recent times. It is legitimate, though, and, indeed, important that we debate some of the issues the Deputy is talking about, particularly when taxpayers' money is being expended in this area. We scrutinise the spending of taxpayers' money right across our public services and we should also scrutinise the spending of public money in relation to migration policy. It is an entirely appropriate and perfectly legitimate area of debate and I think the Deputy's suggestion is a good one.

In fairness to successive Governments, particularly the past Government and, indeed, the start of this Government, we have obviously been dealing with a variety of emergency situations and trying to respond in real time to a significant increase in the numbers. We need to move now from an emergency footing to a more planned, organised system. That includes the issue of accommodation and having greater clarity around it. Deputy Neville's suggestion is a constructive one in that regard. I intend to discuss it with both the Minister for public expenditure and reform and the Minister for justice. This is an area we would expect to be dealt with like any other area of public money. It should be like that in this area too.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade will appreciate the great work done by the Passport Office. I wish to raise a specific issue with him in regard to that office. When a family has travel plans made, has a date booked and is waiting on a new passport for a child, great stress can be brought on that family when that passport application is returned. Very often this is close to the issuing date because the Passport Office has failed to secure verification of the Garda witness. As the Tánaiste may know, the Passport Office now telephones the Garda station. If it does not get through on three occasions, the office will return the application to the family, resulting in huge frustration and stress.

I put it to the Tánaiste that there is a more efficient way of doing this verification. I appreciate it is an important part of the process but I strongly suggest that verification should be done by an email system. It would be more efficient, transparent and speedy. I ask the Tánaiste, as the Minister for foreign affairs, to please take this issue up with the Passport Office and try to introduce this change. I raised this issue previously under a Topical Issue matter a number of

months ago. I just want to try to continue to highlight the issue because I think we can avoid the level of stress and frustration brought on families when they have a travel date pending.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy is entirely right. It is an enormous stressor. Verification is really important. The Deputy has made that point and it is absolutely correct. Child protection and all those aspects are really important and no one in this House would ever do anything to weaken that. We can move on from wondering if somebody will ever answer the telephone in a rural Garda station. Gardaí are very busy people. They are doing a great job getting out and about, and we want them out and about. By the way, I am really proud of the passport service and of its turnaround times. It is a great example of public sector reform. I am very interested in working with the Minister for justice to try to develop a better protocol that will move us towards the 21st century in terms of how this is done. In fact, I think we could further enhance further the protection of a child through the use of technology in relation to this. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and we will be back on this matter.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** Drogheda is the largest town in the country, with an expectation of becoming Ireland's next city. The design of Government policy has meant it has become a commuter town, with little to no investment in infrastructure to serve it. Almost 20 years ago, a train station for Drogheda's northside was included in the Drogheda northern environs plan. To this day, it remains an objective of the Louth county development plan.

Notwithstanding the already high population figures we have, we are due to see a population boom in the coming years of approximately 20,000 people with the housing along the port access northern cross route. Combined with an IDA business park and new sporting and amenity facilities planned for the area, the train station on the north side of the town is needed more than ever. Will this Government pull the relevant stakeholders, including the NTA, Irish Rail and Louth County Council, together and make this long-standing ambition a reality? No obstacle is insurmountable if the Government wants to deliver it.

**The Tánaiste:** I have had the honour of meeting a number of people in Drogheda in terms of the Drogheda city campaign but also regarding this idea of making sure the town is adequately resourced and supported from a local authority point of view, the whole tug between the two counties and the likes of that.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** Yes.

**The Tánaiste:** I am aware of all that too. On the specifics relating to the train station, I ask the Deputy to allow me to ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to take a look at this issue and to come back the Deputy directly and see what can be done.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** The recurring theme of my time in this Chamber is talking about special education. Today I want to bring up the NCSE asking parents to notify it before 1 October if their child needs space in a school. This is fantastic because it means the process is supposed to move on further.

**The Tánaiste:** Yes.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I have been assured by both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, that despite the fact 1 October has passed, this will not prevent any child who gets a diagnosis or a letter of eligibility afterwards from being considered. This is not the experience of many parents who have contacted me. Some of them are from the Tánaiste's constituency. If you look at the website today, and go on to the portal, it says it is closed. There is no way to navigate that.

**The Tánaiste:** No.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I am able to say to parents what I have been told and they are able to get around it that way but this must be much clearer for parents. It is very difficult. I am speaking on behalf of other parents who have told me it is difficult to have a child with a disability and additional needs and navigate that system. Will the Tánaiste please ask the Minister to get the NCSE to clarify that situation for parents, so they are not in this loop. They seem to be stuck in a gap.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this issue. She is right. I have heard from people in relation to this issue too and I am pursuing it through my office. I will absolutely do as the Deputy has asked. The Minister and the Minister of State brought in a welcome reform, which I know the Deputy welcomed too, to try to get ahead of this and be able to properly plan earlier each year for the next September to reduce the stress, anxiety and worry of parents and their children with additional needs. I take the point, however, that if they are logging onto a website, seeing the portal is closed and finding the system too complex and too difficult to navigate, this is not where it should be. I will ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to speak with the head of the NCSE and get back to the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Last week, Limerick Chamber contacted the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about the Mackey roundabout and the safety issues there to formally request €2.2 million in funding to advance the next stage of improvement works to the roundabout. This is a critical priority for the safety of people in the mid-west but also for our economic development. It is a key interchange in the east of the city, connecting the M7 motorway to the R445 Dublin road. It is a primary gateway to Limerick into the University of Limerick, UL, and National Technological Park. There is a huge volume of traffic there and it frequently causes persistent backups right up the motorway. It is a car park at peak times. It is really quite dangerous and we are lucky someone has not been killed because when you are coming along the motorway, you literally come to a sudden stop with no warning. Basically, the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan transport strategy identified this as one of four key pinch points. While some work has been completed, the project cannot proceed to the next stage without the additional €2.2 million. I hope the Government will release that funding.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Sheehan for raising this matter and highlighting the issue Limerick Chamber has also raised with the Government. I thank the Deputy for the useful description he has given me of the issue in terms of not just the congestion, the traffic issues and the environmental issues that causes but also the dangers in terms of cars coming to a sudden halt. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue, I will speak with the Minister, Deputy

O'Brien, and ask that he examine how the Government can assist and respond to the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Michael Murphy:** It will be a very positive day in Templemore tomorrow when 194 new recruits will be passing out. Unfortunately, many of these new recruits will be allocated to the metropolitan cities while in my constituency the key towns of Tipperary, Cashel, Cahir, Fethard, Carrick-on-Suir and my hometown of Clonmel will be left behind. I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that maintaining law and order is not just a challenge for our cities. It is a challenge for every town, village and community across Ireland. I am very proud of Clonmel but maintaining law and order is an enormous challenge. Of the four allocations this year, we received four additional gardaí but many more have transferred out. At the end of this year, Clonmel will have fewer gardaí than we did at the beginning of it. I appeal to the Tánaiste to intervene.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Murphy very much for raising this issue. Garda attestations are one of the most joyous occasions I have attended in a variety of roles. Putting on the uniform of An Garda Síochána is an ultimate act of public service and I join with the Deputy in wishing everybody well tomorrow. I presume the Minister for justice will be in the Deputy's county tomorrow. I will ensure the Deputy has an opportunity to raise this matter with the Minister directly.

In the first instance, the distribution of gardaí is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. I will ensure the Deputy's views are conveyed directly to him. I do, however, take the point the Deputy made. We have gone through several challenging years in terms of Covid, the college being shut down and the likes. We are now back with a very steady pipeline, for want of a better phrase, of gardaí going in and out of Templemore. I know the Minister has plans to further increase the capacity in Templemore as well. The programme for Government also commits to exploring other opportunities to recruit and train more gardaí. Making sure that every part of Ireland gets a fair provision based on the needs of the community, including Clonmel, Cahir and other towns, is important. I will certainly support the Deputy in making sure south Tipperary is adequately resourced, and I will speak to the Minister.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** We all accept that mobile phones now play a major part in the social and working lives of the vast majority of our citizens. We become more and more reliant on them as the weeks and months roll by. Can we ask the Minister for communications if works are planned to improve mobile phone coverage in County Kerry and all over Ireland in those blackspots we all come across in our daily lives? These blackspots, for whatever reason, be it mountain shade or otherwise, continue to interrupt the social and business lives of our citizens if they are only passing through them but more particularly and deeply if they happen to live within blackspot boundaries.

This issue must be addressed, especially to allow us to deal with emergencies. In my county of Kerry, there are several locations where mobile phone coverage is either non-existent or subject to regular interruption. These include the Tralee to Dingle road, Camp, Anascaul, Glencar, Gneevgullia, the Black Valley, Ballintleave, Curraheen near the Kerry bog village, Mountain Stage, Dromaclaurig, Ballinskelligs, to name just a few. These areas suffer regularly due to an unfulfilled mobile service. Could the Tánaiste clarify with the Minister if the

Department has plans to deal with this issue? Can we get timelines for delivery of 100% mobile telephone coverage to all of Kerry and Ireland?

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue and for the comprehensive list of towns and townlands in County Kerry where there are challenges in relation to mobile phone coverage. I know the Minister for communications has a blackspot task force operating in his Department to identify these. It is quite peculiar how this happens. There are areas very much in the heart of urban and rural Ireland that are experiencing these issues. I will ask that the list the Deputy has read into the record of the Dáil be given directly to the Minister for communications and that he raise that with the relevant authorities under his remit and come back to the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Within the last while in Dundalk, County Louth and across the State, parents have made applications for their primary school children to get a place in secondary schools. Unfortunately, a number of those in Dundalk and its environs have had to make contact with me. I will go through these very quickly.

My daughter got rejected. We are absolutely devastated.

[...]

My son has not been selected for any school for next year.

[...]

My son is now the only boy from his soccer team, Gaelic team and hurling team that does not have a school place for next year. A lot of his friends have had multiple offers.

Here is the crux of the matter:

Surely this could be changed to a process more like the CAO, where kids can put their choices in order of preference and each child be allocated one school place.

That has been done in certain places - I am not saying perfectly - and it needs to be looked at.

If the Tánaiste would allow me a certain element of flexibility, does he have an update in relation to the pension case of John McNeela, the father of Michael McNeela who was killed in Lebanon? In an answer to a parliamentary question, he said this may or may not require legislative change. I know he is committed to dealing with it but we would obviously like to get it dealt with as soon as possible.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** The Deputy always makes a very efficient use of his time. There are two important issues there. On the John McNeela case, it will require legislation. I have asked my officials to explore the most expeditious vehicle with which to take that forward. I will ask that a written update be sent to the Deputy very shortly on that.

On the issue of school places, the Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, is doing what the Deputy suggested by putting in place that kind of common application system - I think that is the phrase. It is rolled out in a number of areas to test it. This year, it is hoped that it may be rolled out more broadly in the time ahead. We are also trying to bring forward dates for

enrolment and the like. I take the point the Deputy made. I will ask the Minister to specifically look at the issues in relation to Louth and come back to him directly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Could the Tánaiste provide a route map? These people here should be-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Healy.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** I will ask the Minister to look at that too.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I appreciate it.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** On Monday last, Clonmel lost one of its most distinguished daughters, Monica del Bigio, née Cullen, from Albert Street in Clonmel. She was an exceptional talent, a soprano of the highest rank who passed away in Italy. On behalf of the people of Clonmel and on my own behalf, I extend sympathies to Monica's family, her daughter Paola, son Patrick, extended family, relations and friends both here in Ireland and in Italy.

Monica made her operatic debut with St. Mary's Choral Society in 1953, taking the leading role of Serpolette in a production of *The Bells of Corneville*. She trained professionally with the Abbey Theatre, continued her vocal studies in New York and completed her training in Italy, where she won numerous awards. Throughout a very successful career, she performed in all major opera houses in Europe but she never lost touch with her home town of Clonmel and her beloved St. Mary's Choral Society. She performed professionally with the society and officially opened the South Tipperary Arts Centre in Clonmel. Monica was a wonderful ambassador for Clonmel, Tipperary and Ireland. Ar dheis lámh Dé go raibh a hanam uasal.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am sure we all join in that.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** I wish to extend the sympathies of everybody, including my colleague, Deputy Michael Murphy, with Deputy Healy in relation to the people of Clonmel and the family of Monica del Bigio. It sounds like a remarkable life and contribution. May she rest in peace.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Sarah Costello from Trim in County Meath was treated under the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, in a hospital in Belfast for endometriosis. Her surgery went horribly wrong. She had to have an emergency bypass to save her life. She had a cardiac arrest and needed 15 litres of blood. She was left disastrously injured by the operation. Today, she is in bad health and in pain. When Sarah sought help from the Mater hospital she waited for a year. She was told to go to Belfast to see her primary doctor but, of course, she has no doctor in Belfast. She was forced to go privately to a consultant in Galway at a cost to herself. Her scans show that she has an 80% blockage, that she needs a stent immediately and that if this does not happen, her life is in significant danger. She is actually in immediate danger of losing a limb. She was told to have that operation. She has to pay between €45,000 and €50,000 and cannot afford it.

The NTPF told Sarah to just switch from the waiting list in the Mater hospital to Galway. The problem is that if she simply switches waiting lists and there is not an immediate operation, she will be in trouble. I ask the Tánaiste to make sure that Sarah receives the operation she needs now. The operation happened under the NTPF and it is responsible for the operation happening. It has a responsibility now to make sure Sarah receives the necessary operation so she can survive.

**The Tánaiste Simon Harris:** This sounds like an extremely difficult and concerning case. I cannot, because I do not have information, make commitments on the floor of the Dáil in relation to people having medical procedures. I cannot do that but what I can do is ask that the transcript of what the Deputy has outlined be sent to the Minister for Health and that she would ask that the NTPF consider the Deputy's request and come back to him directly on behalf of Sarah. We are thinking of her at this difficult time.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.08 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.26 p.m. and resumed at 2.08 p.m.*

### Science Week: Statements

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless):** I am delighted to be here to open this debate to mark Science Week 2025. As Minister for science - in fact, I have a long title and science is a key part of it - it is so important we mark this event and occasion. The Irish physicist John Tyndall once observed, "Knowledge once gained casts a light beyond its own immediate boundaries." Ireland's future lies in its people. Through supporting our innate curiosity and by encouraging our latent talent, Ireland can play a leading role in addressing key challenges and drive competitiveness into the future. As a small, open economy without obvious natural reserves of oil or gas, our natural resource is knowledge and our competitive edge is talent and our people.

When science moves, everything around it moves also. This is what we sometimes call the "halo effect". A breakthrough in material science leads to warmer homes and lower bills. An artificial intelligence model becomes a faster way to diagnose and treat cancer. A new bioprocess becomes a new regional employer. For everything there is a catalyst and then there is a reaction, and often there is a chain reaction leading on to the applications and impact of the research and the science, as well as the science itself. One story captured this very well. During my recent visit to the Tyndall National Institute in Cork, in the middle of a discussion on microneedles, quantum materials and future technologies, the team there mentioned a graduate of whom they are very proud, Dr. Ann Kelleher, who began her journey in UCC and went on to lead the technology development at Intel, becoming a vice president globally of Intel's technology chain. Her success continues to ripple around Ireland because every time a global company looks at our research capability, every time a young student in Cork imagines a career in science and every time a team at the Tyndall National Institute secures a new partnership, Dr. Kelleher's achievements, and those of so many more like her, are part of the reason and part of the inspiration - if you can see it, you can be it. It is also a great beacon for Ireland in those international boardrooms. That halo effect of one person's education nurtured here went on to create opportunity far beyond themselves. During Science Week 2025, when we celebrate

curiosity, talent and possibility it is a reminder that the next Dr. Ann Kelleher may already be sitting in a classroom, visiting a Science Week event or engaging with scientists for the first time. Last night, I had the opportunity to visit the Posters in Parliament exhibition in Leinster House 2000. This involves a team of young undergraduate researchers showcasing their work in an exhibition in Leinster House, one of five parliaments around Europe that will give that opportunity to young researchers. All of those young students are the scientists, groundbreaking engineers and rising stars of the future.

It is through that investment and activity in research and innovation that we will deliver a step change in areas such as environment, technology and healthcare. Fundamental blue sky research can provide new answers to questions we have not thought of yet and drive paradigm shifts like those we see in AI and quantum. I am told that quantum computers will be able to perform calculations in seconds that currently take up to a year on a regular computer. Frontier discoveries sometimes seem abstract but they are what gives us vaccines, clean energy and digital tools. Many of the key technologies and innovations of modern life came about by accidental discovery. They were not the outcome of the initial experiments; they were something that was found along the way but which became a seismic shift in the relevant field.

As the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, I am conscious of my role in not only delivering a robust research and innovation system today but also ensuring that we develop the talent and skills to create, nurture and maintain our world-class research system into the future. A critical element is ensuring that the public are aware of the broad range and value of current research activity and that science and technology are something all our citizens are comfortable engaging with, are aware of and are happy to discover more about. I am delighted, therefore, to have the opportunity to highlight the range of Science Week 2025 events taking place across the country to celebrate the vital role that science plays in our everyday lives. The theme - "Then. Today. Tomorrow." - encourages all of us to explore how scientific research has evolved over the years, assess the role science plays in our lives today and look to the future to consider how science might shape tomorrow. From its origins as a small series of outreach events launched by the Royal Dublin Society in 1995, the initiative has grown to become a truly interactive and countrywide calendar showcasing the marvels of science. Now co-ordinated by Taighde Éireann-Research Ireland, Science Week has become a key event across Ireland connecting young and old with science through a broad range of opportunities and events. I am delighted that my Department has continued its support for this year's programme, with over €847,000 in funding provided for 36 projects through Research Ireland. During the week, almost 400 events, involving 200,000 participants, will be hosted in schools, libraries, theatres, town halls, community centres, markets, homes and other venues nationwide. Somewhere, maybe in many places, in those 400 events are our future clinicians, climate scientists, engineers, farmers and entrepreneurs. These are the people who will write the next chapter of Ireland's story. I am looking forward to attending a few of the events. Later this afternoon, I will launch the Museum of the Moon festival at Merrion Square, which runs from this evening until Saturday. This features a 7 m illuminated moon sculpture mapped using NASA imagery and offers visitors an extraordinary opportunity to experience the moon up close, complemented by musical performances.

I thank Members of the House for the support shown for Science Week. I very much want to reach out to colleagues in the Chamber and beyond because there is very strong collaborative cross-party support for Science Week and the initiatives that flow from it, as well as for science,

research and innovation as a policy more broadly, in the course of our mutual work here in the Oireachtas and through the engagements Members have in their constituencies and communities, and policy initiatives more generally. Scientific research has an enormous influence on almost every aspect of our lives, from healthcare, technology, transport, agriculture, food and climate to education, sport, well-being, entertainment and so much else. Ireland is very much leading, having a long-established Science Week that has co-ordinated nationally and is delivered and hosted regionally. We were one of the first countries to see the importance of promoting science nationally in this way and have created opportunities for education and public engagement with science and research. This builds on the success of the recently hosted maths week only a few weeks ago. Weeks like this, and these outreach events, are so important to reach out to the next generation of researchers, academics and students and showcase what is possible, as well as bringing to bear with a wider audience some of the applications of science in everyday life.

Our international standing as a nation that greatly values science is reflected in landmark achievements. Last month, on 22 October, Ireland officially joined the European Organization for Nuclear Research, better known as CERN. We are now an associate member state and we are taking our place among the nations of the world. In so doing, we have entered one of the world's most prestigious scientific collaborations, opening the door for academia and enterprise to rise to the next level in terms of scientific innovation. Ireland joining CERN had long been an outstanding ambition of mine. When I was in opposition I advocated for Ireland's associate membership of CERN. Previously, as a student and long before I was a Minister, I visited CERN on a couple of occasions and I was shocked at how Irish students at that time had to effectively go in the back door. Ireland did not have access and students could not participate. Irish companies could not tender. That is all now addressed through our membership and Irish people can proudly walk in the front door and be very much part of the team, collaborating and benefiting from all that this bestows upon us. CERN membership means opportunities for Irish firms to win contracts, for students to gain experience at the frontier of physics and for our regions to benefit from skills and the know-how that flow back.

Of course, CERN is about leading-edge particle physics but it is also about so much else. It is about data science, data storage, reflectors, electromagnetism and engineering, even to the extent of tunnelling and creating every new round of the Large Hadron Collider. For example, we see new partnerships emerging. I was at Munster Technological University last week, at the Tralee campus. I spoke with some of the team of engineers who are working at CERN on the ATLAS experiment. They are working on technical challenges in terms of the power supply and supporting of the CERN detectors that actually pick up the collisions inside the Large Hadron Collider.

Primary school students around the country this week are taking part in an instruction on data science as part of the physics run by CERN and hosted by the Microsoft Dream Space. This kind of pioneering advancement can only happen when backed by significant Government support, as reflected and called out in the programme for Government which I am now implementing. This makes significant commitments in support of research and innovation. I am pleased to tell the House I have secured funding to enable us to deliver on these commitments through transformative investment under the national development plan in research, education and innovation, all of which will secure long-term returns for Irish society

and our economy. A strong economy powers a strong society because it creates the resources that we can use for the public good.

In a watershed moment, and in keeping with the theme of "Then. Today. Tomorrow." when we look back at the initiatives and moments that have the power to change the landscape of research and science, over half of my Department's €4.5 billion national development plan capital budget will now be earmarked for research and innovation initiatives. This allocation recognises my Department for what it is, namely, an economic Ministry with levers that shape productivity, resilience and long-term growth across the whole wider economy and society, and my prioritisation of research and innovation as a key enabler for economic and social progress.

The recently published action plan for competitiveness and productivity also places front and centre the centrality of research and innovation to Ireland's future economic performance. This theme was also writ large in the Draghi report and the Letta response, which we saw across the European Union. To be competitive, we must excel at science and invest in research. This outcome and prioritisation within the national development plan and within my budget are a recognition of the need to invest in that national research and innovation system as an engine of our knowledge economy. This planned investment in research infrastructure is both critical and timely because we want to continue to maintain our international reputation for research excellence and for fostering exceptional research talents. We need to modernise the equipment the students and researchers are using and bring it into the 21st century and beyond. Working off old equipment limits discoveries and also the student, teaching and learning experience. Renewing it ensures that every graduate is being trained on the tools of tomorrow and not yesterday.

Research infrastructure is light on concrete but heavy on capacity creation. It creates opportunity without overheating or placing undue demands on the construction sector, and it compounds in value through ideas, skills and innovation. It can be quickly ramped up, it can deliver at scale and it does not have the complex process that surround physical infrastructure. In addition, the budget announcement of an increase in the research and development tax credit from 30% to 35% demonstrates our commitment to industry in terms of partnering research sector collaborations in academia and enterprise.

One of my hopes for initiatives such as Science Week is that they will help young people to discover a love of science, technology, engineering and maths, STEM, and ultimately develop careers in the STEM field, perhaps even going on to be researchers. Putting the arts into STEM to get STEAM is equally important, as we teach people how to think and assess a set of facts, and how to apply a lens, whether through history, economics, literature, languages or the core STEM subjects.

Research talent is a priority for the Government. It is essential that we build on our research capacity, developing and extending our talent base, and increase the level of research and development being undertaken to support it. The Department, working through Research Ireland, supports the development of excellence in research talent through all phases of the research and innovation pipeline, from early career, frontier and blue skies research to programmes of scale, such as its research centres which foster large-scale collaborations across academia and industry. Between 2020 and 2024, over 2,500 PhD students were funded through Research Ireland through a suite of structured PhD and post doctorate programmes that provide a pipeline of highly skilled researchers for careers in academia and industry.

It is also important to look further afield and welcome top tier international research talent to Ireland. Doing so expands our research talent base and allows the cross-pollination and fertilisation of ideas, with new thoughts from outside our normal circles. We are now inviting these talented individuals here, many of whom are uncertain of where to turn next with changing global events and different priorities for science in other jurisdictions. Ireland offers stability, opportunity, excellence and a warm welcome to researchers on the move. We also offer a gateway to the European Union.

In that vein, I recently launched the Global Talent Ireland programme, which represents a critical initiative in the current global environment to attract outstanding international researchers to Irish higher education institutions and to join public research bodies. There has been a remarkable response to this call, which clearly demonstrates the timeliness of the initiative and our position as a beacon to attract world-class research talent. We stand ready to welcome these researchers who aspire to make a meaningful impact, economically and societally, in their fields and disciplines, while advancing their careers here in Ireland. By investing in global research talent, we are also strengthening Ireland's own position as a hub at the heart of Europe for research excellence, innovation and opportunity.

We have international engagement across Europe and we are strengthening Ireland's position as a hub of European research excellence by maximising opportunities for researchers to collaborate on key emerging technologies. I am ambitious for Ireland to be a change maker and not a change taker, and to be a maker and shaper of new technologies. In June, I signed Ireland up to the European quantum pact, which allows Irish scientists and researchers to engage with their EU counterparts in the field of quantum, building on our own expertise in this area. Quantum technologies represent an important part of Ireland's aspirations in the field of deep tech, owing to their vast potential to impact critical strategic domains, including semiconductors, life sciences, sustainable energy, financial services, cybersecurity, climate modelling and much more.

Another development which gives local researchers access to state-of-the art European and international resources is the recent successful AI Factory Antenna bid, led by the ICHEC team and the University of Galway. I had the pleasure of visiting them on Monday morning and I was impressed by their excellence and commitment to leading class research using high-performance computing and supercomputers. They are particularly enthused that joining the European quantum pact and the EuroHPC agreement allows them to collaborate and pitch for ideas. For a team that was not even participating in the initiative until a few months ago, I am proud to report to the House that it came second out of 14 in the bid it put in, based on excellent science. Well done to ICHEC and the University of Galway. These breakthroughs open doors for researchers, developers, public bodies and institutions across Ireland. They provide access to cutting-edge infrastructure, expert support and European AI networks. From climate to health to transport to advanced manufacturing, this will accelerate innovation across every corner of our economy and society.

AI is recognised as a key priority for the Government, and my Department provides support in the development of a national digital and artificial intelligence strategy, working with the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, who have a specialist focus on the area. How artificial intelligence integrates into our lives is of concern to all of us, as it increasingly impacts how we do business, how we work and how we interact with other people.

It has great potential to enhance our lives and transform the way we live and work by creating efficiencies and helping us find solutions to some of our greatest challenges.

The power of technology can be used to bring knowledge together in many new ways. There is a real prospect of accelerated scientific discovery. We can run the same experiments faster and more repeatedly and capture the vast data flowing from them to make real breakthroughs in many fields. It is already happening, in fact, and my role is to ensure that Ireland is at the table and playing a significant part of it, and ensuring the skills and research ecosystems are up to speed and leading edge so our researchers and academics can play a major role. There are also huge opportunities commercially for companies in Ireland to develop AI capability but they need the talent to work with it. We provide a broad range of skilling, upskilling and reskilling initiatives, including through the funding of PhDs in disciplines involving digital technologies and their application.

We know also that AI must be developed in an appropriate regulation, with policy that allows for innovation but prioritises the safety of its users and ensures that biases are mitigated from the outset. We must challenge the limitations of data sets, the AI slop we talk about and the model becoming perpetuating, and ensure quality responses and outputs from large language models. The ongoing need for cutting-edge research in this rapidly evolving area is now impacting on almost every area in its work.

Research Ireland is also a key lever in enabling our AI technological progress, providing the talent, skills and career paths into high potential sectors engaging with AI, particularly in the pharma, medtech and data science areas. AI has boundless possibilities, which are only beginning to be understood, and I am intrigued to see how this subject is going to be explored during Science Week. Research Ireland centres have had a huge impact on innovation and economic development, linking researchers in partnerships across academia and industry in areas of strategic focus. I will be announcing the launch of the new programme of globally competitive research centres in early 2026. These research centres will drive research and innovation in areas of national strategic importance, building connectivity with industry and supporting regional development, while providing PhD training aligned with future skills needs and enhancing our chances of success when competing for European funding. Critically, they will drive academic collaboration with industry and others to maximise knowledge transfer from our higher education institutions to the wider economy and society.

These centres, alongside the accelerating research to commercialisation, ARC, hubs, give SMEs a front door into innovation so the benefits of science are felt throughout the country, in Athlone and Letterkenny as much as in Dublin and Cork. Another approach to driving innovation to market is through the ARC hubs that I mentioned. The ARC hub programme aims to transform cutting-edge, publicly funded research into market-ready applications and innovations, fostering regional development and boosting economic growth and activity. All of this work takes place in the context of the Impact 2030 strategy, which is bringing greater cohesiveness and effectiveness to our national research and innovation system, forging closer links between the Department, Research Ireland, the Higher Education Authority, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

We continue to forge closer links across the research and innovation ecosystem. As the Minister with the research and science portfolio, I was delighted to mark in September, along with Enterprise Ireland and other partners, the achievement of reaching the €1 billion milestone

in funding drawn down through the Horizon framework. Irish agencies, business and players helped to take the framework to the next level and achieve a €1 billion drawdown in Horizon funding. This represents a significant national achievement and is a powerful endorsement of Ireland's capacity and our growing strength as an innovator on the European landscape. Reaching this milestone has been made possible through the collective efforts of our research community, our universities and enterprises, and the robust partnerships we have built across Europe. As we look ahead, we expect that the final work programme publication under Horizon Europe will be launched before the end of this year. This will open future opportunities for Ireland's researchers and innovators to build on this success and continue to shape Ireland's scientific future.

In recent years, we have made enormous progress in developing a thriving research and innovation ecosystem and we will continue to build on this momentum. Over the coming years, I want to deliver on the promise of this sector, forging a more cohesive and collaborative system, boosting and modernising the infrastructure which enables it and maximising the capacity and impact of the system as an economic engine for growth to future proof it and make it more diverse, agile and capable of not just withstanding but of responding to and shaping the opportunities of a rapidly changing world. I commend Research Ireland on its leadership role in supporting and co-ordinating science week in a very visible and very inclusive way. I congratulate Dr. Diarmuid O'Brien, the new CEO who recently taken up office, on his leadership of the organisation.

Science week plays a key role in demystifying many of the complexities of science and bringing it to every town and community in Ireland. I thank all of the teams involved in science week for their valuable contributions, creativity and imagination and for instilling an appreciation of science, research and innovation, especially among our younger people. I would like every young person in Ireland to feel that science belongs to them in order that they can follow their dreams and realise their full potential. I thank the Business Committee of the House for scheduling the time to discuss science week today and its value in generating public discourse and raising awareness of the critical role of science in terms of our past, present and future.

We live in a time of rapidly accelerating change and of exciting new opportunities and breakthroughs in our understanding of the universe. As George Bernard Shaw put it, "We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future." That is a responsibility that all of us in this House hold dearly and that we are fulfilling through initiatives like science week and the research initiatives we have discussed. I want our young people, our up-and-coming research and innovation talent, to see this as a time for curiosity - curiosity is always a good thing - and a chance to write the next chapter of Ireland's success story. STEM and science are for everyone, and science week is a fantastic opportunity to open the door for the next generation and let them see their own potential futures in the world of science and to unleash a new halo effect of ideas, skills and discoveries that will bring benefit to every community in this country.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Gone are the days when curiosity killed the cat.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I welcome science week as an important moment for children at primary level, further and higher level students and our educators. This is a celebration of

the achievements of science and the advances in rapid technological change. Science week promotes STEM and hands-on learning. It also inspires future scientists and creates curiosity in young minds, making science more accessible, and provides a platform to showcase how science can become a subject for young people to take up in their studies. I saw this first hand while visiting the Póstaer san Oireachtas exhibit 2025.

This year's science week marks 30 years of collaboration to advance science in Ireland. Science week is a nationwide event with events involving industry, colleges, schools, libraries, teachers, researchers and students throughout Ireland. The theme then, today and tomorrow sparks a very important conversation about the future we want to build in this country.

The overlap between science and technology has really ramped up at an unprecedented rate with the development of AI. AI is becoming an essential part of scientific endeavour, and some of it is remarkable in its capabilities. It can analyse large and complex data that would be difficult for humans to spot. It can automate repetitive tasks in laboratories, such as liquid handling, incubation and imaging, making workflows more efficient and reliable, among many others.

We in Sinn Féin believe that science and technology must first and foremost be used in a responsible way and not be an opportunity to serve the interests of the few. While there may of course be benefits to AI, there is one that is really worth mentioning. AI companions like Hayley, as featured in a recent RTÉ news report, can really benefit those who are caring for loved ones at home. This new system involves AI and movement sensors, which could mean that future older populations may never have to enter nursing homes. While we celebrate AI advances of this nature, there is a need to ensure that AI language and systems are being taught at a high standard at third level. With the necessary equipment and infrastructure, future science researchers can effectively integrate these tools, ensuring that AI complements their area of expertise rather than replacing it. AI can be utilised as a working tool to enhance the effectiveness of laboratory work, assisting researchers to manage complex biological problems. There should be robust measures to ensure the technology is available for all students, not just the elite few.

Speaking broadly in terms of Ireland's economy, the knock-on effect of AI replacing workers is a very real and serious concern. Recent announcements that Amazon will lay off approximately 14,000 office workers globally, including staff in Ireland, largely due to increased investments in artificial intelligence means that at least 30 staff cuts in Ireland are planned. These layoffs are set to continue at a pace not seen previously. While AI technology continues to expand and evolve, there is a real concern that this can lead to very serious outcomes for third level graduates who face very insecure prospects due to the advancements of AI.

The Minister announced Government support for a major new initiative to boost Ireland's AI capacity by bidding to host a European AI factory antenna. Serious questions must be asked regarding his responsibility to be bidding for this when our graduates could struggle to find entry level employment because of these advancements. The long-term implications of overreliance on this technology, particularly for the future job security of our third level graduates, is a serious consideration. Irish start-ups and other businesses will fully benefit from the rapid development of AI innovation. What we must be aware of is that these technologies could in fact replace jobs in the various sectors.

From a climate perspective, we must also acknowledge there is a direct correlation between advancements in AI technology and its reliance on data centres that produce massive amounts of energy. Furthermore, this also means it will directly impact on Ireland's future housing supply, largely as a result of to the failure to invest in energy grid resilience. In 2015, data centres used 5% of Ireland's electricity. In 2023, they used 21%. It is well known that AI is a massive contributor to this usage. The rise in electricity use by data centres is outpacing new renewable electricity sources. This is concerning.

Additionally, the National Training Fund, which has a surplus of €1.8 billion that we are seeking to unlock, needs to be urgently invested. The outcome of this not happening is that some universities are posting financial deficits. Their infrastructure and research equipment also continues to fall into disrepair. Some institutes are using equipment that is not fit for purpose. Proper investment in science and research is needed in order that our future scientists can thrive and flourish because they are using state-of-the-art equipment that can propel their careers further. Ultimately, successive Governments have created funding deficits in the university sector that could threaten the viability of Irish universities.

I acknowledge that science week is an opportunity to bring together children, students, teachers and communities. However, we must hold the Government to account to ensure that jobs are protected, that our climate is protected and that AI does not become a threat but instead becomes an important tool to help, especially those who are most vulnerable in our society.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I welcome the guests in the Visitor's Gallery, namely Councillors Padraig Fallon and Brendan Barry and others. Ta fáilte rompu go Baile Átha Cliath. It is no Leitrim, but sure it will do.

I am delighted to speak about science week. It is really important that we put a focus on it and ensure that all of our young people have opportunities, if they wish, in the field of science. If we do that and if that is the focus of the Dáil, we need to look at how we can do it. One of the issues that was raised with me quite a bit when I was held the spokesperson role that Deputy McGettigan holds now was that of the basic instruments and infrastructure we have within our third level sector, neither of which is up to standard. Some of it is, but could soon not be. This has an impact on young people who are really talented in this area and who to build on their talents. The way they build on those talents a lot of the time is, unfortunately, that they emigrate and study at universities abroad. Of course, when you are studying, that can be part of it in order to bring that knowledge base back. If we want them to bring it back, however, we need to make sure our instruments and scientific infrastructure is up to scratch. I strongly believe that we need to ensure we actually have funding coming through for the third level sector in order to keep that at the base it is now and expand it. We have the talents, the people and the visions but we need to build on that.

Equally, if we are looking at our young people who may want to go into science, we need to look at the opportunities they have. One of the biggest issues is that many of our young people, including aspiring scientists, face an uphill battle when it comes to building a secure and good life in this State. Basic things their parents would have taken for granted are now difficult, sometimes impossible, to access.

Young people in final year of school may be thinking of what university to apply for. Unfortunately, many of them quickly realise that they do not have much, if any, choice in the

matter. The outrageous cost and limited availability of student accommodation means they are forced to stay living with their parents and commute very long distances in order to access any type of third level course. That takes the decision-making out of it. That is a big issue.

We have student university accommodation that is low quality, insecure and extremely expensive. We are still waiting for the student accommodation strategy that was promised in 2024. When will that happen? We need to end the rip off for students. They need to have choice in this matter because they need to be able to study science if they so wish. That should be part of this conversation.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I commend Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, on the 30th anniversary of Science Week, along with parents, industry, colleges, schools, libraries, teachers and researchers but mostly the students. It is time to reflect on our own role as legislators on the theme of this year which is: "Then. Today. Tomorrow." We have produced world leaders and are home to domestic and multinational companies at the forefront in their fields of science. Our healthcare workers provide among the highest standards of care and we have more women in STEM fields than ever before. In some contexts, thinking from then to today, progress has been made. However, thinking of then, think also of when third level fees were abolished. Then they were reinstated and then increased this year. This is not very encouraging for our future scientists.

When I think of the science-led improvements to healthcare and the talent and commitment of our healthcare professionals today, I regret that people cannot access their care. I think of more than 800 children in my own county of Monaghan, none of whom were able to access their dental checkups this year. While welcoming the pending expansion of veterinary medical places, I think of the hundreds upon hundreds of students in recent years who have been forced to study abroad due to the lack of capacity while a crisis, particularly in rural areas, festered at home.

While acknowledging progress, I bear in mind that only one third of STEM students today are women, with only 25% in ICT. We have made progress but not enough. It is definitely not working. We have a backslide in some areas. We look to tomorrow. My appeal to the Government is that the goal will be a tomorrow that allows for ambitious planning for the future, beyond simply responding to the excessive amount of issues that plague our society today.

In regard to the national children's science museum, the concept of which I fully support, the approach from the Government seems foolish. More than 20 years ago it was envisaged that it would cost the taxpayer €14.3 million to build a national children's science museum. The estimated cost 12 years ago was €36.4 million but today that estimate has gone up to €70 million. The Government seems powerless and held to ransom by a charity. I will not prescribe the exact solution to what I appreciate has competing views from different stakeholders. However, I ask the Government to recognise the situation is farcical and take control of this board and the findings and recommendations from the Comptroller and Auditor General and ensure that in the future its officials are not left to defend what may seem an absolutely scandalous waste of money.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Science Week is an important opportunity to highlight the value of research, innovation and STEM education throughout the State. It is also an opportunity to look very honestly at the structural failures in how Government supports science, third level education and regional development. For those of us in Waterford and the south east, these failures are not abstract. They are stark and lived realities. The potential of the South East Technological University, SETU, is extraordinary, yet Government decisions have placed it firmly at the bottom of the pile when it comes to funding for technological universities. Figures released by the Department show that since the establishment of the TUs Dublin has received almost €56 million in capital funding, the Atlantic TU, €52 million, Munster TU almost €47 million and the Technological University of the Shannon €41 million. In stark contrast, SETU has received just €27 million of funding. That is a full one third less than the next lowest university.

This pattern reflects a deeper problem. When choices are made the south east is routinely treated as an afterthought. Waterford and the wider south-east region is mid-table for student numbers among the technological universities, yet bottom of the list for investment by a considerable distance. The Government must explain how this is consistent with any credible strategy for balanced regional development or indeed any strategy for investment in innovation and science.

Science Week should also prompt a discussion about the chronic underfunding of higher education more generally. Colleges are operating with 38% less funding per student than in 2008. That reduction has had serious consequences for quality, for research capacity and for staff conditions. The Government has spent less on research and development as a share of modified GNI in every year since 2011, leaving us below the EU average and below its own stated targets. That trajectory undermines the future of innovation and economic development.

Yet, in Waterford, despite these constraints, remarkable work continues to happen. ArcLabs, the Walton Institute and other parts of SETU are driving cutting edge research in information and communication systems, emerging technologies and artificial intelligence. SETU has enormous potential to lead nationally in these fields but potential without investment will not deliver the step change our region needs.

We need a fair funding model for TUs, a fast-track capital programme for SETU and urgent progress on the promised pharmacy and veterinary medicine courses to support regional growth. The south east has waited long enough. The Government must finally deliver the resources and respect that our students, our regional economy, the researchers in these institutes and our communities deserve.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I am pleased to speak on Science Week 2025, marking its 30th anniversary. This year's theme, "Then. Today. Tomorrow.", asks us to take an honest look at how far we have come, where we now stand and what choices we must make to secure a fair and sustainable future for our young people and for research in Ireland.

Science Week began three decades ago as a relatively modest outreach effort. Today, it is the biggest science festival in the State with thousands of events involving schools, universities, libraries, youth services and communities. It is testament to the passion and commitment of educators, researchers and volunteers across Ireland. Throughout the country, we see that energy every year with schools taking part in hands-on STEM workshops, university and

research-led events by all universities and higher education institutes across the country. Youth projects throughout the country use Science Week materials to encourage coding, robotics and environmental science in ways that are accessible and fun. That is real inclusion in action.

However, it also highlights the key challenge before us. How do we ensure that children and young people in every community, not just the well-resourced ones, have equal access to science education, research pathways and the careers that flow from them? As the Labour Party spokesperson on education and youth, that question is central to my work. This is the first major Science Week under a new integrated agency, Research Ireland, formed from the merger of SFI and the Irish Research Council. It was meant to bring coherence, stability and fairness to the research system. Let us be frank and honest. A new logo and a merged board will not fix the deeper structural issues that students, PhD researchers, postdocs and academic staff are experiencing every day: chronic underfunding, precarious contracts, a lack of genuine career paths and widening inequality in access to research careers.

Ireland's research and development intensity still lags behind the EU average. Meanwhile, the Government has found room to increase the research and development tax credit for multinationals even though our publicly-funded research system remains stretched, reactive and overly dependent on short-term project grants. That imbalance tells a story. We are quick to subsidise big business but slow to invest in people, in public research, in our universities and in our young people. If we are serious about being a knowledge-driven economy and a fair society, that must change.

Science Week rightly celebrates curiosity but curiosity needs opportunity. In too many schools, especially DEIS schools, science education is held back by inadequate laboratory facilities, outdated equipment and insufficient supports for inquiry-based, hands-on learning. The physical infrastructure of Irish science education is not fit for the demands we place on teachers and students. We saw that this year when science teachers across the country were asked to roll out leaving certificate reform without the adequate resources in place.

In my constituency of Cork North-Central, I have spoken to teachers who are doing heroic work in outdated laboratories or without a laboratory at all. They should not have to compensate for systemic neglect. The Labour Party believes every child should have access to a modern science laboratory regardless of their postcode. Every teacher should be supported with proper continuing professional development, CPD, resources and time to deliver inquiry-based STEM education. Every youth service should be able to offer meaningful engagement with digital skills, coding, climate science and robotics, not just sporadic workshops. Science Week shows what is possible but it must be a catalyst, not a once-a-year showcase.

The reality in our higher education system is stark. Many early year career researchers are on fixed-term, insecure contracts. PhD researchers are trying to survive on stipends that do not meet the cost of living, especially in major cities such as Cork, Dublin and Galway. Universities are being asked to do more with less while navigating financial instability. The gap between industry-led and public interest research continues to widen. If we want the next generation, including young people across the country, to pursue research careers, we must make research a stable, viable and respected profession. This means we need: a living stipend and proper worker status for PhD students and researchers; multi-annual, inflation-proof funding for Research Ireland; secure career pathways for post-doctoral researchers; dedicated investment in public good research on housing, health, education, youth well-being, social

cohesion and climate justice; and funding streams that value the arts, humanities and the social sciences, recognising that real innovation requires the full spectrum of knowledge.

Science Week places inclusion at its core and it must stay there. Girls and young women remain under-represented in STEM pathways. Students with disabilities still face barriers to accessing laboratories, equipment and placements. Young people in deprived areas encounter fewer opportunities, role models and routes into higher education.

In my constituency of Cork North-Central, we know the difference that role models, community partnerships and sustained investment can make. However, we cannot rely on individual schools or local heroes to do all the heavy lifting. Inclusion must be designed into curriculum reform, funding decisions, research priorities, university access programmes and youth services. Ireland cannot afford to waste talent, and talent is found in every estate, classroom and youth centre regardless of where people live.

The theme of "Then. Today. Tomorrow." invites us to learn from the past - then, public investment delivered vaccination programmes, environmental protections, medical breakthroughs and digital infrastructure; today, research tells us clearly what must be done on climate, housing, health, youth mental health and educational inequality but Government too often chooses inaction; and tomorrow, we face rapid developments in AI, bio-engineering and automation. These are not abstract; they will reshape education, work, democracy and the lives of young people growing up in Ireland today.

Science Week should not only be about celebrating discovery. It must also be about democratic accountability. Evidence must guide policy, even when uncomfortable. Science Week gives us a glimpse of Ireland at its best: curious, ambitious, creative and collaborative. However, behind the celebrations lies a clear responsibility for this House and for us as policymakers. We must invest in children, teachers and youth workers. We must build a higher education system based on fairness, not precarity. We need to equip the next generation for the challenges of climate, technology and social change.

We must ensure all young people in this country have the same opportunities no matter where they live or what their postcode is. If they are in a socio-economically deprived area, it should not deter any young person from being involved in STEM. Science Week is a reminder that talent is everywhere and it is our job to ensure that opportunity is everywhere too.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** Although I trained as a lawyer, science has always been part of my life. My mother was a dentist and my father was an engineer. They encouraged us to watch every television show on science. They subscribed to the *New Scientist* magazine and the *National Geographic* to encourage a love of science in us. My sister got the bug and she went on to get her PhD in chemistry. She and her husband have worked very successfully in biotech and pharma both here and abroad over the past number of years. When we travelled, we also visited science museums and I continue that tradition to this very day. I was in Milan a couple of weeks ago and the one museum I took time to visit was the Leonardo da Vinci science museum and I very much enjoyed my visit. Establishing and maintaining a science museum is challenging. The big science museums in Europe have been built over decades. They have received major donations. The museum in Milan had trams, trains, airplanes, rockets, helicopters and ships on display, all of which had been donated over the years. The collection

was built up over the years through donations from private benefactors, sponsors for exhibits and some state support.

The challenge for a science museum is that it requires regular updates, which are costly. What is cutting-edge today will be a museum piece tomorrow. I have seen versions of my older mobile phones in museums and it does make me feel that I am ageing somewhat. It is an example of how exhibits have to be constantly updated. They have to be updated as new technology emerges. For example, most science museums are only now starting to develop their AI areas and upgrading their existing displays to take into account the impact artificial intelligence is having on existing technologies.

In Ireland, we have the knowledge of how challenging it is to run a science centre. In 2008, the Science Gallery opened in Trinity College Dublin and I visited multiple times. It put on fantastic exhibits. It was established with private sponsors from the science and tech industries from here and abroad. It was also supported by some public investment. However, after struggling through Covid-19, it closed in 2022 due a failure to find a lack of sustainable, ongoing funding.

In my constituency of Dublin Rathdown, the Explorium science centre opened in 2018, just before Covid-19. Despite having to close almost immediately after opening, it has survived. It demonstrates the public demand, support and interest in educational science. It is located in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains and has an impressive 10,000 sq. m. footprint with scope for expansion. I have visited Explorium and have seen how many schools take the opportunity to visit it. It is a science education day for students but because they enjoy the experience so much, many come back with their friends and family. It also has a resource for children with autism, which is regularly used with people just dropping. It has a fully resourced sensory space. This is also a valuable educational tool for everyone to understand the challenges that certain students and children have.

There is also a third potential science museum for the city centre, which has been in the planning since 2003. This has already had €4.2 million of taxpayers' funds invested in it but we still do not have a museum. Cost overruns and delays have been the subject of many media reports, including a "Prime Time" programme. The Comptroller and Auditor General has also written several reports on it. The most recent one highlighted a number of serious concerns with the ongoing project, including a lack of governance and in particular a lack of a Department sponsor, which may have contributed to the delays and cost overruns.

The Explorium in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains has shown that it possible to create and operate a science centre that caters to all ages. Its large, open site also provides scope for expansion, perhaps to include agriscience, especially with a link to the UCD school of veterinary medicine, which is close by, and Airfield, the city farm. However, having two competing museums so close to each other would threaten the viability of both. The closure of the Science Gallery demonstrates the challenge of the ongoing operating costs of science museums.

3 o'clock

Museums in Europe like the Leonardo da Vinci Museum of Science and Technology in Milan and the Deutsches Museum in Munich show the key role of private investment and ongoing

sponsorship, which are essential. It is also critical that we consider the value for money of investing further in yet another science museum in Dublin.

In the spirit of Science Week, I want to ask the Minister of State to urge the Department to take on a sponsorship role in the development of a national science centre for Dublin. By working together with Explorium and the Irish Children's Museum Company Limited, the sponsors of the proposed city centre site, there is potential to create a viable, sustainable and world-class science centre for Ireland. Of course, any museum of this scale would require some State support. We must get something effective from the millions of euro we have already invested in a science museum. The operators of Explorium have shown that they can operate a science museum successfully in Ireland. They have demonstrated that they understand the market, demand and opportunities. They have also created international connections with other science museums as they regularly take on board some of the travelling exhibits. The board of the Irish Children's Museum Company Limited obviously brings its scientific expertise, passion and determination.

Much has been written and spoken recently about the need to deliver on projects, to stop all of the project planning and to actually get projects built. We need to take leadership of the science museum project and get delivery. It is important that the Department of further and higher education take the lead on this. We want to encourage that spark in children and young people and encourage their early interest in science, to make science accessible and exciting to them. These early encounters with science are critical. They will encourage children to view STEM subjects as exciting, to take them up in school and to pursue a scientific career or even just tech-related hobbies, thus providing a level of support for and contribution to the knowledge economy that we so urgently need to maintain. By working with the current stakeholders and operators of science museums here in Ireland and harnessing their expertise, we could develop an attractive, exciting, accessible and affordable world-class science centre for Ireland. Today, during Science Week, I ask that the Minister of State and her Department take the lead on delivering on this potential and develop a world-class science centre for Ireland.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Before I start, I would like to welcome Councillor Kevin Meenan to this illustrious place. Obviously, he will be absolutely delighted to be mentioned and will not be embarrassed by it in any way, shape or form. In fairness, he will probably also say that the best thing I could do would be to use ChatGPT to prepare my speech rather than delivering what I am going to come out with now. Anyway, we are where we are.

I was in a committee earlier today dealing with the issue of drugs and the completely disastrous impact that they have had on society. We are talking here about science, the joy of science, and the possible future successes and solutions to some of the problems we have, from climate change right across the board. We need to make sure that we do not have a huge cohort of people who are locked out of education, which is the issue at the minute. We have had over-and-back discussions on the high cost of fees and accommodation and their impact on those who are already, or who would like to be, in further education. This needs to be addressed in a wholehearted way, which is not what we have seen in the recent budget.

We also need to provide supports at a far earlier stage for those on the margins. I have often talked about the need for early family intervention so we can ensure that we facilitate people

to enter employment, life-long learning and so on. We have all seen advances in the last while, including at the Drogheda Institute of Further Education, DIFE, in my own constituency, as well as Ó Fiaich College and the PLC route, which members of my own family have used. These routes are particularly good for those who are not necessarily enamoured of the secondary school system and can enable them to get where they need to go. I have seen huge success stories in that regard. I welcome the fact that there is a far deeper relationship between the likes of Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT, and the further education colleges, as well as other universities across the State. That is absolutely necessary.

I do not think I have ever been in the Chamber to speak about this sort of topic previously without mentioning the Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence, an absolutely spectacular facility that deals with industry from the point of view of producing what is needed. When we talk about apprenticeships, we are not just talking about the traditional trades but also about the likes of AI, robotics and so on. There was much talk earlier in relation to disability and we need to see increased input around assistive technologies in the context of autism and other disabilities. A lot more work needs to be done in that area.

There is also a particular issue with regard to the personal assistants who do great work in further education but who do not have the contracts they require. I have no doubt that both the Minister and the Minister of State are aware of it and that we will get a solution.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I am delighted to contribute to this debate today during Science Week. As spokesperson for this area, I have had the pleasure over the last number of months of meeting many groups, organisations and people working in this area. I would like to talk about the main issues that could prevent us from being a world-class leader in science if they are not addressed.

We need to ensure that our primary schools are fully resourced for those naturally inquisitive minds that children have. The Minister talked about curiosity and I agree with him 100%. Curiosity for science starts when children are very young and we need to harness that all of the way through our education system.

Each year, primary schools can put forward projects for Science Blast. In January, I went to visit it and my mind was blown away by the projects there. I am not sure if the Minister of State was there but it was something else. One of the schools in my constituency, Griffith Barracks Multi-Denominational School, asked which was better, hearing or reading? They tested 54 people and their results showed that people did better when they heard the instructions. They said that the judge praised them highly and I am praising them again now. It was a fantastic project. What is fantastic about starting to explore science in primary school is that it stops the growth of any barriers to who can be a scientist and all of the stereotypes that can be fed in as children go along. However, every primary school has to be fully equipped with materials and resources to be able to harness that curiosity.

At second level, there are also concerns. At a recent meeting of the education committee, we heard from teacher unions and organisations about leaving certificate reform. The Irish Science Teachers' Association said that because there had not been the necessary investment at second level in science laboratories in particular, there were health and safety risks due to insufficient space for lab work, a lack of safety guidance and no risk assessment protocols. That needs to be set out under the new curriculum reform. I understand that the Minister wants to work on

this. If we go to the bother of reforming the curriculum to make it the best it can be, it is imperative that we put the resources behind that.

The I Wish survey revealed that girls in all-female schools continued to face greater barriers to studying STEM subjects. The Department of education's indicator report in 2024 showed that only 71% of girls were offered STEM subjects other than maths and sciences as opposed to 96% of boys in boys schools. The research showed that while girls' STEM achievement had improved in mixed schools, stereotypes in mixed classrooms still limited their participation and confidence. Construction studies was available in 84% of co-educational schools but in only 5% of single-sex girls schools. Engineering was available in 74% of co-educational schools but only in 6% of single-sex girls schools. That is a huge disadvantage for those girls. We need to seriously look at our school structures and make sure that they are not disadvantaging young people based on their gender or indeed, where they are from or their socioeconomic background. If we are to stay as world class as we are in STEM, that needs to be addressed fundamentally. The Minister needs to take leadership on that. That goes for all Ministers working in education, as both Departments have responsibility for that. Youth services are really challenging the issue. They are working in areas and providing really good STEM projects. In the South West Inner City Network, SWICN, in Dublin 8, there is a project with a 3D printer, which is a fantastic resource. That is beneficial to young people, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

At third level, there are initiatives to address STEM. Today would not be a good day to fail to mention Dr. Katriona O Sullivan's STEM passport for inclusion, because the work she has done has seen 5,000 young women go through that programme learning about STEM. They have experienced it not just at school, but elsewhere. That allows young people to believe they can be whatever they want to be. They experience that hands on, harnessing that curiosity. I praise Dr. O'Sullivan and Maynooth University to ensure it is rolled out to as many young people as possible. The students in Clogher Road Community College in my constituency are taking part in it and I look forward to visiting them as they do that.

I recently met staff of the Amber Centre, hosted by Trinity College. I was fascinated to see its programme and how its pillars link in with industry. A lot of people talk about talent. It is not my favourite word when we talk about people and their interest in STEM, but if that is the way we describe it, that is fine. I was struck by the people in that fantastic centre saying that the equipment they had was out of date. How they explained it to me was - I do not really want to name things, but I will - it was the equivalent of having a Nokia "blockia" rather than the most up-to-date iPhone or such phone. If we want to be the best we can, we cannot be working with out-of-date equipment. Like the Minister said, we need to be looking at materials and instruments that are for the future, not the past.

I am delighted to speak about science today. The Social Democrats takes it very seriously. We celebrate the things that are going well. To be the best we can in the world, we need to make sure we have the resources. I commend the Minister on his passion in this area. I will say that. His interest in the area has moved us on quite a lot.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on Science Week and the importance of the sciences to our country and to humanity. I first qualified as a chemical engineer, seeking that course because of my love of the sciences and mathematics. That

education gave me much understanding of our world. Interestingly, it is helping me to analyse our wastewater treatment and energy systems in my work as a TD and I am proud to be able to bring some insights to bear for my constituents.

I am conscious that people with a science education are in a minority in the House, which is not always a bad thing. However, I wonder whether our education system is broad enough to arm all of us with the crucial knowledge of the arts and sciences. I am concerned more generally about the lack of esteem for the sciences in 2025 in our country and in our world. We need more scientists, not fewer. We need more engineers, not fewer. We need more technologists and mathematicians, not fewer. Our economy depends on it, but more crucially, our environment and planet depend on it. Other countries, most notably Germany, the US, India and China, have invested heavily in scientific development and it has yielded significant economic and environmental benefits.

I am also extremely concerned that scepticism of science has crept into our public discourse and society. I have consistently heard from people in my constituency about such conspiracy theories as chemtrails and weather manipulation by world governments, anti-vaccine propaganda and climate change denial, a belief in things that are fantastical and defy all logic. Relatedly, a poor understanding of statistics leads many in the public discourse to poor conclusions and poor critical thinking. A core part of me wonders whether it is a lack of scientific understanding or education that has led us to this point where people can be so easily susceptible to the inaccurate and misleading.

Therefore, my major request is for the Minister of State to think sincerely about how our education and public information systems can address this lack of knowledge and understanding and how we can take the time and space to impart an appreciation of scientific thought to young and old alike. Are we investing sufficiently in scientific curricula at earlier education levels? Crucially, are we catching older populations up? Are we arming our workforce with the skills they need for the climate action era? Are we building an economy and society that will thrive on scientific progress rather than eschew it?

I thank the Government for making time to discuss this important issue. There have been many positive developments recently, in particular with Ireland joining CERN last month, so I congratulate the Minister and everyone in his Department who worked on that in the hope that it represents a more considered effort to establish Ireland's position as a leading science nation. I affirm my strong support for the development of the sciences in the House.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** Science Week celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, marking three decades of encouraging curiosity, innovation and public engagement with science. However, Science Week is more than a calendar of events. It is a reminder that science underpins almost every aspect of modern life, including health, the climate change response, the economy, infrastructure and the daily choices we make as individuals and communities. This year's theme - Then. Today. Tomorrow. - invites us to reflect on the progress we have made, the challenges we face and the kind of scientific future we want to build.

As a doctor, I am reminded daily that science is not an academic concept; it is the practical foundation of modern healthcare. It is the diagnostics, treatments, evidence and technology that allow us to deliver better outcomes for patients. Science shows up in every decision we make in practice and this is not unique to medicine. Whether we talk about agriculture,

manufacturing, communications or energy, science is embedded in the practical, everyday functioning of our society. That is why Science Week is so important. It brings science into the public square and strengthens the connection between innovation and ordinary life.

However, when we talk about the future of science in Ireland, we must address one of the most persistent challenges, that is, the under-representation of women in key scientific fields. We know the pattern. In early education, girls show just as much interest and ability in science as boys, but somewhere between secondary school, higher education and postgraduate research, we see a narrowing pipeline. This is not because girls lose interest, but too often, the system loses them, and the consequences of that under-representation are not abstract. Women shape the quality of our research, the fairness of our systems and the safety of our innovations. When women are not fully included in shaping scientific questions, designing algorithms or leading research teams, the solutions we produce risk reflecting only part of society and have real-world implications. Historically, medical research often excluded women, leading to gaps in diagnostic understanding and treatment. One example is the under-diagnosis of acute heart attack in women because of different symptoms. Early voice recognition technology struggled to recognise female voices because data sets were skewed and, even today, AI systems can replicate biases if teams lack diversity. These are reminders that the direction science takes is not neutral by default. It is shaped by who is at the table, and if women are not fully represented, we all feel the impact.

I have spoken to many bright young women in schools across Roscommon and Galway, students who are curious, engaged and ambitious. They are interested in engineering, medicine, technology and research but they still tell me they do not see enough people who look like them in these careers and that visibility matters. Role models matter. Mentorship matters. Pathways matter. If we want to inspire the next generation, we need to signal clearly that science is for everyone, not defined by gender, postcode or background. If we are serious about widening the pipeline, we must confront the structural barriers that still shape girls' access to STEM.

I will repeat what Deputy Jen Cummins said, as it is worth repeating. A recent survey of 2,300 transition year students highlighted the stark differences. Some 55% of girls in single-sex schools say limited subject choice is a barrier compared with 37% in mixed schools. Some 46% of girls cite limited subject options more broadly as a barrier to STEM careers and the contrast in access is striking. Just 5% of girls in all-girls schools can study construction studies compared with 84% in mixed settings and only 6% can take engineering compared with 74% of their peers. The pattern persists nationally, with 71% of girls schools offering only one additional STEM subject beyond maths or science compared with 96% of boys schools. These gaps matter. Early exposure shapes confidence, ambition and opportunity. Until access is equal, participation cannot be equal.

This is particularly important for rural Ireland. The future of Irish science is not and should not be urban-centric. We have extraordinary potential in the west of Ireland, with world-class medtech clusters, agricultural innovation, digital health research and a strong network of universities and higher institutes linked to industry, producing genuinely world-class work. Potential needs support. It needs investment in research capacity, educational outreach and infrastructure that ensures that scientific opportunity is truly national. The recent budget shows this Government's support for research and development, with the Minister, Deputy Lawless,

being instrumental in increasing the amount of tax relief available to businesses undertaking research and development activities in the State. The threshold for first-year refunds in the research and development tax credit scheme will increase to €87,000 for smaller projects. I know the Minister, Deputy Lawless's commitment to the concept of our higher level educational establishments, linking with industry to create the technology and jobs of tomorrow. Rural Ireland should not be the last place to benefit from innovation. It should be the driver of it.

This is especially clear from a healthcare perspective. We cannot deliver 21st century medicine with 20th century systems. Our ability to diagnose early, treat effectively and deliver care in the right place at the right time depends on investment in evidence-based practice, digital health, data systems and modern medical technologies. Science and medicine advance together. When science progresses, patient outcomes improve.

As we celebrate 30 years of Science Week, we should think not only about the discoveries that have brought us here, but the kind of scientific culture that we want to build for the next 30 years, a culture that supports curiosity, welcomes women and men equally, recognises the value of rural innovation and sees science not only as something distant or elite, but as a shared national project.

My message today is simple: science is not a spectator sport. It requires investment, participation and public engagement. It requires us to inspire young people, especially our young girls, to step into fields where their talents are needed, and it requires us to ensure the benefits of scientific progress reach every community in Ireland, not just a few. I thank the educators, researchers and community groups as well as the industry partners who make Science Week possible each year. To the students taking part, keep asking questions and keep challenging assumptions. To the girls in our schools who are wondering whether science is for them, let me say clearly that science is absolutely for you. Ireland needs your ideas, leadership and voice, then, today, and tomorrow, and here is to the next 30 years of science and the people who will shape it.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on statements on Science Week, the annual celebration that highlights the important role that science, technology, engineering and maths play in our lives. This week is more than just a showcase of innovation. It is a vital spark, igniting curiosity in the next generation and reminding us all of the power of evidence and inquiry. From the smartphones in our pockets to the medical advancements in our hospitals, science is the bedrock of our modern society and economy. It provides the tools to tackle our greatest challenges, from climate change and energy security to public health and sustainable agriculture. Indeed, some of those very topics were tackled in the posters presented in Leinster House during the week by researchers from across the country. I commend those involved in the posters and the Oireachtas this week.

In an increasingly complex world, a scientifically literate citizenry is not a luxury but a necessity for informed democratic participation. However, a celebration of science must also be a commitment to its future. For Ireland to truly thrive as a nation of innovators, we must be a nation of skilled scientists and researchers. This requires a sustained strategic commitment from the Government to foster talent and interest at every stage of the pipeline. We must start in our classrooms by ensuring our teachers have the resources and support to make STEM

subjects engaging and accessible to every child regardless of sex or background. On this, the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, along with her senior Minister and the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, must engage with the Irish Science Teachers' Association. It has serious concerns that need to be addressed and others have echoed that.

We must strengthen the bridges between our research institutions and industry, ensuring that brilliant ideas are translated into tangible solutions and enterprise here in Ireland. Crucially, this means robust and sustained Government support for training programmes. We need to invest in apprenticeships, upskilling initiatives and postgraduate opportunities that equip our people with the high-tech, hands-on skills demanded by the modern workforce. This is not merely an educational policy; it is an economic imperative. By backing our scientists, researchers and technicians, we are investing in jobs, Irish enterprise and Irish solutions to global problems. We are also investing in our people, in their futures and their potential.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is good that we have this debate every year about the importance of science. The Government, to my mind, largely pays lip service to the importance of science but does not actually translate it in reality into backing science and encouraging those who are working in the area of science, research and development. What is my evidence for saying that? First of all, there is the plight of about 10,000 to 12,000 PhD researchers who, in recent years, have felt compelled to organise themselves into a union through the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation. Some of their demands are articulated by unions in the third level sector, like the Irish Federation of University Teachers, IFUT, who have explained about the poverty that they suffer. It is quite incredible. It is important to note that our public universities are held together by postgraduate researchers and academic staff who are on part-time contracts, effectively if-and-when contracts, living on very low pay with almost no rights as workers, in the case of PhD researchers, or literally no rights as workers. They are not recognised as workers, but they hold together our universities, research and our third level education system. Without them, we would not have those things, but we treat them in a shameful way.

Due to their campaigning, the Government was forced to raise up to, in most cases, a minimum stipend level of €25,000, but that is still minimum wage for people who are highly educated and supposed to be the cutting edge. They are the basis on which we educate our young people, give them third level education and engage in their research that really counts, but they live on minimum wage. It is absolutely outrageous. That compares with our European counterparts, where you are talking more like €30,000, €40,000 and, in some cases, €50,000 for doing what are actually real jobs. We are exploiting people who do the research and science and who teach our young people in third level education. I would say that 50% of those who live in universities are living in precarity of one sort or another, or are not even recognised as workers. Then there are the barriers that we put in the way of accessing higher education more generally, most notably third level fees and fees for postgraduate degrees, all of which are barriers to people getting into higher levels of education and areas of research and innovation, which would put us at the cutting edge that we keep saying we are trying to put ourselves at. This is borne out in overall figures. The average spend in Europe in the area of research is 3%. We spend about 1.7% to 1.9%, which is significantly lower. This is the land of saints and scholars, but there are not many saints, in my opinion, and we are definitely not looking after the scholars in this area.

Do we give money to some? The answer is “Yes”. When we say things, such as that we should get rid of postgraduate fees, give them a decent stipend, treat them as workers or get rid of third level fees, people ask where that is coming from - the socialist magic money tree? They say that Ireland could not actually do that. We cost this every year, however. To get rid of the postgraduate and mature repeating student fees would cost €100 million, to give a stipend to all PhD researchers of at least €30,000 a year would cost €225 million, and to close the funding gap and maintain the existing level of funding would cost €355 million. Anyone would think that is quite a lot of money. However, how much do we give out to the big multinational corporations in research and development grants every year? Last year, it was €1.4 billion. That was up from the previous year, when it was €1.1 billion, and up €400 million from the previous year, when it was €700 million. That is not even examined in the budget. Most people do not bother to look at tax expenditures, which are the shadow budget in this country, the shadow giveaways to the big multinationals, which are already making astronomical profits.

What are they researching? They might be researching iPhone version 15 for Bill Gates, Elon Musk or the billionaires and trillionaires to further boost their profits, which are going through the roof. That is where the money is going. It is money that should be going to the universities, to getting rid of fees for students, to postgraduate researchers and to poorly paid, precariously employed academic staff in order to boost this State’s ability to engage in cutting-edge research, put ourselves at the higher levels of education and develop our domestic economy and our own capacity. But no, we are handing it out in another massive giveaway to the billionaires of this world, who are largely located in the United States and are now the cheerleaders for Donald Trump. That is what is going on. It is just ridiculous.

We will never manage to be the country of saints, but we could do the scholars bit in a serious way if we redirected even half of what we are giving away in research and development tax reliefs to a tiny group of probably ten or 15 big multinationals. They are making so much profit that the idea they would all be running out of the country is nonsense. In any case, that is only one of the tax reliefs they are getting. They are getting enormous tax reliefs, which, again, we detail every single year in our budget submission.

Intragroup transactions are another tax expenditure and they were worth €4.4 billion last year to the same companies. They get tax breaks on the losses they make so they can carry them forward, but when they make profits, they do not pay tax the next year. This amounted to €2.4 billion last year. In total, guess how much these big multinationals get in tax breaks each year? It is €22 billion. It is flipping enormous. It is a scandal, and it is almost never discussed. Before they pay any tax, they use these tax loopholes, so they do not actually pay 12.5%, 15% or anything like it. While ordinary workers are paying 20%, 30% or 40% of their income or more, these fellows are paying 6%, 7% or 8%, and, as we know, some are paying less than 1% while making astronomical profits.

In a choice between enriching Apple, Google, Facebook and already spectacularly profitable pharmaceutical companies to research stuff that, for the most part, we do not need at all, is of little benefit to us and, in some cases, is actually doing damage to our society, would it not be better to redirect that money towards researchers and young people to access higher level education, and towards our universities to advance science, research and innovation? It is a no-brainer, but it requires putting people and our society before profit.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** It is not really fair to have to follow Deputy Boyd Barrett, but I will kick the ball that is in front of me, which is Science Week. This week, we celebrate Science Week, a national event that for 30 years has brought communities, schools and researchers together to explore and celebrate the power and potential of science in shaping our society. The theme for this year, "Then. Today. Tomorrow.", invites us to look back at how science has transformed Ireland, to recognise the role it plays in our day-to-day lives and to imagine the possibilities it holds for our future as Ireland continues to invest in knowledge, innovation and understanding.

As Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, I am particularly conscious of the role that science plays in shaping our response to one of the defining challenges of our time, the climate crisis. Science gives us the knowledge, evidence and tools we need to make informed decisions regarding our environment and the sustainability of our economy in the long term. It ensures that urgency and understanding go hand in hand as we deal with these issues. Across Ireland, researchers are developing ideas and technologies that will drive our transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient future. From renewable energy to biodiversity protection, Irish researchers are creating solutions that will shape a cleaner, fairer and more sustainable country that will be to the benefit of us all.

Science Week is a chance to celebrate this work and to engage people of all ages, young and old, in the excitement of discovery. Supported by Science Foundation Ireland and Research Ireland, hundreds of events are taking place around the country, from exhibitions and talks to hands-on experiments in schools and community centres. In my constituency of Dublin Bay North, I am delighted to have been invited by SciFest to attend its national final, which will take place at the Marino Conference Centre on Friday, 21 November. SciFest is a shining example of what Science Week is all about, giving young people the opportunity to explore ideas, challenge themselves and their friends and showcase their creativity and talent. I pay tribute to all the teachers, muinteoirí, mentors, volunteers and parents who support and encourage these young scientists, day in, day out, and all those who make Science Week possible each year. Their continuous enthusiasm and dedication ensure that science is accessible to everyone, regardless of background or ability.

Science Week also reminds us of the importance of evidence-based policy. As policymakers, we do not always take this to heart. We have a duty to ensure that the decisions we take, particularly in the areas of climate, environment and energy, are informed by sound research, evidence and the best available tools. The challenges we face are complex, and they require thoughtful, informed and science-led responses. That is why the work of researchers, educators and innovators across Ireland is so critical and should be valued. They are not just advancing scientific understanding. They are helping us to shape better policy, protect our environment and create sustainable opportunities for communities across the country.

The climate transition will require innovation on a scale we have never seen before in Ireland and around the world. It will also require collaboration and public trust. Science Week plays a small but vital role in fostering that trust by demystifying science, breaking down barriers and showing that curiosity and creativity are open to all. As we celebrate 30 years of Science Week, we can be proud of the progress Ireland has made. We are now recognised globally for our research excellence, our commitment to education and our leadership in sustainability and energy innovation. There is still a lot to do, however, and science must be part of that journey.

I encourage everyone, especially our young people, to take part in Science Week events, to explore, to ask questions and to imagine what science can do for their own and Ireland's future. I want to thank Síofra Ní Earcain, a second-year student at Trinity College, who worked with us this week and who exemplifies the value of research and education for the future of our country. Let us continue to support our scientists, invest in research and ensure that science remains at the heart of public policy and our national progress.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** It is fair to say that over the last decade in particular, Ireland has made some commendable efforts to foster a culture of scientific creativity and collaboration within the academic institutions and industry, and also in terms of policy development. You have to give credit where it is due. Obviously, it could be said that Science Week lies at the heart of this movement because it is a flagship initiative that predated the foundation of Science Foundation Ireland and its merger with the Irish Research Council to form Research Ireland. From these humble beginnings, Science Week has grown into a national celebration of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. As the Minister of State mentioned, this year marks its 30th anniversary. It is good to see that in 2025, the Government has allocated almost €850,000 to support 36 projects in 14 regional festivals, engaging communities across the country. The theme of Science Week - "Then. Today. Tomorrow" - invites everyone to reflect on past achievements, current challenges and future possibilities. Just opposite the gates of this institution, the Houses of the Oireachtas, we have one of the Science Week exhibitions, the Museum of the Moon exhibition, by the artist Luke Jerram. It is taking place in Merrion Square from today, 13 November, until 15 November. It entails an internally lit 7 m diameter sphere featuring a 120 dpi NASA map of the moon's surface. The scale is approximately 1:500,000, meaning each centimetre represents 5 km of the moon's terrain. It looks like a very interesting feature and I would encourage anyone to pop across and have a look. It is going to be more interesting when it is dark. There are so many other interesting events around the country.

Science Week is more than just a series of events, however. It is supposed to be a strategic tool for public engagement, especially with our young people. Through exhibitions, school visits and community initiatives, it brings science into everyday life. It is supposed to demystify research and showcase our innovation, and it encourages young people to imagine themselves as the scientists, engineers and inventors of the future.

It is also very important at a time of misinformation and disinformation where science is not just questioned but blatantly ignored, manipulated by opportunistic charlatans for self-promotion and financial gain, politicised and often used as a tool, as I have said in previous speeches, by bad actors and rogue states to threaten our way of life. You have only to look at Facebook to see the stuff that is spouted, along with the so-called YouTube experts. Deputy Hayes mentioned the climate change deniers, those totally against vaccines without looking at and balancing up the research, and the chemtrail conspiracists – you name it. People go down the rabbit hole one way or another and then they jump into other echo chambers.

I welcome the input of successive Governments in the development of Science Week. Beyond Science Week, Ireland has invested in research and infrastructure through innovation hubs, public engagement initiatives for funding calls and strong partnerships with academic institutions. These efforts align with current national goals to position Ireland as a global leader. The question remains as to whether Ireland is a global leader in research and development. The answer is mixed. We have shown leadership in some ways. According to

the UK Science and Innovation Network country summary, we are first in the world for knowledge diffusion, third for knowledge impact, sixth for university–industry research and development collaboration and 15th for overall scientific research quality. With regard to subject-specific excellence, we are second globally for agricultural sciences, fourth in immunology and neuroscience behaviour, sixth in microbiology and seventh in pharmacology and toxicology. Of course, we have also been successful in securing EU funding, such as the €1 billion from the EU's Horizon 2020 programme.

Like others, I welcomed the news earlier this year that Ireland had officially joined the European Organization for Nuclear Research, CERN, as an associate member. I was honoured to be able to pair with the relevant Minister, Deputy James Lawless, so he could attend the launch. It is very important to be an associate member.

We have a lot done but we do have more to do because, despite the successes we have had, there are many areas where policy commitments and financial commitments fall short. In this regard, compare investment levels with those of other countries. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett, mentioned an average rate of 3% across the EU. Ireland invests less than 1.5%, or maybe 1.7%, of GDP on research and development, depending on the year. This is below the EU average and it is significantly lower than the rates of countries like South Korea, Israel, Germany and the US, whose rates are 4.8%, 5.4%, 3.1% and 3.5%, respectively. Even though the US is regressing owing to its anti-science agenda, it is still investing over twice as much as we are in research and development.

Other speakers have mentioned various areas where we are falling down. An example is our outdated equipment. I will not go too much into this subject but it is certainly an issue as part of the overall investment deficit, as are the pay and conditions of academic staff, particularly researchers and PhD students, who need better allowances and stipends.

Let us consider schools. While funding for Science Week has increased, it still represents a small fraction of the broader science budget, which itself, as I referred to in terms of research and development, could do with an increase, based on the figures in other developed countries. Long-term investment in science education at primary and secondary levels needs to be increased because it remains inconsistent. Many schools still lack access to modern laboratory facilities or dedicated STEM educators, especially but not exclusively in rural areas.

Ireland continues to face challenges in gender equality in STEM areas, which I focused on a lot when I was mayor of South Dublin County Council back in 2017–2018. While we have initiatives like Smart Futures and STEM Passport for Inclusion to try to close the gender gap, girls in Ireland are still less likely to pursue science subjects at leaving certificate level than peers in countries like Finland or Estonia, and especially the likes of South Korea, which I have referred to. The uptake of physics and computer science among Irish girls lags behind the EU average and female representation in engineering and technology courses is still very much disproportionately low. It is not just about numbers; it is about the system, cultural issues, stereotypes, the lack of visible female role models and the lack of career guidance. We have to do more to challenge all these norms and create a new norm – a new inclusive pathway for STEM for girls.

One issue I am looking at now is that of same-sex schools, which I believe are now outdated. While there is a model for parental preferences, it should be like Australia, where you have to

go to a private school if you want to go to a same-sex school. All schools in the country should be co-educational. We have a historic issue, in that the religious were the instigators of the education system in this country. Boards of management are autonomous but every single same-sex boys' or girls' school in the country should consider merging with another. Science is one angle, but so too is access to playing pitches and other facilities. There is a huge imbalance and it is very unfair on our girls.

Science Week is a welcome event but it needs to be more wide-ranging. We possibly need a Science Month for starters and then progress to sustained year-round engagement through curriculum reform, teacher training and appropriate industry partnerships. Science should not just be subject to a once-a-year celebration. So, what can be done? We need to increase the funding for STEM education, as I have said, expand the mentorship and outreach programmes that connect girls with female scientists and engineers and integrate science and critical thinking into the national curriculum.

There are proposals to increase public research and development investment, which are welcome, and I have a few ideas in this regard that I would like considered. We could be a leader in artificial intelligence and definitely in the field of renewable technology, especially as we have seen some movement in offshore wind. We need to investigate wave energy as well, along with all other types of climate technology. We must also consider pharmaceuticals and particularly the making of new inventions from scratch.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss Science Week 2025, whose theme this year is "Then. Today. Tomorrow" and how past knowledge informs present and future science. I commend Science Foundation Ireland, now Research Ireland, on its vision to establish Science Week 30 years ago. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, and the Minister for the continuing investment in STEM subjects, personnel and facilities.

Essential to the study of science is a quest for knowledge: challenging past theories, proving theories and improving outcomes. It also involves experimenting with variables – for example, temperature, light, dark, moisture, drought, age, gender, ethnicity, wellness, illness and so on – changing them and then examining the new outcomes.

My experience and love of science began, definitely 50-plus years ago, in St. Seachnall's school in Dunshaughlin, County Meath, with the very simple concept of the nature table. I hope we can go back there at some stage. That was followed afterwards with the expansion to biology, chemistry and maths in Cabra, Dublin 7. Then, down the road from here, I studied life sciences with a degree in pharmacy at Trinity College Dublin. I studied genetics, physics, statistics, botany and all of the different "ologies", including physiology, microbiology and zoology. That continued on to the pharmaceutical sciences where, in our final year, we were let loose on patients in St. James's Hospital for our practice of pharmacy.

Common to every branch of pharmacy that we studied along this journey was the ability and necessity to question at every step. We were encouraged and, in some cases, demanded to question past theories, prove a theory and improve on past outcomes. This involved a lot of messing around in the labs, to the chagrin of many of the lecturers who at the stage feared they might have to call the fire services. The memories of Friday practical sessions in pharmaceutical chemistry with projects, as well as Ms Esmond's mixed-bag interrogations, haunt me to this day.

When I entered the world of community pharmacy after graduation, the curiosity continued. In order to help patients effectively in the pharmacy – Deputies who have gone into a pharmacy for assistance with over-the-counter medicines might not know this – there are at least five basic questions we must ask in order to come up with a solution. We must ask about the who; the what; the how; the action; any other medication; whether there is a child aged under two; and whether there is a pregnancy. Preparing prescriptions involves more in-depth questioning of doctors, nurses, carers and hospital teams, all to improve health outcomes. Long may that curiosity and questioning continue to ensure that these best outcomes are achieved.

It is fair to say that science was never meant to be followed. Its very essence, from the time of Archimedes, Galileo, Hippocrates and Pasteur to former influential lecturers Des Corrigan and Ingrid Hook, was always rooted in curiosity and questioning. In 2020, a most worrying development arose with the outbreak of a new virus, followed by a new gene therapy, messenger RNA, mRNA, therapy. The instructions were to follow the science. If people asked any question, despite having a scientific background, they were labelled as, perhaps, a conspiracy theorist and vilified. Now, new and disturbing peer-reviewed research and evidence on this gene therapy is available from Italy, Japan and the US. It must be investigated and followed up on in the true spirit of science. Analysis is also being carried out on recent CSO data into medical mortality rates in the 15 to 24 age category. Again, this is science-based and it must be questioned and followed up on.

In accordance with the objectives of the programme for Government, Ireland aims to be a centre of excellence in research and development, particularly in the areas of healthcare and technology. In these endeavours, we must embrace and encourage curiosity and questioning continuously. Public-private partnerships and industry collaborations in every area of science must be clearly and unambiguously advertised as such to ensure that informed decisions can be made by citizens and the Government on behalf of the taxpayer.

To go full circle, back to childhood, may we create environments where children's curiosity can be supported and satiated, informed by facts and not ideologies.

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin):** I thank everyone in the House for the opportunity to have this debate and their contributions. Many of them were quite insightful and thoughtful.

As a former science and maths teacher, I am pleased to see so many people across the country participating in Science Week because it is about making science fun, accessible, interesting and real. I agree with Deputies Eoin Hayes and Paul Gogarty that distrust in science is growing and we need to find ways to deal with this. Science Week is one of the ways we can help manage it. While it is just a piece of the jigsaw, it is an important one because we can assist in that work to support all the fantastic, novel and interesting events that are taking place all over the country this week.

For too many people, for too long, science has been seen as out of reach and maybe something reserved for the clever ones. In truth, however, science is for everyone. Deputy Martin Daly put it in simple terms - science supports every aspect of our lives, from healthcare to the sustainable food we eat, the systems that support our societies and everything, from transport to cybersecurity.

The most important thing that I can say about Science Week is that it is about connecting children and ordinary people, with no scientific background whatsoever, to the science that is all around us. We are lucky in Sligo to have a fabulous science fair at the ATU. It started last Sunday and events are taking place for the entire week. It is organised by the faculty of science at ATU Sligo. For many years, I have attended these events and they are fascinating. They are fun and family friendly. Titles of some of the shows include “The Electrifying Energy Show”, “The Mad Professor”, “Desert Bloom” and “Who Are You Callin’ Airhead?” If those titles do not pique people’s interest, I am not sure what will. There are a lot of interactive exhibits, such as “Science on Stilts” and “Marine Life Discovery”, as well as hands-on challenges in the ATU’s new teaching gym. That is just one day. For the rest of the week, there are a lot of other events taking place.

I am just going to mention one event that is taking place on Friday night in Slish Wood. It is a guided night-time adventure with Northwest Adventure Tours looking at the Leonids meteor shower. For those who do not know what that is - I had to look it up as well - that meteor shower occurs every November but, this year in particular, because the moon is just a thin crescent and the night sky will be very dark, the meteor shower will be seen very clearly. Those interested can go there to see this. It is happening all over the country but if people want it explained, it is happening in Slish Wood on Friday night.

That is not the only interesting thing that is happening, however. Another event that caught my attention is "Juggling Quadratics for Queens" in the Island Theatre in Ballinamore. As a former maths teacher, when I saw the word “quadratic”, I wondered what this was about. In fact, it is teaching. The “queens” part of the title means this event is for young women and girls. It will teach them how to juggle. It is a fun event which combines, believe it or not, the solving of quadratic equations with the skill of juggling. It is an absolutely fascinating and fun event. It sounds complex. Those are the kinds of things that get people, especially young women, interested in STEM. I am really pleased to say that my former school, Mercy College Sligo, where I was a maths teacher for many years, is hosting that event this afternoon. This is about encouraging young women to see that science, engineering, mathematics and technology is for them.

There are many other events taking place, such as those taking place in Ballyshannon Library, the historic town atlases and the other events in many schools. While I have mentioned some of the events in my constituency - we tend to do that here - these are just a tiny number among the vast number of events taking place across the country. I encourage everyone to see what is still happening. Nearly half of the week is left. Just go and see if you are interested.

We are living in a time of huge change. There are real opportunities. For Ireland, this is not just a challenge but a chance to lead. I have heard many Deputies this evening talk about this. Further education and training are at the heart of the transformation we need to make.

4 o'clock

Through FET, we are building bridges between education and employment. It is crucial that we are creating flexible routes to allow people to learn, upskill and reskill throughout their lives. Literacy, numeracy and digital skills remain core priorities. FET is not just about that, however. It is also about green skills, advanced technologies and innovation. Apprenticeships are a cornerstone of this vision. They offer a powerful, earn-as-you-learn model, combining

real world experience with qualifications that are nationally recognised. Ireland now has over 77 apprenticeship programmes, from traditional roles to cutting edge and emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, biopharma, robotics and data analysis. These programmes are shaping careers. They are giving learners practical skills and employers the talent they need to thrive. Apprentices are gaining confidence, skills and meaningful employment opportunities. From all the surveys we have done, they are telling us this route is working.

As a Minister of State, I am proud to support and advance an apprenticeship system that is inclusive, responsive and central to our future workforce. The backbone of our innovation economy is STEM. We need more STEM professionals every year to meet demand in sectors like engineering, software and advanced manufacturing. Apprenticeships and FET are critical to closing that gap. They offer alternative routes into high-value roles and help to ensure talent is not lost because not everyone has followed a rigid traditional pathway.

A small bit of kindness and encouragement can make all the difference in the lives of children in building their confidence and self-esteem and in seeing themselves as capable of going after their dreams and realising their potential, whatever that might be. In that context, I encourage parents, grandparents, guardians, teachers and communities to get involved, take an interest and share a conversation with their young people. Then, today and tomorrow is a chance to celebrate the endeavours of yesteryear that have brought us to where we are and to consider what might lie ahead for individuals, families, communities, Ireland and the entire planet.

I thank everyone today for their contributions. I listened to all of them. I have heard many comments about the need for further investment in innovation. While I do not have the exact figures in front of me, I can say there has been a very significant increase in resources for research and innovation in this budget. Yes, we have a way to go. This budget, however, has certainly taken not a small step but a very sizeable in trying to close that gap. I thank Dáil Éireann for hosting and agreeing to have these statements today in the 30th year of science week. The world needs to support science now more than ever. Once again, I thank the Deputies who specifically made that point. I really appreciate it

**An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025: An Dara Céim [Comhaltaí Priobháideacha]**

**Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years)  
Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** Tairgim: “Go léifear an Bille don Dara hUair anois.”

I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I thank my friends in the Social Democrats for the opportunity to bring what I believe to be potentially momentous legislation to Second Stage this evening. Before I continue, I am thrilled to welcome so many young people and youth workers to the Gallery, representing organisations like the National Youth Council of Ireland, Foróige, BeLong To and the Irish

Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU. I thank them all for taking the time to come here today to witness what is a really important debate.

On a given day, colleagues across this House debate an eclectic mix of issues, with varying degrees of opinion and agreement. Today, I present this House today with an opportunity. It is an opportunity for us in the Thirty-fourth Dáil to make provisions for the most significant piece of electoral reform in recent history and allow the people of Ireland to have their say as to whether 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in future elections. I believe in young people. Together, we have the time to develop a legislative pathway towards a referendum, which makes this Government's proposed timed amendment, lodged today, quite disappointing. In July, the UK Government confirmed its intention to legislate for the reduction of the voting age there to 16 in time for the next general election. This means that approximately 48,000 young people in Northern Ireland will be entitled to vote in that election. As we know, that opportunity is not afforded to their counterparts in the Republic.

The UK is not alone. As the Minister will know, some 14 other countries have extended voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, for municipal, European and-or general elections and referendums. Countries like Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Estonia, Germany, Scotland, Switzerland and Wales - the UK will soon join them - have extended the franchise to those aged 16. This is a list I would love Ireland to join. I take this opportunity to commend Senator Ruane and former Senator Warfield, Deputies McLoughlin, Byrne, McGreehan and former Deputy Thomas Pringle, who all introduced similar Bills on extending voting rights to those aged 16 in recent years. The Bill before the House is a little different, however. The advice from the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, tells us we cannot differentiate between local and general elections. Research tells us we should avoid partial enfranchisement. It is therefore incumbent on us to seize this opportunity to ensure voting rights are extended to 16-year-olds.

Adolescence is often a time of transition, a time of changes and a period of progression from childhood to adulthood. Some of the recent discourse in this House about young people focused on challenges associated with this time of our lives, whether about a lack of access to services or punitive discussions about antisocial behaviour orders, ASBOs, crime and fear. Many in this House are guilty of undermining the competency, maturity and resilience that young people are capable of possessing and, in doing so, risk categorising this demographic only as anti-social and impulsive. This could not be further from the truth. Now, more than ever, young people need champions in this House. They deserve advocates across this House who believe in them.

Let us look briefly at some of the ways young people have shown leadership in our country. These include the Fridays for Future endeavour, an example that awoke in us a critical consciousness about the reform needed when we are facing the most existential crisis in climate change and climate justice. More recently, young people have been at the forefront in advocating for disability rights, access to services and therapeutic assessment.

I have been a youth worker for nearly 17 years. In that time, I have worked with thousands of young people. These are young people who have opinions and ideas and who are political and hopeful. They are informed and care deeply about their community and society. Too many, however, are frustrated and disempowered. They are frustrated at being seen as a problem for the future, and disempowered in that their voice does not matter until they turn 18. What do

we know? We know that at 16, young people can work and pay taxes. Yet they have no way of choosing how those taxes are allocated. People like us go to the ballot box. Young people do not have that opportunity. They can consent to medical treatment offered by the HSE at 16 years of age. At 17, a young person can drive an eight-seater car. The question before us today is not one of maturity; it is equality. It is not a question of competency. It is about fairness.

Research in countries that have facilitated voting rights for 16-year-olds tell us two really important things. First, where young people at 16 have a vote, there has been no impact on the election results whatsoever. Second, young people at 16 are more likely to use their vote than if given it at 18. The Bill before us today, if passed in a referendum, would have no significant impact on the results of any election.

More importantly, we all have a bigger elephant in the room. Turnout at the most recent presidential election was just 45.8%. The general election turnout was 59.7%. The local elections in 2024 were 49.4% and this is in sharp contrast to the energy and enthusiasm for all elections I see when I visit schools around this country and when I work with youth services and youth groups. Ahead of every election, young people are talking about candidates, parties, manifestos or pledges but, more importantly, they are talking about the issues that face them in the same way they face the Minister of State or me but we can use our vote to express our opinion.

Electoral reform, as is proposed today, would be a seismic attempt to increase civic participation and, ultimately, voter turnout. The Taoiseach said this year that he was not against it. He did not have an issue with reducing it to 16 and he said that the Government would give that serious consideration. Here we are. It is time for that serious consideration. The first report of the Convention on the Constitution in 2013 recommended lowering the voting age to 16 and here, in 2025, we have that opportunity. It is an opportunity to instigate a process and to allow the people of Ireland to have their say.

The Government is proposing to delay this conversation for 12 months - for what, I do not know, and I look forward to the Minister of State's response. I am going to preface it by thinking that whatever is going to happen in that 12 months could happen on Committee Stage and I say that respectfully. I want to say to the 16- and 17-year-olds of this country that they are not a problem for the future. In fact, like many other countries, we believe in their voice and their vote and we trust them.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I welcome everybody in the Gallery. It is great to have them here today. I thank my colleague, Deputy Farrelly, for all of his passion and hard work on this issue.

Sixteen-year-olds in Ireland are mature enough to work, pay taxes, care for family members and make their own medical decisions. If they are old enough to make those choices and contribute to society in those ways, why would they not be allowed to vote? We should be actively looking for more ways for them to participate in our democracy, not to continue to exclude them from it. The young people I meet are engaged, thoughtful and politically aware. They deserve a say in the fact that they are working for a sub-minimum wage. They deserve a say in the failure to take action on the climate crisis that will affect their generation more than any other. They deserve to see a future for themselves in Ireland where they can afford to live in the communities they are growing up in. Young people deserve the right to vote. Other countries like Austria, Scotland and Malta have already taken this step and the evidence is clear.

When young people are trusted to vote, they take that responsibility seriously, they turn out and they stay engaged. We should be racing to follow that example, not dragging our heels.

Lowering the voting age is about saying to young people that we see you, we value you and we trust you. This is not just about age; it is about access. I know all too well how powerful a single vote can be. I tell the story of winning my first election by one vote quite often to try to energise people because too often, people feel like their vote does not matter and their one vote will never be the one that makes a difference. Having experienced that whole "one vote" debacle, I never want to contemplate not being able to vote myself again. Of course, my baby decided to arrive on polling day last year and like every other person on the maternity ward that day, I could not vote in the general election. It is frankly scary how easily people can be locked out of our democratic process - people in hospital, people on holiday, citizens in the North, long-term residents who just cannot afford citizenship and those who have recently emigrated. All of them have a right to be heard but so many cannot vote.

We need to change that. If we truly believe in democracy, we must make it easier for people to participate, not harder. That means expanding access to postal voting, having polling stations in hospitals, looking at automatic voter registration and recognising the rights of people in the North to have a say in shaping our shared future. The principle is simple: every person who wants to take part in our democracy should be able to do so.

Lowering the voting age to 16 is part of that vision. It is a step towards a more open and inclusive republic. We have an opportunity to inspire a new generation of voters and to show them that their voices matter now and not later.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** First, I wish to commend my colleague, Dr. Aidan Farrelly, on his work on this Bill. For the benefit of those people in the Chamber who do not know, Deputy Farrelly is not just a TD and spokesperson for young people but he is also an expert in the area of youth work. His PhD work was about youth work, so it can safely be said of Deputy Farrelly that he is extremely well placed to bring this Bill forward, having worked as a youth worker and achieved the highest level of education in this area.

I was also a youth worker and researcher in this area and I say that because it is important to know that Bills like this are coming from research, evidence and lived experience. As far back as 2004, I was a board member of the National Youth Council, which is very welcome here again today. I remember we were on Grafton Street giving out information leaflets to passers by on the merits of lowering the voting age. I remember that year clearly because I have a photo - a printed-out photo because I am quite old - of my daughter, who was in a buggy. She is 21 now.

This debate has sparked comments that 16- and 17-year-olds are too young to have a clue about voting. I beg to differ, and I will give the House some examples as to why I do not think this is true. I will say, as an aside, that many adults also do not have a clue how to vote or register to vote and have never voted, so this is not an age thing. It is an education and civic society matter.

When I was a candidate in the local and general elections in 2024, I had many encounters with young people asking me a wide variety of questions, be that at the door or on the road and, indeed, I was sent surveys. I have an example from a primary school, whose students

would not be able to vote because they would not have reached the age of 16 but it shows how well our education system is doing to engage young people in the political system. I was sent a survey by St. Brigid's Primary School, the Coombe, and they asked me loads of questions about the local area and how I would improve it if I was elected. They asked me to explain my values and when they got the information from all the candidates, they collated it and their teacher helped them to have an election. They had an election and I know the outcome but I am not going to say what it was. They were already engaged in primary school.

When I was a candidate at that time, I also visited the Solas Project, which is a youth service in Dublin 8 that works with five- to 24-year-olds. They asked candidates to give them a two-minute pitch and then they asked us questions. The questions were really hard and very thorough and they also got to ask us follow-on questions. They did this, with potential politicians and people who were already politicians, in a respectful, intelligent and excellent way. When I became a Dublin city councillor, I had a visit from St. Kilian's German School in Clonskeagh and they gave me a grilling for almost three hours on topics I had not even thought about. They had ideas and notions I had never thought about and they helped me realise I had a lot more thinking to do as a city councillor and now as a TD. They knew their stuff and on top of knowing their stuff, they knew how to communicate it as well.

The world will not fall in if 16- and 17-year-olds are given the right to vote. As our briefing document states, it already happens in several other countries. In Argentina and Austria, they have the right to vote in all elections. In Germany, they have the right to vote in European elections and some state elections. What we know is that people who are interested in voting will vote and those who are not interested in voting will not vote and age is not a factor in this.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** First, I congratulate my colleague, Deputy Farrelly, on bringing forward this proposal, leading on it, setting this out and being a champion on this issue.

I am very disappointed by the Government's response of kicking this issue down the road. We have young people who really want to engage with the democratic process and have their say. People who are aged 16 and 17 now will be aged 17 and 18 a year from now. By the time the Government finally gets its act together, they will be aged 18 and over, so this matter is time sensitive and we need to make progress on it. The Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, stated recently that if the Social Democrats brought forward legislation, the Government would give it serious consideration. I do not think a timed amendment is serious consideration. If the Government was genuinely serious, it would engage with us, move this Bill forward to Committee Stage, listen to both the arguments put forward and to young people and genuinely engage. We could do that over a number of months and have a debate on this important issue. Introducing a timed amendment, a route the Government also took in respect of our Bill in the Seanad a number of weeks ago, is the wrong approach. I ask the Government to reconsider its approach to this and actually give this issue serious consideration, listen to the arguments, to young people and the Opposition and work together on this important issue.

As my colleague said, there is now a global movement to reduce the voting age. We have seen it in Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Germany, Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland, Wales and Greece. There is a movement across the world to increase participation among young people by lowering the voting age. We know the UK Government intends to lower the voting age. In recent weeks in the Netherlands, D66, which won the election there,

put the ability to vote at 16 at the heart of its manifesto. This will happen here too, and we will get there despite the resistance on the part of the Government.

It is worth looking at some of the evidence. There are three strong arguments in particular. One concerns increasing civic participation and lowering the barriers to registration. Research demonstrates that there is a trickle-up effect on participation when 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible to vote. It provides for younger people to not only engage in civic life but also to participate in conversation about politics and local issues. This is particularly true given that many 16- and 17-year-olds still live at home with their families, where discussions and debates take place with other family members and where there are also then fewer barriers to them engaging and registering. There is support and encouragement to be part of those discussions.

We also know that there is increased turnout when the voting age is reduced. A detailed study on voter ages and habits in Denmark found that 18-year-olds were more likely to cast their first vote than 19-year-olds and that every extra month of age saw a decline in first vote turnout. These results demonstrate that by lowering the voting age we are likely to see a higher turnout in this cohort. Also, allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections would allow them to vote before leaving home or school and establish the lifelong habit of voting. It is very likely that people who are turning 18 today may not get their first chance to vote until they are 21. According to the evidence, at that stage those in this cohort are less likely to continue the habit of voting because their first vote will happen much later. Data from Austria shows that extending voting rights to people after they turn 16 promotes higher turnout for first-time voting and over the course of their lives. Research also shows that for the first two elections one is eligible to vote in establishes that attitude towards voting and the lifelong pattern of voting. The Austrian experience also demonstrates 16- and 17-year-olds are ready to participate and want to participate, and are eager to do so.

Scotland extended the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds in the independence referendum. More than 100,000 young people came out and voted in that referendum. Following the success of that, the Scottish Government decided to lower the voting age for Scottish parliamentary elections. There is strong evidence in neighbouring countries and right around the world about increasing participation by involving young people in this.

In my constituency of Cork South-Central, young people want to be involved and want their views to be heard. I have been travelling around schools in my constituency since the election. Just last week I visited Carrigaline Community School and talked to young people there about this matter. The majority of them want the right to vote and to have their say. At the moment, issues that affect young people are ignored by politicians because those people cannot vote. I refer to issues such as public transport for young people, student fees and housing. Many of the issues that directly affect young people in this country are not discussed on the floor of this Chamber or at local councils because young people do not have the right to vote, and they are not heard by politicians. This has to change now. I urge the Government to reverse its position, to engage with us and to give young people the right to vote in elections.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Tairgim:

Go scriosfar na focail go léir i ndiaidh "Go" agus go gcuirfear an méid seo a leanas ina n-ionad:

"mbeartaíonn Dáil Éireann go measfar an Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025 a bheith léite an Dara hUair 12 mhí ó inniu, le tuilleadh breithniú ar an mBille a cheadú."

I move:

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

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025, be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for further consideration of the Bill."

I am pleased to participate in this debate. I thank Deputy Farrelly for bringing forward the Bill and for raising this very important issue. Democracy is an essential component of our country. Ireland is one of the longest continuous democracies in the western world. We do not and cannot take our democracy for granted, and we should acknowledge the fact that we have had 103 years of continuous democracy.

Voting is central to democracy. The laws around voting and eligibility to vote should always be taken seriously. We must be open to new ideas but careful in how we respond to them in equal measure. This Bill proposes to amend Article 16 of the Constitution to lower the age at which persons would be entitled to vote in Dail Eireann elections from 18 years of age to 16. At present, a person must be aged 18 years or over to be eligible to vote in any electoral event, be it a general election, presidential election, local or Limerick mayoral election, European Parliament election or referendum. Article 16 of the Constitution states that those who have reached the age of 18 shall have the right to vote at an election for Members of Dail Eireann. Article 12, relating to the President, Article 47, relating to referendums, and Article 28A, relating to local government, state that citizens eligible to vote in Dail elections are eligible to vote in such polls. A reduction in the voting age in Dail elections would have a consequential effect of reducing the voting age at presidential and local elections, including Limerick mayoral elections, as well as at referendums.

The reason the Government is proposing a deferral of the Second Stage reading of the Bill is that the issue of the voting age is currently being examined by the Electoral Commission as part of its research programme for the period 2024 to 2026. My colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, is of the view that it would be premature to progress the Bill at this time in advance of the commission having considered and reported on the issue.

One of the reasons we need to consider in this debate is the issue of parity of minimum voting age between the different electoral codes. At present, the minimum voting age for all types of elections and referendums is 18. The proposed change also raises the issue of parity of minimum voting age between all codes.

In political, civic and academic circles in Ireland, the issue of lowering the minimum voting age has been debated for a number of years. This debate has happened within the context of change in other countries, including, as has been mentioned, in Scotland and Wales, where the voting age is 16 for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly and their respective local elections. Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds were able to vote in the 2014 referendum on independence, as was mentioned. The Isle of Man and the Channel Islands have also lowered

the voting age to 16 for elections. The voting age for national elections in EU is 18, with the exception of four countries. Austria and Malta allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections. Greece allows 17-year-olds to vote in such elections. At the next national elections in Cyprus, due in 2026, the voting age will be 17. In 22 of the EU's 27 member states, the minimum voting age in last year's European Parliament elections was 18.

Here in Ireland, the issue of lowering the minimum voting age to 17 was debated by the Convention on the Constitution back in 2013. At that time, a slim majority of the assembled citizens and parliamentarians, 52%, favoured reducing the minimum voting age for all elections. If the minimum voting age were to be changed, 48% of participants supported lowering the age to 16, compared with 39% who favoured lowering the age to 17. A sizeable majority, 68% of participants, opposed lowering the minimum voting age for some types of elections but not all and 28% of the participants supported lowering it for some electoral events but not all.

Among the arguments used at that time for lowering the minimum voting age were: the fact that people of 16 and 17 enjoy other legal rights and that it is important that they have a say in who governs them; that if lowering the voting age coincides with better political awareness and education, voter participation among young people would increase - research has shown that if voters vote in the first elections that they are eligible for, they are more likely to form a voting habit and vote throughout their lives; that initial political engagement is best placed happening within the stable environment of schooling rather than during college years, when there is great change in people's lives; and that the increased civic education of young people through the school curriculum prepares people at an earlier age than previously for engagement with the political process.

On the other hand, among the arguments used for maintaining the current age of 18 were: that 16- or 17-year-olds may not be mature enough to make decisions on who should represent them or govern them; that other rights are gained at 18 years of age; that lowering the minimum voting age to 16 or 17 is an arbitrary decision about when young people are ready to vote; and that maturity is a process rather than something someone obtains at a certain age. It was mentioned that telling 16- or 17-year-olds that they had the responsibility or duty to vote was viewed by some as an additional expectation on teenagers. Other points made were that it was not a panacea for the lower turnout rates among younger people than among other age cohorts or that the motive for such reform can be partisan, as there is a perception sometimes that younger people tend to vote for left of centre parties, although I do not think this last is borne out by the research in the few countries where the voting age has been lowered to 16.

Whatever the different views on this issue, I suggest that we are better placed to have this debate now than we were when the convention had its deliberation. We now have the Electoral Commission, which is well placed to look at issues like this, which are complex and nuanced, and to engage with international comparisons. There has been more time since other jurisdictions lowered their minimum voting age and lessons from their experiences can be used to inform our debate. Civic education in Ireland has increased and expanded. Leaving certificate students can study politics and society, which is something they could not do ten years ago. We also have lessons from the education system's experience in teaching secondary school students matters relating to citizenship, democracy and related matters.

As someone who joined a political party at 13 or 14 years of age, I have absolutely always believed in the importance of youth participation. I had the honour of heading up the political youth movement of my party. I believe in getting involved early and in the importance of having your voice heard. It is something I can see all the arguments on. I have been passionate since that age in my life when I used to - and perhaps one of the other Deputies also mentioned it - sit and have those arguments at the family table with my dad. My dad and I never agreed on the same politics and I think it really hones your argument when you come from a family where you can have those discussions that actually cause you to break out and be challenged in your thinking. I believe this is done really well in family environments, when people are teenagers, and when people have opportunities to engage. I went to the local community school in Cabinteely and we used to organise brilliant civics weeks. We would put candidates up for election from all political parties. We had the local TDs and Ministers come in and deliver speeches. If someone had told me I was going to be one of those in 20-something years' time, I would have laughed at them, to be honest. I would not have believed them. That is the real importance of participation for young people in the democratic process. It is about being involved in youth organisations, including political youth organisations. Having a say and having it heard is important. I just wanted to put forward my own experience on that from a personal background.

I thank Deputy Farrelly for tabling the Bill, which I have no doubt will help generate a positive debate on what the minimum voting age in Ireland should be. I believe the debate is a really important one. A decision in this area requires considered research and analysis before it can be made. In that regard, I look forward to the Electoral Commission's research on the matter and to all the contributions from Deputies here today.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** It is welcome to hear the Aire Stáit's passion and interest in this area. I have something in common with him, in that I spent a lot of time having discussions with my poor dad. He did not agree with me on anything. Perhaps if we had done an exchange at that stage, there might have been more in common.

I welcome the leadership that my colleague Aidan Farrelly has shown on raising this issue. I also welcome the young people in the Public Gallery. I especially want to welcome the young people from the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, and BeLonG To. I will take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Mick Ferron on his recent appointment as NYCI director. Mr. Ferron is known well to me in terms of the Trojan work he has done for the last 20 years in Sphere 17 in Darndale in my and Deputy Mitchell's constituency. We are delighted to see him take on that role.

The crux of the issue is that, collectively in this Dáil, there is a strong view that voting and civic engagement are positive. I think we all have that view. We all value our democracy and we want to see as much civic participation and engagement in the political process as possible. That is absolutely fundamental in a democracy. A weakness in our democracy is when we have low levels of engagement and low levels of participation. We know that the current situation, where there are low levels of participation, which can happen in particular cohorts or particular communities where people feel left behind, is not healthy for our democracy and we want to have that addressed. The evidence shows very clearly that, where a younger voting age of 16 is introduced, it leads to higher levels of engagement and participation in the years thereafter when people go to vote. One gets higher levels of turnout. All of us want to see higher levels

of turnout and we are in agreement on that. That is what this would do. It really is a win-win measure for democracy, civic participation, engagement and safeguarding our democracy. The more people who are involved, the more who are engaged and the more who are looking at what we are doing and holding us to account - everyone in government, everyone in opposition and every different party, including the Independents - then the stronger our democracy and the better the outcomes will be for everybody. That is what it boils down to.

Climate change, housing and the lack of investment in public transport often affect young people the most. Having the voice of young people in the political system through voting will help to bring about change in core areas that will benefit all of us. It will help to get more pressure to have the action we need on housing, the action we need on addressing climate, the action we need on mental health, and the action we need on investment in public transport. Getting that younger participation through voting will drive critical change. That will be good for all of us.

In Scotland, we have seen how this has worked. We have seen the research from Scotland and other countries on how this has worked and is successful. As the Minister of State said, if there is a fear that this leads to different outcomes, the research shows it does not. Would it not be great if everyone voted centre left because they were young? It turns out, however, that young people vote centre left, left, centre right and everything in between, the same as the rest of the population.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I am pleased that the young people in the Gallery today got to see the Minister of State's passion when he was talking at the end of his speech. It is clear that it is so important to who he is and who he has become to have that participation in democracy and to be involved. What we want is to bring that passion forward a little bit more so that it is not a tokenistic involvement in democracy, and that 16- and 17-year-olds are being given the vote so that what they believe and what they want to see happen is mattering at the ballot box and will make a difference in who is on these seats in five or ten years' time. I ask the Minister of State to please take that passion and belief back to his colleagues because it would appear to me that the Minister of State very much believes that this would be a positive motion or development if the Bill was put through. I ask that he express this and have the discussions with them. Do not kick this down to the Electoral Commission. The Minister of State talked about the commission as being the body that could take this complex Bill and look at it. We are employed and voted in to do that very job. We are well able to handle complex legislation. We are well able to engage with people. We are well able to talk to young people and have those discussions. Let us do our job. The commission can be involved in that as well but please do not kick this down the road for another 12 months. It is too important. I appreciate the Minister of State's positivity on this but I would ask him to use that and hopefully direct a bit of positivity from the Government benches towards the Bill.

I want to talk about COP30 briefly. Climate change is an existential crisis. The reality is that the Minister of State, many others in this Chamber and I will probably not be impacted by climate change to the same extent as young people. The decisions that are currently being made in this Chamber are being made by people who will not face the full brunt of climate change if we get it wrong. I include biodiversity loss in there as well. It is vitally important that young people are involved in those discussions and that they get a chance to say who is representing them in this Chamber when those decisions are being made. It is their future we

are speaking about and we are locking them out of the debate. When we speak about these issues and make these decisions, it is important that young people's voices are heard and that their futures are debated as part of this. We cannot be making these decisions without thinking of the young people in the Gallery and young people all over the country, because it is their futures we are debating.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I thank Deputy Farrelly for introducing the Bill. Dr. Farrelly and I were lecturers together in the department of applied social studies in Maynooth, and one of the areas he worked on in particular, as was spoken about, was the issue of youth work. His research has been in this area and he is one of the foremost experts in the country on it. We really need to take seriously the evidence base understanding and the experiential understanding of young people and what they need and what they are looking for.

I want to speak very briefly about what is facing our young people today. Look at the things they talk about in particular. Mental health is a major issue. There is so much isolation and people feeling undervalued. I welcome the young people in the Gallery. They have a sense of not being listened to and being unheard. This is not just happening in Ireland; it is happening across the world. The mental health of our young people is declining. We need to engage them seriously in developing solutions so we can help address the mental health disaster affecting our young people.

Part of this is the issue of housing, their future and what future they see in this country. Surveys show that young people see emigrating as their future. They do not see a future here. There is a real opportunity to give young people hope. We give them hope by respecting them and valuing them as equals. A key way to do this would be to give them the right to vote, and give them the ability to partake and be valued as equal citizens. I see this in my constituency, working with youth services in places such as Finglas and Ballymun. I see the disconnect with young people. They look at politicians and the Government and all they see are older people making decisions that seem to make their lives worse or at least do not help them. This would be a real way of valuing young people as equals.

I remember being a student at 17 and going to university. One of the first political things I did in my life was to organise a petition to try to get the date of the general election changed from a Friday to a weekend. I felt it was disadvantaging students from engaging in politics. We need to look at the ways in which we run our elections and referendums to ensure they increase participation, particularly for young people. They need actions that show we value them and care and want to give them a stake in society. This would be a key area.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Fáilte to everybody in the Gallery. I am delighted to see them here today. I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the Bill. We remember the Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016. We restored it to the Order Paper in the Seanad in 2021 and it was seconded by Senator Ruane. We are a long time at this; we are too long at it. The Minister of State knows from his contribution that we are too long at it. I ask him not to let the permanent government get in the way of this. This is a political measure that needs to be taken. As was said, we can do it here ourselves and we need to do it.

We cannot say that on one hand we are listening to youth groups and to young people and, at the same time, say they cannot have what they are asking for. It is vital that we do this. At the

age of 16, people know the difference between right and wrong. In fact, there are many people who are 86 who do not know the difference between right and wrong. We see how things have evolved over the years.

Even at 16, while I may not have been party political, I was certainly very interested in what was happening on our island. I was very shocked and appalled by the fact that so much was happening in the North. It was always of interest to me. As a child, I could never make sense of the fact that a tiny island like ours was divided and that part of our island was owned by another island. That still does not make sense to me today. It did not make sense to me when I was 15 either or even younger than that. We do a disservice by not lowering the age.

I respectfully ask the Minister of State to take the amendment off the table. We are talking about 24 months. It is the two years between 16 and 18. That is all we are talking about. I commend all the youth groups and the campaign that has led on this for years. In fact, some of the people who were involved in the campaign now have children themselves. We do not want to let this continue.

As a TD who comes from Mayo, we see that what happens is people, like my two sons, go to college. If they are not registered to vote before they leave home, where do they register for their four or six years in college? It is not right and this all builds into the low turnout of young people voting.

I welcome the Assembly lowering the age to 16, which happened recently, but then, just down the road, 16-year-olds cannot vote. We have to correct this. I have long believed that a lot of Government- and EU-funded groups, such as LEADER, should be obligated to have youth boards in their decision-making. Young people need to be involved in the decisions being made that impact them most. What is the Government afraid of? I do not say this cynically. No more than giving the vote to Irish citizens in the North or the diaspora, it is time to be confident about this and to be confident in the ability of young people, and the ability and insight of Irish citizens everywhere, particularly on the rest of our island.

Obviously, there has to be an education programme with it also but I would not be concerned about the arguments that teachers are going to influence young people in how to vote. Have you ever tried to convince a 16-year-old to do something they did not want to do? Good luck with that. People are well able to make up their own minds but it would bring onto the curriculum the things that need to be discussed. These are things that are being discussed anyway about education, climate, transport, health and housing. Young people are discussing these things in their own groups. They just need to be able to have a say in votes. It would be a shame on all of our houses if we go beyond this without progressing this legislation to lower the voting age to 16. There are so many reasons we have to do the right thing here and the Minister of State knows it.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I will begin by welcoming the Minister of State's very passionate contribution but I have to say that here we go again, another Bill tabled by the Opposition and another delay by the Government. The exact same thing happened last week with Deputy Ó Snodaigh's Bill on the arts. I will not get started on the presidential voting rights because, as the Minister of State knows, there has been delay after delay. Is this a tactic the Government is bringing forward just to delay sensible proposals being tabled by the Opposition?

I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the Bill on lowering the voting age. It is something for which my party and I have called for a long time and something that I strongly support. I want to start by addressing the arguments we often hear against this. Usually, it is something along the lines of young people are not mature enough to vote or they do not have any life experience. The National Youth Council of Ireland, which strongly backs the lowering of voting age, has noted that 17-year-olds can leave school. They can seek full time employment. They can pay tax. They can drive a car. Why can we not trust them to vote? There are young people who take on enormous amounts of responsibility in their own communities. Many teenagers are carers for loved ones in their families. Others volunteer their time in sports clubs and community groups. The reality is that young people have never been more involved in political discussions than they are now.

I see it in my own area. Young people involved in Sphere 17, our local youth group, are working day-in, day-out to improve their community and are campaigning for better resources. Young people have been way ahead of most adults when it comes to mobilising on issues like climate change. We just have to look at the huge number of young people at the demonstrations on Gaza. I trust our 16- and 17-year-olds to be responsible, to inform themselves and take their right to vote very seriously because they have a stake in their communities. They know the decisions that are made in this House affect their future.

The reality is that it has worked in other countries. There have been decisions to lower the age in certain elections in Estonia, Malta and some of the German states but the most important case to look at is Scotland. It has been over a decade since the change was brought in there and results show that young people who voted at the age of 16 or 17 during the Scottish independence referendum have been more likely to vote in other elections since then. It had a positive effect on increasing engagement. Before that change, people in Scotland were not convinced this was a good idea. In fact, only one third of adults supported votes for 16- and 17-year-olds. After the referendum, though, and having seen how well informed young people were, the polls now show that the majority of people actually support it.

This Bill is very welcome but it is a part of a broader reform we need to see when it comes to our democracy. We have a situation where the ability to vote via postal vote is incredibly restricted. People who are studying abroad, those on holidays or even those on business cannot cast their vote. That seriously needs to be looked at. We also have a situation where we have citizens living in the North who have no vote. Extending the vote in presidential elections to Irish citizens living in the North is an important step.

Young people are a lot more clued in than some people give them credit for. If we want to see more engagement in politics and get people to come out and vote, getting them interested in politics at an early age is key to doing that.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I welcome the young people to the Gallery. It is great to have so many people in the gallery on a Thursday afternoon. I give a special mention to Paul Minnock and Charlotte Minnock, who are with me on work experience. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta as ucht an rún seo a chur os comhair na Dála inniu. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil guth ag daoine óga sa lá atá inniu ann. It is very important that young people are heard and not simply seen. Their involvement in politics can be inspired from a young age. I salute an Teachta Farrelly, my north Kildare comrade, for tabling this Bill.

It is the young people, after all, who will face the consequences of the actions we take inside this Chamber more than any of us. They are acutely aware of that fact.

The young people of today are more political than any others I have seen before. They are learning about the effects of climate change every day in school and understand that this issue may not be top of the political priority list for today's politicians. You would know that if you attended any of the climate committees. It was full to the brim in the previous term. Unfortunately, we are lucky to get four or five members this term. It is really important for our young people that we make sure we deal with climate change. As we speak, COP30 is underway with leaders of the world attending in the hopes of building consensus around actions on climate change. How many more COPs must we have before we see genuine action taken, not just words, on that issue?

Our Taoiseach has said that he travelled to Brazil to attend COP to show Ireland's commitments to climate resolutions. He also said he went to demonstrate to other countries that were absent that Ireland was serious about tackling climate change. I hope he talks to some of his members on the climate committee and makes sure they are not absent from the climate committee and actually engage on this issue, considering how important it is. How can he possibly say this when his Government has failed to meet modest national targets set at home? We are not taking climate change and climate action seriously. Young people know this best. They know this because they are politically engaged on issues like this and social justice. These are issues that directly affect them and they want to lead the conversation on these topics, not be talked down to by politicians like the Minister of State or me.

If we look at the international perspective, the evidence of young people engaged in politics is even more obvious. The Gen Z protests in south-east Asia shocked many when young people organised online to bring down corrupt governments in Nepal and elsewhere there. Nepal was particularly striking, as there was rampant corruption among Nepalese Government officials. It was well known but little action was taken. It was only through a server on Discord that young people convened and decided that enough was enough. Not only did they take action to overthrow their Government, but they also continued to raise their voice and shape their own future by holding a vote online to decide who they thought should be the next leader.

This is democracy in action and was carried out by young people who were previously thought to be too online to actually be engaged in politics. However, these stereotypes continue at home. I mentioned my two transition year students earlier. They are in here on work experience with me. They are from Confey College in Leixlip. They are only delighted to get the opportunity to come up today to Leinster House and see democracy in action. They have ideas. They care about housing. They care about climate change. They care about being heard. They have opinions on issues like everybody else, whether it is the arts or social justice, yet their opinions are essentially dismissed by us when we tell them they have to wait and they do not have a voice until they are 18 years old. *Caithfimid éisteacht le daoine óga agus tacú leo freisin.*

One of the best things I always remember from when I was young was how in a hurry I was to grow up because of the thoughts of being able to go into town on my own, being able to go to the disco that was only for the older people or whatever it was. We always had one eye to the future. I believe that if you extend the responsibility of voting to people of 16 and 17, they will take that with great seriousness and genuinely think about who they want to vote for and

why. I remember myself when I was young, my father told me to go out and vote 1, 2 and 3 for Fianna Fáil.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** A wise man.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I did not heed him. My mother told me to go out and vote for the Labour Party.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** A wise woman.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I did my own thing because I always believed in a united Ireland as well.

This is my last point and we have to take it very seriously. We are currently in a world of political extremism where young people can be easily sucked into a world view that is built on misinformation and deception. Young people who use the Internet a lot are particularly susceptible to this world view but I really believe that we can inspire young people to engage in the world around them by showing them their voice is as important as ours. Not only that, but they will have a genuine say in what they think the world should look at in the next few years. As the old saying goes, *mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí*.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I thank the Social Democrats for tabling it. Votes for 16- and 17-year-olds is a matter of fairness. In my opinion and that of my party, it is a matter of the future vitality of our democracy. For too long, we have clung to the arbitrary line in the sand drawn at 18. We tell our young people that on the eve of their 18th birthday, they are disengaged, uninformed and unprepared for the solemn act of voting.

5 o'clock

Yet, on the morning of that birthday, by some miraculous overnight transformation, they emerge as full, responsible citizens. This is a fiction and we all know that to be the case. The reality is that our 16- and 17-year-olds are already active participants in our society, carrying responsibilities that fly in the face of their exclusion from the ballot box. They are workers paying taxes on their earnings, they are carers providing vital supports to family members, and they are climate activists articulating with clarity and passion the stakes for their generation in a way that often puts us to shame. They are digital natives navigating the complexities of the information age. To tell these young people that they have a stake in our society, that they must obey its laws and contribute to its economy, while simultaneously denying them a voice in its direction is a contradiction. Some will argue that they lack the maturity or the knowledge. This is a patronising and outdated view. In fact, it is plain wrong. At 16, a young person in Ireland can consent to medical treatment, can join a political party, as many have said. Indeed many of the most energetic campaigners in all our parties are in this very age group. They are studying CSPE, politics, history, geography and a range of other important subjects at school, engaging with the very issues we debate in this Chamber day in, day out. Are we really saying that the student grappling with these issues on a daily basis is not qualified to vote? I think the

logic does not hold at all. In fact, you could reasonably argue that they are more qualified than the general voting population.

Furthermore, this is not a leap into the unknown. The minimum voting age in many countries is already 16. It differs in different areas. We heard about different examples. However, the principle is well established. The Scottish example is one we can point to. This is a long-standing Sinn Féin policy, as Deputy Conway-Walsh has pointed out. We hope to see it delivered in the North. The next general election has been mentioned. We would like to see it delivered for the next assembly elections as well.

Lowering the voting age is an investment in our democratic health. Habits formed young last a lifetime. By inviting a 16-year-old into the democratic fold, we foster a lifelong connection to the political process. We tell them that their voice matters now, not at some distant point in the future, when the critical decisions affecting their lives may have already been made. It is the most powerful antidote to the cynicism and disengagement that can threaten any democracy. This is about the long-term health of our democracy as we strive for a true republic. It is about trusting the young people of Ireland who will inherit the consequences of the decisions we make today on housing, on climate and on everything else.

I echo the call for the Government to withdraw its amendment. Deputy Conway-Walsh mentioned the permanent Government getting hold of this, whether that is in the form of another agency. I remember listening to a civil servant who said to me that their job was to tell politicians and Ministers it is not that straightforward. That was a great civil servant, but in this case it is just that straightforward. Let us be bold, let us be brave here, let us trust young people and deliver for them. Give them the opportunity to have a real stake in our Republic and in our democracy. Please withdraw the amendment. This is a powerful piece of legislation that we should work together on delivering.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Ar dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta agus an Teachta Farrelly as ucht an Bille seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid na Dála. Cuirim fáilte roimh na cuairteoirí go léir atá anseo. Is Bille tábhachtach simplí é seo. I mo thuairim, caithfidh muid é seo a thabhairt isteach, because I believe, and the Labour Party believes, that the voting age should be lowered to 16. This is something Joe Costello, who served in this House for many years, first introduced in a Bill as far back as 2006. This is a fair change but it is forward thinking, inclusive and necessary for the health of our democracy.

I am worried. In the recent presidential election we saw a large and significant spoiled vote. There are many reasons for that. However, a common thread throughout all the reasons is a democratic deficit. This Bill is a way of addressing that democratic deficit. If you are old enough to work, to pay tax, to have sex and have children, as many 17-year-olds in this country do, then you should have the right to exercise the democratic franchise. Democracy is about representation. I am conscious that many of the decisions we make as TDs and public representatives disproportionately affect many young people who do not have that voice or agency in our decision-making process. A person aged 16 or 17, as well as paying tax and working, can consent to medical treatment and can enlist in the Defence Forces. Young people contribute so much to the economy, to our communities and society. They must have more of a say in how our country is run and how society is run.

I often think of the principle "no taxation without representation". If we trust young people to take on adult responsibilities such as raising children then surely we can trust them to go to a ballot box and vote. There is an awful myth that we hear at times that young people are not that interested in politics. As constituency TDs, many of us spend a lot of time in secondary schools in our individual constituencies. I have often come out of some of my local secondary schools nearly with my tail between my legs. You would not get the level of probing questions, of interest or insight from some of our esteemed national broadcasters as you would in a local secondary school. I was in Ardscoil Mhuire in Limerick recently, Villiers and Laurel Hill, and I was blown away by how tuned-in all the students were.

There was a great Labour Party Minister for education, my predecessor, Jan O'Sullivan, who introduced the politics and society leaving certificate in 2016, which started with 40 students on a pilot programme. We can all acknowledge that it has been very successful. If we look at the recent presidential election, there was a groundswell of young people who came out, particularly in support of Catherine Connolly's campaign. However, going further back to the big civil society campaigns in recent years such as marriage equality and repeal, those campaigns were driven on the ground by younger people. Young people in Ireland have been front and centre of some of the most important social and environmental issues of our time. I am thinking for example of the climate marches when they first started seven or eight years ago. Saoirse Exton in Limerick was a transition year student who started the Fridays For Future Climate Strike in Limerick. We saw how the Fridays For Future movement filled the streets of Dublin, Cork and Limerick. Who was at the front of that? Who was leading it? Who was calling for meaningful climate action before politicians? Teenagers were, 15- 16- and 17-year-olds who are going to live the longest with the consequences of whatever decisions we make. I do not believe lowering the voting age would suddenly make young people take an interest. I think young people are interested. There is a lot of engagement there and it needs to be given democratic power.

We have seen countries that did this, such as Scotland and Austria. Some Deputies pointed to the Scottish independence referendum. The evidence shows that when people cast their vote at 16 or 17, they are more likely to keep voting throughout their lives. I think that, by doing this, we would not be taking a leap into darkness. We would be giving young people a real say in their future. The political decisions we are making in climate, education, housing, healthcare and the future digital regulation of social media companies, these are all long-term issues that will affect us consequentially, probably as far as 2050. The people who will be most affected by this are the people who at the moment do not have a direct say in decision making. If a vibrant, healthy democracy is meant to represent all who are governed, all of us, how can we continue to justify excluding a whole generation whose future is decided right now? I am pretty sure 80, 100 or 120 years ago many similar arguments were made about extending the democratic franchise to women. The fact of the matter is, when we lower the voting age, we legitimise and acknowledge the experiences of young people. It might force all of us to actually listen more to younger people, not talk down to them or not listen to them when they turn up to protest or when, for example, they take to social media, but actually listen to them through the ballot box. Some might argue that 16-year-olds are not mature enough, but Deputy Conway-Walsh made a very good point when she stated, we are taking about 24 months. Maturity does not magically arrive on your 18th birthday. I know adults who vote carelessly. God knows we saw enough of it in the presidential election. I also know teenagers who really

think deeply and are cognisant of what is going on in this country at the present time. The research shows that by the age of 16, a young person has the same cognitive capacity for reasoning and moral judgment as an adult.

The fact of the matter is, it is simply condescending to say young people are too easily influenced. Let us be honest, we are all adults and we are not immune to being influenced either. Every voter, whether they are 18 or 88 is exposed to the same outlets, whether social media, print media or advertising. Democracy does not need perfection. What it needs is participation. This would make more than a little difference; it would make a significant difference. I call on the Government to withdraw its amendment because a small expansion of the electorate would send an important and powerful signal that this country, the country that has had ten democratically elected presidents, the longest unbroken system in the world in terms of a democratically elected Head of State, values its young people as equal participants and will give them a seat at the table, listen to them and acknowledge and reflect upon their experiences. It is a valuable opportunity to change how we talk about politics. All parties and none pay an awful lot of lip service to young people and their issues when it comes to election time. This would encourage parties to take youth issues and participation seriously, and speak to young people, make policies that reflect their concerns and strengthen civic and community engagement. It would tell an entire generation of young people we are listening, we acknowledge them, we are taking their concerns on board and we will act on them.

Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the Social Democrats and Deputy Farrelly in particular for bringing this forward. It is a really important Bill and it is great they have used their Private Members' time for it. I do not think we need to debate this; it is the most obvious thing in the world that 16 and 17-year-olds should be able to vote. It is their future and them who are going to live in the barbarous world we are currently on a trajectory for. It is them who have the power and I hope are going to avert us from the course we are currently on, of descent into ecological breakdown, a world marked by war and genocide, the rise of the far-right, authoritarianism and fascism. They are the people currently out working, paying taxes, able to join the army and not permitted a say in all the decisions that are made. They are the ones who on the current trajectory are going to be forced to emigrate, because they cannot afford to get housing here. They are the ones affected by all of it and they are fully mature. I will come back to the point on maturity later.

If a person was not familiar with Dáil procedures, they could look at this and say the Government is not being unreasonable. It is saying to give a year for the Independent Electoral Commission to look into it further. That all sounds very reasonable. Let me say, this is a scam. The Government is kicking the can down the road. It has no intention whatsoever of allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote. It is not telling young people the truth. That is what is happening here. A person could say to me it is very cynical to think that, but the reason I know it is because the Government did exactly the same thing to a Bill I brought forward to stop discrimination against young people. In 2022, I brought forward at First Stage a Bill for equal pay for young workers to stop the scandal of sub-minimum wages, whereby under 20s are legally allowed to be paid less than the minimum wage. We brought that to Second Stage, which is what is happening here, on 14 June 2023. Again, the Government did not have the courage of its convictions to vote against it and say it was in favour of the super-exploitation

of young people, so instead it did the same thing and tabled a timed amendment and said the Low Pay Commission was looking into it and it would delay it for a year and that a year later it would be deemed to be passed. The Low Pay Commission, the body that was going to look into it, then came out and said we should get rid of sub-minimum wages. The report the Government said it was going to wait for came out and said it should do the thing our Bill was going to do. Did the Government then do it? No. It said the Department of Finance needed a further economic investigation into how much it would cost. It started that over a year ago. It did not even wait for that to be published; it is still not published, and the Government has said it is not going to do it. It said it will reconsider it in 2029.

So, this is a scam the Government is currently engaged in. It does not have the courage to say it does not think 16 and 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote so instead it is kicking the can down the road and trying to make it go away. The only way the Government will be beaten on it is if public pressure comes to bear and it feels it cannot withstand it.

The bottom-line point on the maturity issue is the Government thinks we are immature. It is not just young people it thinks are immature, it thinks all of the left is immature. If we look at the neutrality debate, we are presented as being immature because we are in favour of neutrality. We are presented as immature because we are in favour of actual climate action. We are in favour of what Mícheál Martin spoke about in Brazil; actually doing it, following the science and telling the truth as opposed to bending over backwards to multinational corporations, big tech, fossil fuel companies and big agri businesses. The Government thinks that is immature and not taking the economy seriously. It thinks saying we should invest money in building housing that is affordable is immature because we do not understand how the market works. When it says young people are not mature enough to vote, what it is really giving away and what it is scared of, is that young people have progressive opinions on a wide range of things and are not going to back up the continuation of the rule of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and will look to the left. For me, that is not the reason to support it. It is a point of principle regardless of how young people are going to vote. The fact is 16 and 17 year olds should of course have the right to a say and vote. We should stop the paternalistic attitude towards them. We would also get all the benefits seen in other countries in terms of increased turnout as we would be engaging people at a younger point. Those points have been made.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I too welcome this Private Members' Bill put forward by Deputy Farrelly. I look forward to supporting it.

The concept of reducing the voting age to include 16 and 17-year-olds is one the Green Party has supported for a long time. When we first used to advocate for this change it was seen as radical, out there and unusual. That is not the case anymore because this movement is happening. It is early in its evolution but it is happening around Europe and the world. If we look around the world 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in as vibrant and large a democracy as Brazil and likewise, Ecuador. When we bring it back to the European continent we see that change having been made in Austria, Malta and thriving European democracies. A number of other member states or component elements of member states have made that change in lower order elections. For example, 16- and 17-year-olds can vote in Estonian local elections. In the Scottish independence referendum the voting age was reduced to 17 and that has been subsequently rolled out for the Scottish parliament elections. Likewise, the voting age for the Senedd in Wales has been reduced. The proposal that has been put in legislative form today by

Deputy is Deputy Farrelly is not something "out there". It is operating well in European countries we travel to. The Minister for housing will meet other Ministers for housing in the days and months ahead at EU Councils who have been elected by 16- and 17-year-olds and that does not cast any judgment, democratic question or any question on the ability on the capacity of those Ministers to engage at any particular formation of the Council. This is not some idea that is "out there". It is an idea that has been building momentum and its time is now. The fact that Keir Starmer would try to grab this as a fig leaf to distract attention from the other difficulties his government is having is so indicative of the fact that this is an idea whose time has come.

While I do not have any dispute with the Bill, I have always advocated that we should start with the European and local elections in Ireland. I do that for one reason only, which is that it can be done by legislative change. The referendum that Deputy Farrelly's Bill will entail will be hard to win. I always think back to the referendum on the Thirty-fifth amendment to the Constitution reducing the age at which someone can contest the presidency from 35 to 21. That referendum was held on the same day as the marriage equality referendum and did not really get a look-in during the campaign. Many of us here were out trying to get behind the marriage equality campaign. If someone had come to Ireland and read the papers the day before that referendum, it was as if the question being put to us was, "Will every President of Ireland from now on be 21?" That was the standard of the debate in that campaign. It was completely corrupted. If we go first with a referendum, there would be much more focus on it and we could generate a strong, united campaign but I really worry about where the standard of debate would go for much of the campaign. This works; it is working around the world in the EU, elsewhere in Europe and in parts of the British Isles. The way to convince people that this works is to do it in a sequential way. We should bring it in for local and European elections first and disprove the fear and the rumour-mongers. I received an email yesterday from a known party saying, "Don't support votes at 16. My daughter is 17 and she's not mature enough" - ergo, no one is mature enough. That will be the standard of the debate. We can prove that the worries and the scaremongering are not justified by moving on local and European elections and then driving forward on the proposal that Deputy Farrelly is bringing forward. I look forward to strongly supporting this Bill when we vote on it next week.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I thought I was sharing time with Deputy Lawless. If he comes in, I will try to finish up quickly. Otherwise, I would like the opportunity to spend some time on this very important issue. I thank Deputy Farrelly for tabling the Bill, which is hugely important. We have had others in the past push towards it. Maybe society has changed and maybe we are getting to the point where we are ready to make this leap. It is a momentous leap, if we make it and it is a very important motion.

First, I will address the Government's suggestion about coming back to this in a year. If we take that at face value rather than as a political stunt, as Deputy Paul Murphy suggested, there is an argument in support of taking time to discuss it. Deputy O'Gorman mentioned the local and European elections as a first step. Some individuals and parties would like to go for the full leap and I can see the merits in that as well. If it was parked for a year and we got all of this research and it came back again, where would we be? We would probably have to spend another year getting to the point where we would have to hold a referendum. At that stage, we would have the debate all over again. It is better, if we are being honest with ourselves and if

this Bill is passed - and I will support it - to facilitate having a proper debate and working towards a decent referendum where we can have an open and honest discussion about the pros and some of the cons.

I will turn to Austria first. Various countries have been mentioned but Austria was the first country, to my knowledge, that actually brought this in for full elections. We had it for municipal elections in Germany and Scotland came a year or two after Austria. A study entitled "Lowering the Voting Age to 16 in Practice: Processes and Outcomes Compared" by Jan Eichorn from the School of Social and Political Science/Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh and Johannes Bergh from the Institute for Social Research in Oslo, Norway made specific reference to Austria and Scotland. In all of the countries for which data is available researchers could not find any negative effects of lowering the voting age on young people's engagement or their civic attitudes. They said that in many instances, the opposite was the case and that enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds were usually more interested in politics, more likely to vote and demonstrated pro-civic attitudes such as institutional trust, which is hugely important these days. People have lost trust in politicians and religious institutions because of systemic abuse over the years, in the legal profession and more and more in the so-called mainstream media, wrongly as it may be in some instances. Young people who were able to vote from the age of 16 onwards were found - not just in the first year but over their voting lives - to be more likely to be engaged. This was found in Austria, Scotland and Latin American countries. While there were different experiences, at the very least this interest in voting was partially retained. Where we have the data, it shows that it works.

There are arguments that suggest that younger people are not as mature as others, as has been mentioned in this Chamber. We know, for example, in the context of motor insurance that those under 24 are more likely to be involved in road traffic accidents than older cohorts. Sometimes it is suggested that this is because the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed, leading to greater impulsivity and so on. My wife suggests that men in particular probably do not mature until the age of 50 or older. I will not comment on that. All I can comment on is the genius of young people in mock elections, fifth and six years who consistently elected me in mock elections. I was just being facetious for a second, but I do take young people's voices very seriously. Young people see through the waffle that political parties and candidates often try to spin to get votes in elections. They ask the pertinent and hard questions, albeit not everyone. Sometimes I have gone into a school and faced a wall of silence. That is often a confidence issue. People do not feel they should ask a particular question so the first thing I say is, "Say whatever you want, however stupid you think it is and be as impolite as you'd like". Usually that gets the juices flowing.

Younger people have a greater social conscience. When we look at the Fridays for Future school protests, for example, and the Gaza protests as was mentioned, we see that young people are fearless. This is also about having a stake in society. Rates of voting are higher among the older generation. Let us take the example of Brexit in the UK. Obviously, we need a proper and open debate on immigration and I have called for a citizen's forum on that but in the Brexit discussion, the people who were most afraid of immigrants were from areas with an older population that had no immigrants. It was older people who were stuck in their ways. There is a lot of value among our older voting cohort. They have been through a lot and have seen the way our society has developed over the years. There is a lot of wisdom there, but equally, there is wisdom among our youth and we have to hear their voices more and get more of them

engaging. It has been shown time and again in society that social movement comes through young people. Everyone else tends to go towards the *status quo*. In one sense it is human nature. In another, it is about trying to preserve the best of the past and being a little afraid to move forward. Young people are not afraid to ask the new questions and put in the new challenges and the time has come for their voices. However, I caution to some degree, with the amount of misinformation that is going out, what I describe as the Andrew Tate-ification and misogyny that reaches into our primary schools. There is a need, alongside, for the general population, but also for our young people, given they are the subject of this discussion and cannot even contribute to the debate but that is another story. Politics and society should be a compulsory subject for everyone and we should give time to critical thinking and analysing what is in the media, where it comes from, why the likes of RTÉ sometimes seem to be a day or two behind on stories. It is because it is afraid of being sued. It wants to have the facts right and it cannot report on something that is hearsay and allegation. My background is in journalism. I am all too aware of what can and cannot be said. Meanwhile, we have so-called dog-kicking citizen journalists who were in far-right parties bringing young people up hills to try to indoctrinate them. They go around asking "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?" with no moral compass and no fact-checking whatsoever. This is what is on TikTok, YouTube and Discord. It is all over the place and we need fact-checking filters.

I have three teenage kids. I have worked with a lot of transition year students. I have been involved in local GAA clubs and I was involved in youth groups in the past. I have found that, as social media has developed, the tendency for people to be taken in by it has begun to diminish, especially among younger cohorts and those who are more likely to be duped and take stuff at face value are older people. At the same time, when most of the news for young people comes through social media and other online platforms, we need to mix in the political filter that is education. I am not talking down to young people saying they need to be educated. We all need to be educated. When a process is being brought in and, I hope, a referendum is being held on bringing the national voting age down to 16, a lot of people in society, as they did with the question about the age of 35 in the Presidency, will bring in a lot of red herrings and ask some valid questions and those questions need to be answered. We need to have the checks and balances, when the debate comes, to say this is not a problem, that it has happened in other countries, why it will be good in Ireland, that we take on board what is being said and what we will do to ensure that when the voting age is reduced, people with fears will be placated.

In my last few seconds, I again thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this Bill. They have my wholehearted support. I hope the Government will consider passing it now, or that at least in 12 months' time it will live up to its word and get it moving to a referendum as soon as possible.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly):** Is Deputy Byrne sharing time with Deputy Heneghan?

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Yes, I am.

I commend Deputy Farrelly on introducing this Bill and on his deep and genuine commitment to young people, engagement in civic life and youth work more generally. I have long supported the reduction of the voting age to 16. In fact, I wrote an opinion piece in August

2007 for *The Irish Times* and in preparing for this I reread it. The arguments I made then are still as strong 18 years later as they were at the time. Deputy Jen Cummins mentioned she was on the board of NYCI in the noughties and said she felt old. I was on the board of the National Youth Council in the 1990s, but I was described on "The Week in Politics" at the weekend as a young Fianna Fáil TD. Given that we are ageing and our life expectancy is getting higher, I will take that in a positive way.

Like many others, I welcome all our guests to the Public Gallery this evening, who are listening to this important debate. It is about votes at 16, but it is also about young people's participation in society. Like others have said, when I go to talk to schools or young people, I find that young people are engaged with the issues. They do not have any filters. They will say exactly what they think. I always get annoyed when I hear the phrase "young people are the future". They are not. They are very much part of the present and engaged in society and we should encourage that.

I do not share the dystopian vision of the future that was offered by Deputy Paul Murphy because I am often quite inspired by young people when I engage with them. In January, many of us will go to the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition where we will see some of the most amazing ideas come up. We will see what happens at Young Social Innovators. We engage with Comhairle na nÓg. The Minister of State does so directly. The Irish Second Level Students Union, ISSU, does incredible work and, during the Covid-19 pandemic when there were issues around exams, it was 16- and 17-year-olds in the ISSU, led by Reuban Murray, who provided some of the most informed and inspirational leadership during some of those discussions.

Deputies will be aware I chair the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence. We had a session on AI and children and young people. Of all the witnesses who have come - and older witnesses have confirmed this - the younger witnesses, particularly those from the youth advisory panel of the Ombudsman for Children's Office, gave some insightful and informed testimony. I look at the work of Seán O'Sullivan who won the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in 2024 with his project on detecting the use of large language models in student essays, which was not necessarily popular with all his classmates. He is entirely in touch with the tech revolution we are all facing. Others have talked about climate change and biodiversity and how young people have led in that space. Patrick and John Collison from the Minister of State's neck of the woods won the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition as young people. Arguably, they are among the country's most successful entrepreneurs at the moment.

The youth wings of all our political parties and the people who are involved and engaged in them inspire me in many ways. Ógra Fianna Fáil, my political party, allows people to vote and become a member between the ages of 16 and 30 and Ógra Fianna Fáil is in support of reducing the voting age. People can become a voting member of the Minister of State's party, Young Fine Gael, at the age of 16, although it defines youth as going up as far as 35. The individual I believe to have been the greatest Taoiseach in the history of the State, Seán Lemass, fought in the Easter Rising at the age of 16 and he inspired many in politics.

When this debate came up before, then Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, expressed strong support for it. When we had engagement with young people during the last term of the Oireachtas on the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act - young people have greater knowledge of online safety and provided great input into the Act - we ended up setting up a

youth advisory panel to inform Coimisiún na Meán when it was set up. In the context of the national AI office, which will be set up next year, I also want to see a youth advisory panel be set up. The Government has responded on a lot of youth issues, including reducing youth transport costs and I hope to see the youth culture card introduced.

However, I share the views that have been expressed, that in the first instance, we should move to allow for the reduction in the voting age for the local and European elections in 2029, which does not require constitutional change. I know that Deputy Farrelly would prefer that we move and try it in the same way as Austria moved with local elections first and then move on to broader elections. We could see what impact that has and then look at a constitutional amendment. Referring to Austria, I am conscious of what Deputy Gogarty said. Austria has had it for federal elections since 2007, so there is plenty of research, including that mentioned by Deputy Gogarty. The research shows that, on average, young people are as informed as other generations about the issues. They are much more likely to participate later in life. They are embedded in their communities so they will get involved. The evidence is that young people do not tend to swing one way or another politically. They tend to vote broadly in line with other generations. Young people are not all the same. They hold a great variety of views on a variety of issues, but it tends to mean that political parties respond in a far greater way to the issues that are impacting on young people.

I finally want to turn to the proposal to kick this down the road for a year. I am raising this because, in the Seanad, on 7 November 2023, when I introduced my Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2021, again there was a similar proposal to kick it down the road for a year. At that time, the Government amendment was that the Bill would be read on 1 July 2024 to allow for further consideration of the Bill. At the time, in the last programme for Government, which the Minister of State will remember, there was a commitment to examine the Scottish experience. In July 2023, the then Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, wrote to An Coimisiún Toghcháin as part of its first research programme to specifically examine this issue. I was very glad to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, speaking with real passion. I have to say to the Minister of State, with respect to him and the civil servants who are here, because they were there at that time, that much of his speech was a cut and paste from the speech delivered by the then Minister of State, Senator Malcolm Noonan, in response to the Bill I brought forward in 2023.

I have to ask why the Government has not taken action on what has happened up until now. Why was the research not done before? This will require going into committee and into debate. It will not happen overnight. I believe we should allow the Bill through. Go into committee and debate it in great detail. I speak in strong support of the Bill.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Farrelly for tabling this. I am in full support of it. One of the main reasons is taxation without representation. If we are not going to give young people the chance to vote, are we going to make them exempt from taxes at the age of 15, 16 or 17? When I started work, I was on €6.06 an hour at the age of 15, but I was not able to vote until the age of 21. The thing I am trying to say is that the way the general election falls can make a huge difference here. When I knock on doors in north Dublin, I meet young people who have just turned 18 and therefore missed out on voting in last year's general election. Their voices will not be heard until they are 22 or 23. We need to bring down the voting age for exactly that reason. I have heard Members across the House talking about the

progressive ideas of young people. That is something we need to encourage in politics, because young people will bring fresh ideas, fresh perspective and lived experience. My generation and the generation below me are the ones who are going to be going through this housing crisis and are dealing with the health crisis. As other Deputies have said, young people can be carers. They can go into the Army, but we are not allowing them a voice in democracy. It makes no sense.

I will not go into repeating everyone else who talked about Brazil, Scotland and Austria. Studies show that it has been done. On the matter of 24 months and maturity, young people under the age of 18 can consent to medical surgery, but they cannot give a vote in democracy. That is a bit hypocritical. I thank the Members. I am aware that I only had two minutes. There is much more I wanted to say. On another thing I have heard about referendums, I urge the Government to look at how the Geneva system works with referendums. A huge issue we have in this Government is the cost of referendums. If we could speed up and copy the Swiss system, we could really listen to our citizens and to what changes we want as a society, in a more economically viable way.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I thank Deputies for their contributions this afternoon. I echo the comments of the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and his thanks to Deputy Farrelly for tabling this Bill and raising an important issue. The debate has presented a useful opportunity to discuss the age at which people would be entitled to vote in elections and referendums in Ireland and provided much to consider as we move forward on this issue. I join others in welcoming so many students to the Gallery. It is great to see the engagement. You are more than welcome to Leinster House.

As Deputies are aware, this Bill proposes to amend the Constitution in order to lower the age at which persons are entitled to vote in Dáil Éireann elections from 18 years to 16 years. This amendment to reduce the voting age in Dáil elections would have the consequential effect of reducing the voting age of presidential and local elections, as well as referendums. The right to vote in these elections is linked, under the Constitution, to the right to vote in elections to Dáil Éireann. Any Bill such as this one which proposes to amend the Constitution must be passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas, and a referendum is then held. In his earlier contribution, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, outlined the reasons the Government is seeking the Second Stage reading of the Bill to be deferred. It is proposed to amend the motion for the Second Stage reading of this Bill, whereby the Bill would be read a Second Time in 12 months' time to allow for further consideration of the Bill. I understand that the research to be done by An Coimisiún Toghcháin will certainly be done within that 12-month period. I felt that was important to state.

The reasons are as follows. The issue of the voting age is currently being examined, as I said, by An Coimisiún Toghcháin as part of its research programme from 2024 to 2026. I understand that work will be concluded within the next year. That links in with the amendment to the motion tabled by the Government. The Government is of the view that supporting this Bill outright would be premature in advance of An Coimisiún Toghcháin having reported on the issue. In addition, it is important to ensure consistency across all electoral codes. The Bill only lowers the age of voting to 16 in Dáil elections and consequently at presidential and local elections, as well as referendums. It does not lower the voting age for elections to the European

Parliament and to Seanad Éireann through the Seanad higher education constituency. Further legislative change would have to be made to the Local Elections Act, Presidential Election Act, Seanad election Acts, Referendum Act and European Parliament Election Act. These amendments are largely technical in nature but would have to be implemented nevertheless.

As we are aware, there is much to consider with regard to the proposal to lower the voting age. Lessons from other countries should be considered. Experience elsewhere has shown that it is not enough to reduce the voting age and expect that positive benefits will flow. To have the desired effect of promoting participation and democratic engagement, legislation must be supported through education. This is the message coming from the experience in other countries, such as Austria and Scotland, which many have referred to today. In no way do I doubt the engagement of the people and students in the Gallery today. An Coimisiún Toghcháin has an important role to play in this regard. The Electoral Act 2022 gives the commission a broad public education role, working to promote public awareness of and increase public participation in the State's electoral and democratic processes via information and education campaigns. This element of an coimisiún's work can help to encourage young people to engage with our electoral processes. I understand that this year the commission has been developing an education and public engagement strategy. This is being informed by a public consultation process.

I understand that a strategy will be completed in the first half of 2026 and I have no doubt that work under the strategy will contribute to young people's level of connection with democratic processes. Indeed, I ask civil groups and organisations across the country that are working with young people to encourage them to participate in our elections and in politics. Public participation is the lifeblood of a democracy. We must do all we can to encourage new generations to appreciate this to keep our democracy healthy and strong. As already outlined, in Ireland the issue of lowering the minimum age to 17 was debated by the Convention on the Constitution in 2013. Out of that came a result that 52% of the assembled citizens and parliamentarians favoured reducing the minimum voting age for elections. Changing the minimum age to 16 was favoured by 48% of participants, compared with 39% who favoured lowering the age to 17. At that time, 68% of participants opposed lowering the minimum voting age for some types of elections but not all, with 28% of participants supporting lowering it for some electoral events but not all. While there are differing views on the subject, we believe the Electoral Commission is well placed to look at issues like this, which are complex and nuanced, and where there are international comparisons.

As already stated, it would be premature to support the progression of this Bill in advance of An Coimisiún Toghcháin concluding its work on the issue to which it relates. We believe it is prudent to allow this work to be completed prior to bringing forward any further reform proposals. As stated, I understand that this work will be completed within the next 12 months, which is very much in keeping with the amendment put down by the Government.

Our debate this evening has served a useful purpose. I appreciate the contributions of all speakers. I look forward to discussing this matter further at a future date. I will close by stating that the Government amendment seeks that the Second Reading be deferred for 12 months to allow further consideration of the Bill.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I commend Deputy Farrelly on bringing forward the Bill and on the work he has put into it. Deputy Farrelly has dedicated a lot of his life to youth work and youth empowerment, and that shines through in the work he brings to Dáil Éireann every week.

In relation to the timed amendment, the idea does not carry much weight for me any more. Deputy Byrne referred to John Collison. Following an article by Mr. Collison a couple of weeks ago, we were told that decisions should no longer be made by bureaucrats and that this is a Chamber that should make decisions. Then, the Government tells us that we need to wait for the Electoral Commission to come back to us. Surely, the idea of allowing the Bill to progress to Committee Stage in order that we could look at the evidence and explore the arguments that are being presented from all sides would further empower this Chamber, not to mention empowering the young people we wish to give the vote to.

It is strange that we would have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael politicians one week telling us they no longer want to see faceless bureaucrats making decisions and, at the same time, we are told we need to wait because the Electoral Commission has not finished its work. I can appreciate that this work will look to the evidence that has already been referred to by Members across the Chamber. Surely we can demonstrate the courage of our own convictions and stand for a principle that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have held for the past two weeks.

We are not asking for anything radical. We are simply asking for an extension of the franchise. The argument is always made that those paying tax should have representation, as Deputy Heneghan said. This is more about letting good ideas flow. Let us stand for election, talk to the young people who are impacted by decisions we make in this Chamber and simply say that we trust them to decide whether they are going to vote for us or not. That is simply what this is about. The arguments have been made and have been won. Deputy Murphy had a Bill that was passed. Deputy Malcolm Byrne had a Seanad Bill in 2023 that was timed out for a year. Let us just get on with it.

This is not just about young people who pay tax; it is about young people who have ideas. Many of us in this Chamber had the privilege of working with young people, whether in youth work or other areas. I was fortunate in a previous life to work in the Trinity access programme, developing leadership programmes in transition year schools all across Dublin. When I went to schools, I talked to young people about leadership and the leaders they admired, and brought that down to where they see a leadership contribution in their own lives. The conversations that come back are truly incredible. You walk into a school and you come out having learned so much yourself. It is the young people who want to talk about local infrastructure or the care they have to provide to older loved ones. They talk about where they have been failed or assisted.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly):** I will have to ask the Deputy to conclude. I call Deputy Gibney.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I thank Deputy Farrelly for all of the hard work he has done. I also thank all the Deputies who have spoken, particularly those on whose work we build. As we have heard, this is not our first time at this rodeo. This issue has been discussed many times here and on the floor of the Seanad. That is why I hope the Government can understand our frustration and disappointment with the timed amendment. It is just kicking the can down the

road. If this research and these conversations need to happen, surely they should have been happening on the multiple occasions on which this matter, in its many iterations, has been brought before the Government in recent decades.

The key points I want to make are that young people know their own minds, are crucial voices in policymaking and lead the way on many issues. I am sure many of those in the Chamber today have had similar experiences. As a TD, I have spoken to many senior cycle classes in my constituency. What always strikes me is that they are engaged, informed, critical and thoughtful. Never mind what happens on the plinth or in this Chamber; the real hot seat in this job is a classroom full of 16-year-olds who want you to answer their questions. They bring a fresh perspective, which is informed and critically engages with the rhetoric they are presented with. It is not just a case of copying what their parents or friends think. They are people with opinions and with skin in the game, and their ability to engage with our democratic process needs to be supported and expanded.

I welcome all of the representatives from youth bodies who are here today. We have consistently heard from organisations like the ISSU and the National Youth Council as to how important it is to include the voices of young people in law and policy. It is not about engaging on our terms. It is also not just about engaging on youth policy. Young people have a lot to say on all of the issues society faces, not just what we decide are youth issues. We cannot say that we want young, active citizens and then insist, when it comes to big decisions, that they have no real say. On climate, on Palestine, on economic justice and, which is particularly heartening for me, on neutrality and peace, young people are leading the way. This Bill is about including their views and voices in our democratic system. It is not about tucking them away at the kids table and only allowing them to speak when spoken to, but place them on an equal footing with all citizens.

Cloister go minic an frása, “Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí”. Tá níos mó ná moladh ag teastáil, áfach. Caithfidh muid meas a bheith againn ar dhaoine óga agus glór a thabhairt dóibh nach bhfuil faoi smacht nó faoi bhráid duine ar bith. Tá muid ag cur oideachais saoránachta orthu agus, mar sin, ba chóir dúinn caitheamh leo mar shaoránaigh, ní mar lucht féachana ar an tsochaí. Is é sin atá i gcroílár an Bhille seo.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I thank both Ministers of State for their contributions to the debate, which I appreciate. I thank Deputies from all sides of the House for their important and meaningful contributions.

There are a couple of things I would like to say in wrapping up. First, it is that my heart is full that we have had a chance to talk about young people for such an expansive amount of time - two hours - and what I certainly perceive to be universal support for the idea and the purpose behind this. Whatever way it manifests itself in the end, we collectively agree that young people at 16 and 17 in this State deserve the right to vote. With the greatest of respect, like the Ministers of State, only last year I knocked on thousands of doors. Not once did I ask people to vote for me on the basis that I would rely on a third body to advise me how to legislate. I asked people to vote for me to become a legislator.

What we have before us is a very simple, straightforward piece of legislation. It absolutely has consequences, and I do not undermine that for one second. However, we have seen so many attempts to progress this. There is nothing creative in this, and I really mean that. We

have all the research that An Coimisiún Toghcháin will be reviewing. That research is comprehensive and very clear. In the context of the Bill and the attempt by the Social Democrats and I to raise this matter today, it is almost as if we have received the baton from Deputy Byrne and other Members of the Oireachtas, including Deputy Mac Lochlainn, Senator Ruane and many others. All we are trying to do is revive a debate.

While it is said that we are going to do this again in 12 months' time, I do not accept that. I mean that with the greatest of respect. We do not need An Coimisiún Toghcháin to tell us how to legislate. There is nothing creative in this. The UK and 15 other countries around the world are doing it. Young people's voices deserve to be heard. Reuben Murray, who has been name-checked already, is in the Gallery. Members might have heard him on "Drivetime" this week. He spoke eloquently and respectfully, but, my God, he spoke with a competency that we would all be proud of. People like him deserve to vote. Young people in this country of 16 and 17 years of age deserve to vote.

We, as legislators, should come together. I urge the Government, with all sincerity, to please withdraw the amendment. It has been suggested that we do what we are suggesting in the 12 months until the Bill is read again.

6 o'clock

Let us do that on Committee Stage. Nothing is going to change dramatically. I urge the Minister of State to let us take this conversation to the next step as a show of faith in the young people of Ireland and to show we are taking this seriously and mean what we say when we say we trust and value them.

I reiterate my thanks to my friends in the Social Democrats for allowing me the time to introduce this Bill and to everybody across the House for thinking about what they would say and saying it so eloquently and respectfully. I also thank the young people and youth workers in the Visitors Gallery and those around this country who devote their lives to empowering, respecting, valuing and trusting the young people of this State. This Bill is a very natural next step. I look forward to hearing from the Minister of State.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly):** That concludes our debate. I welcome those in the Gallery and thank them for staying and listening to the debate this evening.

Cuireadh an leasú.

Amendment put.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly):** De réir Bhuan-Ordaithe 85(2), cuirfear an vótáil siar go dtí an am vótála seachtainiúil an tseachtain seo chugainn.

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

## **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly):** 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 Michael Cahill – To discuss the shortage of early childcare places in Kerry.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue – To discuss the development of a minor injuries hub plan for Balbriggan.

Deputy Jen Cummins – To discuss the ongoing miscommunication with the NCSE regarding the deadline of the notification process.

Deputy Carol Nolan – To discuss contract work delays for St. Brendan's Community School, Birr.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí – To discuss issues arising from new BusConnects services in north Dublin.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny – To discuss the urgent need to fund renovations and refurbishment of Mayfield Sports Complex.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan – To discuss wandering and malnourished horses in urban areas of Limerick.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara – To discuss ambulance waiting times in north Tipperary.

Deputy Séamus McGrath – To discuss the new school building project proposed for Ringaskiddy and Shanbally national schools, County Cork.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne – To discuss the difficulties facing Wicklow and Wexford commuters.

Deputy Shane Moynihan – To discuss the new school buildings for Divine Mercy junior and senior national schools, Balgaddy, Lucan.

Deputy Pádraig Rice – To discuss the redevelopment of Cork city library.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore – To discuss the closure of the NCSE "parents notify" portal for children requiring special class or special school placements.

Deputy Sorca Clarke – To discuss concerns regarding the recent publication of standards and criteria for counsellors and psychotherapists by CORU.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty – To discuss the need for a full public inquiry into the tendering and construction of Lucan leisure centre.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett – To discuss the new Uber fixed fares and taxi driver livelihoods.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh – To discuss the proposal from An Post to move operations within County Mayo.

The matters raised by Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh, Pádraig Rice, Shane Moynihan and Maurice Quinlivan have been selected for discussion.

## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### Postal Services

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue this evening. Absolutely no disrespect to him but I had hoped the relevant Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, would be here to answer. My aim is to bring to the Minister's attention the unworkable proposals being put forward by An Post in Ballyhaunis and Erris, County Mayo. Neither the proposal to move the sorting depot from Barnatra in Erris to Ballina nor the proposal to move the Ballyhaunis sorting depot out of the county, to Castlerea, County Roscommon, makes economic, social or environmental sense. All of my colleagues, and indeed all of the Minister of State's Oireachtas colleagues from Mayo, are united in rejecting these proposals.

Let us take the case of Erris. An Post's proposals would mean postal workers serving the Erris area would have to collect mail from the newly opened Ballina depot. This change would mean the 13 postal workers who deliver across the Erris region, an area the size of County Louth, would have to undertake a two-hour, 100-mile-plus round trip each day to collect the day's post before even starting their delivery. The Erris postal delivery area is one of the largest and most rural in the country and includes many isolated and coastal communities. The decision would have wide-ranging implications for workers, locals, community life, road safety and climate emissions.

I met workers from Barnatra and spoke to some of those impacted in Ballyhaunis. The proposals from An Post are completely unworkable, unsafe and socially damaging. It makes absolutely no sense to ask postal workers to drive more than 100 miles every day just to collect the mail before they even begin their deliveries. That is at least a two-hour round trip. We simply cannot have 13 vans travelling from Erris to Ballina and back again daily. It is just not feasible. It is bad for the environment and creates unnecessary risks for workers on an already busy and neglected road.

The Ballyhaunis delivery service unit currently employs 13 local staff, most of whom live in the community. The proposal to relocate this service would not only cause significant disruption for these employees but also have a detrimental impact on the local economy and the very fabric of the town. Should the relocation proceed, staff would be required to travel 27 km each way to Castlerea, resulting in over ten additional vehicles commuting daily. This would significantly increase carbon emissions, directly contradicting both An Post's and the national climate action plan's commitments. Moreover, any electric vehicles based in Castlerea would still have to return to Ballyhaunis to deliver post, adding unnecessary mileage and increasing energy use and operational inefficiency.

Beyond the environmental concerns, this decision could lead to a loss of an early and efficient postal service for Ballyhaunis businesses, many of which rely on timely deliveries to operate effectively. The knock-on effects would be felt right across the local economy from restaurants and cafés to service stations and shops, all of which depend on daily trade generated by local employment.

The Ballyhaunis and Erris chambers of commerce are absolutely against these moves. They make no sense whatsoever, economically or socially. The Ballyhaunis delivery service unit is a purpose-built facility, and relocating it would send a deeply discouraging message to rural towns already struggling to retain essential services. Ballyhaunis has already lost two banks and a courthouse, contributing to the erosion of local business and community activity.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I welcome the opportunity to outline the position on this matter today on behalf of the relevant Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. An Post is a commercial State company with a mandate to act commercially and, as such, day-to-day operational matters, including decisions in relation to the size, distribution and future of the network, are matters for the board and the management of the company and not ones in which the Minister and Minister of State in the relevant Department, namely, Deputies O'Donovan and McConalogue, have a statutory function. However, the Ministers and Government are very aware of the impact that decisions relating to changes in An Post operations can have on communities and individuals in both rural and urban areas.

An Post has advised that the suggested move of An Post delivery operations from Barnatra delivery office – not a post office – to Ballina in quarter 2 of next year is currently under consideration. An Post notes it should be stressed that the move of the delivery office in Barnatra is still being considered locally and no formal decision on the move has been made at this stage. As noted, this is a matter for the company and as no decision has been made, it would be inappropriate for the Government, as a shareholder, to comment on or prejudice decisions that are for the board and management of An Post to consider.

An Post states it is worth noting that its mail delivery facility in Ballina, which was recently visited by the Minister, represents an investment in local infrastructure and planning for the future of just over €2 million. This is a significant investment in the area and is in line with the national transformation plan the company agreed with the Communications Workers' Union.

An Post advises that it can confirm outline plans to amalgamate its mail operations in Ballyhaunis and Castlerea as part of An Post's ongoing investment in and planning for the future of the mail infrastructure in the region. An Post further advises that, in all, 47 staff – 12 from Ballyhaunis and 35 from Castlerea – will jointly work from An Post's current delivery office in the Castlerea business park. An Post states it is likely that the staff complement at the newly unified base will increase as a result of the merger. An Post advises that the move is likely to take place in the second quarter of 2026. An Post notes all postal staff begin and end their working day in Castlerea while conducting their local deliveries throughout as normal. Additionally, An Post states the site is also the base for 20 of An Post's rapidly growing electric vehicle fleet, part of the largest EV fleet in the country, and the site has been fitted out for further EV post vans to be pressed into service throughout the north west.

An Post also advises that the cases of both Barnatra and Ballyhaunis represent an opportunity to plan for and organise this important piece of local infrastructure to reflect the changing nature of its business, including the huge growth in parcel numbers and the rise in e-commerce and home shopping. An Post notes both potential moves are part of a national transformation plan agreed with the Communications Workers Union.

The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for Government states the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working to deliver on this, and an enhanced amount of €15 million per annum is to be allocated for supporting the network subject to all legal requirements being satisfied.

A sum of €10 million per annum is currently being provided over a three-year fixed term, from 2023 to 2025, to An Post. An Post then disburses this funding across the post office network, with all contractor post offices benefiting from Government funding with the objective of securing the stability of the network. An Post then disburses this funding across the post office network, with all contractor post offices benefitting from the Government funding with the objective of securing the stability of the network. The funding is being paid monthly for each 12-month period. To date, over €25 million has been claimed by An Post for the network. The current funding provides time and space for An Post to accelerate the transformation and commercialisation of the network to ensure relevant, viable network delivery.

An Post has over the last number of years been transforming its business by delivering new products and formats in the way it operates. This includes, among other things, diversifying and growing the financial services products it provides for individuals and SMEs. An Post is also providing agency banking services.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister of State's response is really disappointing. This is going to be fought by all public representatives across the board. It completely ignores people in rural Ireland and rural Irish towns. This is the wrong thing to do. The Government is copping out by saying that An Post is a separate commercial entity. It is being funded by the Government. There has to be an influence there to say that this goes against everything. There is a whole social dimension here that An Post and the Government seem to be ignoring. Rural postal services are not just about delivering letters and parcels; they are also about keeping people connected and supported. Our postal workers are at the very heart of our communities. Many elderly people and those living alone know the drivers by name and they often look out for each other. For some, that visit from the postman or postwoman might be the only human contact they have for the day. This represents yet another example of our vital services being stripped away from our rural communities. Locally, people rely on Barr na Trá and Ballyhaunis depots to collect urgent post, such as passports or examination papers from schools. That access will be lost if everything goes out to Ballina or Castlerea. It is not acceptable.

I am also calling on the postal workers' union to stand up against these moves. We need common sense to prevail. This plan is bad for workers, communities and rural Ireland. It makes no sense whatsoever to make postal workers undertake road trips in excess of 100 miles on bad and dangerous roads only then to come back to deliver the post. It is just bonkers. It is the most ridiculous idea that the Government has come up with yet. I just cannot accept that anyone would sit down and make this plan. The removal of yet another public service from Ballyhaunis, after two banks and a court house have been taken, is disrespectful to these areas. It makes no economic sense, or any sense on any level.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** As I indicated earlier to the Deputy, and I will repeat again, decisions in relation to post offices and operational matters are a matter for An Post and not a matter in which the Minister has any statutory function. The Deputy will appreciate the Minister cannot intervene in such matters which we, as the Oireachtas, have given An Post the statutory responsibility to manage. An Post has an independent board. It has a clear mandate. I trust, therefore, that the Deputy understands that it would be inappropriate for me or the Minister to comment further on operational matters relating to proposals for specific post and delivery offices.

Obviously, An Post plays an important role in serving the needs of business and domestic customers and communities. This is to the forefront of An Post's mandate. The board of management is doing all it can to maintain the company's sustainability and relevance to customers into the future. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, as well as their officials and Cabinet colleagues, are working to support the company to that end. The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and a post office network that is a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland.

The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with the funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working to deliver on this and an enhanced amount of more than €15 million per annum is to be allocated for supporting the network, subject to Government approval.

### **Library Projects**

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I wish to ask the Minister of State about the future of Cork City Library. We have a fantastic library service in Cork city but the building is not fit for purpose. The roof leaks and parts of the library have been closed off to the public. It is not acceptable in this day and age. Even more disappointing is that four years ago, the Taoiseach announced that €50 million would be spent transforming Grand Parade with a new public library, a new central plaza and boardwalk to facilitate cultural and recreational activities. The vision was big, with a planned 7,700 sq. m library capable of facilitating 1 million visitors per year. Four years later, however, our library is nowhere to be seen. It is not acceptable. This is just a pattern of under-delivery for Cork city. Time and again, we see these announcements of big capital projects that fail to be delivered on. We can talk about the events centre and the dental school in that regard. Again and again, projects are announced that are not delivered on.

This is a very large sum of public money. A total of €50 million was promised to be spent. We know that of that €50 million, some €7 million has been spent on upgrading Bishop Lucey Park, which is very welcome, but that leaves approximately €43 million to be spent. There is a huge lack of transparency about this project and the money. It is utterly unacceptable. It is not for the lack of asking questions. I have met council officials and the librarian and I have submitted repeated questions but I have not received any information about where this project or the money is at, nor when we are going to get a new library for Cork city.

To that end, I held a public meeting last weekend to hear the views of my constituents. There is huge interest and engagement from members of the public. There is a clear demand for a new public library in the middle of Cork city that meets the needs of today and tomorrow.

It is really disappointing that, in the four years since that funding was announced, there was no public consultation. It takes public representatives like me to organise engagement with the community to hear their views about what they would like to see in that library. It is really clear what people want. They want a world-class library for Cork city, a 21st-century library in the heart of our city. The advantage of building this new library is that it will tackle some of the ongoing dereliction on Grand Parade. This money could be spent in both addressing the vacant and derelict sites in the middle of the city that need to be tackled and building us a library that meets the needs of today and tomorrow. This includes addressing the needs of the arts and culture community, including spaces for film, craft and expanding the music library, including maker spaces, as well as the local study section. It should also include a small theatre space because Cork is lacking a small theatre space in our city. This could be provided in the new public library.

There is also a real demand for a library of things, not just a library of books. I refer to a place where people could borrow tools, games and music instruments for their children. This is more sustainable and cost effective. People want a library that is open late where they can share stories and ideas, a melting pot for our diverse city. They want it to be a cathedral of learning, a place open to all. In a city that is very commercial, it is one of the few places that is free to use and open to a diverse array of citizens right across the city.

If we look around Ireland at all the places where new public libraries have been built, really good results and use have been achieved. For example, the numbers using the library in Dún Laoghaire have doubled since the refurbishment, going to, on average, 1,300 per day. We know from research that Cork city has the highest library use *per capita* in the country. In 2023, 882,031 items were borrowed from libraries in Cork city but we do not have a library that is fit for purpose and meets the needs of the city. Approximately €43 million or more is sitting there that was announced by the Taoiseach. It is not being used to build this library and I know want to know why.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, was launched in 2018 as one of the flagship elements of Project Ireland 2040. URDF is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne. It provides up to 75% funding for applicant-led projects to support a programme of significant transformational capital projects that will contribute to the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's cities and other large towns, in line with the objectives of the national planning framework and the national development plan.

As applicant-led projects, responsibility for the composition of any applications for URDF funding and their advancement through the various stages of planning, development and completion is, in the first instance, a matter for the relevant local authority, which in this case is Cork City Council.

With regard to the Grand Parade Quarter proposal, a successful application was submitted for funding under the first round for the first phase of the Grand Parade Quarter project proposal. Funding of €916,000 was allocated for this project to regenerate the area of the Grand Parade Quarter through completing preliminary design works for future projects. Under URDF call 2, a further €46.5m was provisionally allocated to build upon the design works developed under call 1. The city library is one element of this overall proposal. The proposal will bring

about the regeneration of the Grand Parade quarter, an underutilised area of Cork city. Furthermore, this redevelopment will be transformative and will combine with other complementary developments in the area to create a vibrant quarter where culture and learning acts as a catalyst for business and tourism. Other elements of the proposal include the rejuvenation of Bishop Lucey Park and the completion of a number of bridges to enhance access to the quarter.

The Grand Parade has traditionally been the home of Cork's city library, but the existing library is currently limited in its capacity to achieve the potential for a library in a UNESCO learning city. It is proposed to develop a new library in a well-designed iconic building that embraces its riverside location as part of a vibrant mixed-use quarter. The city library service is an important component of the cultural, literary and recreational infrastructure of Cork city and its community now and into the future. Providing a new city library of scale and substance is a priority for the council and a key objective for the city.

Overall, the Grand Parade quarter project is progressing very well, with Bishop Lucey Park and the bridge at Lambley's Lane substantially complete. The official opening of these redevelopments is taking place tomorrow. Multiple options have been considered for the new library by Cork City Council. There has been a significant level of engagement between Cork City Council and officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to the project. I understand a revised preliminary business case that will set out the council's preferred options is expected to be submitted to the Department in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I thank the Minister of State very much. I am concerned at the response because what we see is a passing of the buck. It goes from the Government to the council. The council says it does not have enough money to complete the project, so it goes back to the Government. We never get a full answer about when the library is going to be built. Is it going to be a new-build library? Are we going to get the construction of a new building and not have this shoved into an existing building that does not meet the needs of a library and is not the promised new-build library? This is what people in Cork want to know. Will we get the library that has been promised, the new-build library, and not this project shoved into an existing building on a nearby street? It should stay on the Grand Parade, at the heart of our city. It should be a library that is fit for purpose.

The Minister of State mentioned the other elements of the redevelopment of the Grand Parade and they are very welcome. The upgrade of Bishop Lucey Park is very welcome, but this is a smaller element of this project. It accounts for about €7 million of the overall funding. The Taoiseach announced funding of €50 million in Cork. It is not referenced here. I think it is €46 million. When the Taoiseach came to Cork, though, he announced funding of €50 million. What is interesting is that when the press releases go out, they often have the names of the Taoiseach and the Minister on them. When it comes to responsibility, however, it is a case of it not being them but Cork City Council that is responsible. I would like the Taoiseach and the Minister to take responsibility for the delivery of the projects they announce.

It happens time and again in my city, where they come and announce projects, turn the sod on them and then they do not get delivered. I mentioned that we had it with the events centre. In 2016, just in advance of the general election, the Taoiseach and Tánaiste of the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government at the time came to Cork, turned the sod on that project on a nearby

street, and it is still a vacant, empty site. There is a new bridge there too, but it is a bridge to nowhere. People in Cork are absolutely sick of this. They want to see the delivery of the projects. In his reply, I want the Minister of State to tell me if a new library will be built on Grand Parade as promised by my constituency colleague and Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I will state part of my original answer again, in that the URDF support for the Cork city library project demonstrates this Government's understanding and the critical important part of it in the regeneration of the Grand Parade quarter. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will continue to engage with Cork City Council on delivery in that context. The Department looks forward to the receipt of the preliminary business case and we will review it in a timely manner once it has been received.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** Give us an answer to the question. Will a new library be built or not?

### **Schools Building Projects**

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** Go raibh maith agat. Before I start on the main topic of my contribution, because it is pertinent to the school in question, I will take a moment to acknowledge that the community of the Divine Mercy Senior National School staff, students and the wider school community have experienced a particular tragedy this week. They are in my thoughts and prayers and have the full support of the community behind them.

I wish to raise the case of a school I attended and I am proud to have done so. My alma mater was then known as Archbishop Ryan. It is now the Divine Mercy Junior and Senior national schools. I am proud to have gone to school in Balgaddy. The issue I raise is with regard to the long overdue and long-needed building project, especially for the junior school, on that campus. I have been raising this matter since being elected to this House, and even beforehand, with previous Ministers for education and departmental officials.

To put this into context, the school building that houses the junior national school is over 40 years old. It has not been allowed to go ahead with retrofitting to improve the insulation and energy rating. It is architecturally very pleasing, but it has not been possible to proceed with any upgrades on improving the quality of the insulation, the heating and the efficiency in the building and to make sure that, for example, special educational needs, SEN, classes are appropriately kitted out and that appropriate provision is made for those in the building itself. This is not something that has just been raised. I have been on the board of management of the senior school for some time and it has been a perennial issue. Since raising it, while being told it is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2b, in the answer I got in November 2025, we have been told for about six months now that we are waiting for a meeting of all stakeholders to look at the review of the overall design of the building. That review, though, has not happened.

Today, I am keen to learn where we are at with this building project between the junior national school and the senior national school. I am also asking for certainty regarding what is going to happen here. Ultimately, the question I am being asked by parents and teachers in these schools is where we are at with the project. People want to know if we are going to

continue with the upgrade of the older building and allow for warmer classrooms for the children in that building now or are we going to get this meeting of the stakeholders. When will that meeting of the stakeholders happen? What will be the outcome of that meeting with the stakeholders? We cannot, for example, have a situation where there are prefabs on the grounds of this school that are no longer in use in some cases. Some of them were only listed for removal after I raised them as part of a parliamentary question. I am a bit frustrated with the building section in the Department of education that it is not giving the clarity the school is requiring in this instance, despite the fact we know and have voted for the allocation of appropriate capital spending to refurbish and refit school building projects across the country.

In my constituency, the Divine Mercy school campus is not the only school that requires attention in terms of buildings. I will be raising those other schools on the floor of the House. This is one in particular, however, where I think there is a very acute need, especially in the context of the junior school. The school authorities have not been told what the overall plan is and they cannot budget or plan accordingly to improve the quality of the overall building. Ultimately, it is not possible to improve the quality of a school that has so much in terms of the most fantastic teaching staff in it, the really committed boards of management in both cases and students who represent the new, diverse Ireland of which we are so proud. Many nationalities are represented in that school. It is located in a DEIS area and was recently awarded DEIS status on band 1 and band 2, respectively. It has contributed so much to the life of the Balgaddy community, which is a very proud one. Now, though, the schools need our support and clarity on what is happening with the building project. They need certainty and to ensure that the world-class education being delivered by the staff and the boards of management in those schools is reflected in the State's commitment to make sure they have a world-class building in which to learn and receive that education.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I thank the Deputy very much for raising this matter. I join him in expressing my sympathies.

This project is included in the Department of Education and Youth's construction programme, which will be delivered under the national development plan as part of the Project Ireland 2040 framework. The Divine Mercy Junior National School and the Divine Mercy Senior National School are co-educational, Catholic schools under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin. This joint school building project will deliver a new extension and refurbishment of some of the existing accommodation to provide two 24-classroom primary schools with classrooms for children with special educational needs to cater for the junior and senior schools.

The original brief for the schools was for a 24-classroom school for both the junior and senior national schools, an increase in both schools from 16 classrooms. Stage 1 of this major project was completed in July 2014, with stage 2a completed in March 2016. A complete stage 2b report was received by the Department in January 2019 for review. Subsequent to this, the design team architect withdrew from the project, and was replaced in the summer of 2021 by a new consultant architect. Due to the passage of time since the original brief was agreed and on review of the schedule of accommodation during 2021, the Department requested two special education needs classrooms be added to the brief for both schools. This necessary brief change will require a new planning application along with other statutory approvals. The design team submitted its amended design options, to include the increased accommodation, to the Department for review, which is currently ongoing. On completion of the Department's

review, a meeting of all stakeholders will be held to discuss and agree the preferred option, which can be further developed and prepared to be submitted for planning permission. During the planning application process, requests for further information from the local authority and possible third-party appeals to An Coimisiún Pleanála can occur. Therefore, it is currently not possible to provide a timeline for the completion of stage 2B.

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 under the national development plan. As part of this NDP allocation, the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs.

In relation to the project roll-out for large-scale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the 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 the 2026 to 2030 period to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs. It is planned that circa 80 school building projects will progress to construction across 2026 and 2027 as part of that two-year rolling programme.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** I thank the Minister of State for that answer. I am a little disappointed that we still cannot give a date for this meeting of stakeholders. I note that the passage of time is attributed for the need to evolve the presentation. I hope that, in a few months' time, we are not looking at the passage of time again as being an issue why this has not progressed to a point where it is being delivered.

The boards, staff and students in Divine Mercy Junior and Senior National Schools stepped up to the plate when they were asked to provide a second special educational needs, SEN, class. They have done so in the hope they will get a new building and they have always responded positively to requests from the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and the local special educational needs organiser, SENO, to make sure they do have adequate facilities there. They are in an area where there is a large amount of disadvantage. There is a large prevalence of children who have special educational needs. They are well aware and there is an expertise in the school in dealing with that. That is why it is really important that we give them that certainty and clarity about what this process looks like.

I hope when I ask this question again in a month's time that we will have a date for the meeting of all stakeholders that is to review this overall design. It is important that we give people confidence that the fantastic work being done in our schools by our teachers in challenging circumstances, as is the case in their building, is reflected by the Department of education. They are aware, obviously, of the constraints around the planning issue. I do not think there is anyone in that locality who will object to a brand new school building that has been at the centre of the Balgaddy community for so long and has such a proud and great name as an educational institution. It is somewhere I am proud to say that I went to and attended school and I will make it one of the central planks of my time in this House to ensure we do our damndest to make sure they get the building and investment they deserve. I look forward to getting that certainty from the Department about when that review meeting will happen and when we will get the ball rolling finally on a long-overdue project.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I thank the Deputy. I know this is something he has been very much involved in and is very passionate on. I appreciate his remarks. I reiterate that since 2020, the Department of Education and Youth has invested over €6 billion in our schools throughout the country under the national development plan, involving the completion of over 1,300 school building projects. In addition, over 200 SEN repurposing projects have been delivered, maximising the use of existing accommodation while creating opportunities for inclusion and integration. Government support for this investment, including by way of supplementary capital funding, has delivered real benefits for school communities. Supplementary capital funding of over €210 million approved by Government has brought the total capital allocation for 2025 for the Department of Education and Youth to €1.6 billion.

All Government Departments are expected to publish their sectoral National Disability Authority, NDA, implementation plans in November. The Department's plan will optimise those outputs from the NDA 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.

### **Animal Welfare**

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Wandering and malnourished horses remains an issue in urban areas across the country. I have raised this many times over a number of years in this Chamber. It is an ongoing issue for Limerick. The late former Limerick TD, Mick Lipper, raised the issue in this House as far back as December 1977. Unfortunately, it remains a challenge that many Limerick communities continue to face.

There remains a prevalence of horses in green areas and others are often stabled in derelict council houses or properties. In one day in February in the space of half an hour, I counted 50 horses grazing in urban areas. During my regular visits to many of Limerick's urban areas, it is apparent that there has been no reduction in the number of horses. Unfortunately, it has got worse.

From an animal welfare perspective, these horses appear malnourished. They are often tied to lampposts with hardly any space to roam. A dirty bucket of water is often next to them and they are neglected for days on end. In many cases they are ridden, violently whipped and made wander streets without appropriate horseshoes. It is shameful to see these beautiful animals treated in such a manner.

From a community perspective, the mistreatment of these animals has a real impact. I hear from local communities about the horses, and often foals, left injured and dead in their areas. Recently, I got a horse removed after it was lying dead at the back of someone's home for more than a week. This is incredibly unfair to local people. We see many green areas destroyed, areas that should be used by children to play. Footpaths and open spaces are caked with manure and vacant houses are often commandeered without permission to stable these animals.

The level of impunity is frustrating for citizens. If the Minister of State or I drive without an NCT, road tax or insurance, we will, correctly, be penalised, and yet those riding horses and sulkies, often young children, face no penalties. The risk posed by these animals, particularly

given the inexperience of some of their riders, is a growing concern. Without decisive action, I fear injuries or even fatalities are inevitable.

It is apparent that many left to care for these animals are children and teenagers. It is hard to believe, with such young owners, that any of these animals have been chipped and pinned as required by legislation. Over the years, via numerous parliamentary questions, I have sought to see how many prosecutions there have been regarding the failure to chip and pin a horse. "None" is the answer I usually get. If a law is not enforced, it will not be abided by.

In the past four years, an average of 92 horses were collected each year by Limerick council. However, up to October of this year, the council has collected 22 horses. This is a collapse in collecting horses, not fewer horses. The local authority, under the Government's watch, has abandoned communities and failed to collect these horses. The local authority will not collect horses in daylight, meaning there are very few horses around to collect at night-time, even though those horses can often be in the same green area for days on end. An Garda Síochána, which will need to assist, is often not available. The pound does not usually have the capacity to collect more than four or five horses at a time, and local gardaí have told me it is not worth their while and effort to assist in collecting so few horses. Why is this legislation not being enforced? Why are there not targeted efforts by the Minister of State's Department, in conjunction with local councils and the Garda, to take decisive action that demonstrates those abusers of animals and this type of situation will no longer be tolerated?

I acknowledge as well that many people keep these animals and care for them very well. They abide by the laws and engage with urban horse projects. There is no escaping that many young people in Limerick and beyond love their horses and, given the appropriate training, would make very caring horse owners. Urban horse projects give them an opportunity. A recent article in *Changing Ireland* magazine quoted a number of young kids, including Wesley Joyce, who is not a kid anymore, "If you invest your money into Moyross Youth Academy, you might win it back on a jockey someday." That was Wesley Joyce, over 50 times a national flat winner and, I hope, more. Another person said:

For me, when you're on a horse, the speed, just getting the feel off the horse, there's no other feeling like that. My dream was to work with horses, but without Moyross Youth Academy I definitely wouldn't be a jockey today. They're very supportive.

That was Terry Casey in Southill. "With the Moyross Youth Academy, you know, they really help young people out", said Aoife Leonard, 14 years old, who is now a showjumper.

Considering the lack of enforcement of chip-and-pin legislation despite the continuing presence of huge numbers of stray horses destroying many of our urban areas, is it the Minister of State's view that the Control of Horses Act 1996 is still fit for purpose?

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter in respect of wandering and malnourished horses in urban areas of Limerick. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is responsible for all policy and legislation in relation to the Control of Horses Act 1996. Operation of the Act comes under the remit of the local authorities though. Any reports of welfare issues received by the Department, including breaches of the animal welfare legislation, are acted upon and investigated.

Appropriate enforcement action, where breaches or shortcomings are identified, is undertaken by the Department and authorised officers appointed under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, including but not limited to An Garda Síochána, customs agents and local authorities. Primary responsibility for protecting the welfare of equines rest with the owner or the keeper. Under the Control of Horses Act 1996, local authorities may take a range of actions in relation to equines, including prohibiting horses in certain areas, issuing licences and seizing horses in contravention of the Act. These powers can be used in respect of straying horses, which includes horses put on land without the owner's permission, including public land. Local authorities may also prosecute offenders.

The Department provides financial support to help local authorities with the cost of these seizures. The Department collects information from local authorities on a quarterly basis in respect of the overall number of equines seized by them. Currently, only the figures relating to quarter 1 and quarter 2 of this year are available, with the number of horses seized in Limerick over this period totalling 22. This number is down from the same period in 2024 where the number of horses seized was 45.

This Government is fully committed to supporting sustainable initiatives in line with the programme for Government and Working Together for Animal Welfare: Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025. As part of this commitment, the Department of agriculture has continued to support urban horse projects nationwide, working with local authorities, charities and community stakeholders. These projects have proven very successful and are aimed specifically at equine welfare and marginalised communities. These projects can foster community leadership and education in responsible horse ownership for young people. An exemplar project of note is the Moyross project, which has been in operation since 2016 and has helped so many young people from disadvantaged communities. I will interject here to point out there is a very good project in my own constituency which has also done incredible work in this area and we are all very proud of it.

From 2015 to date, over €2 million has been spent on urban horse projects by the Department, with €150,000 allocated for these projects in 2025. The urban horse projects greatly benefit the welfare of equines and young people from disadvantaged communities or backgrounds. There are currently seven live projects.

Last year, the Department awarded €6 million in funding, which went to 101 animal welfare charities throughout the country, under the animal welfare grants programme. Of that figure, just over €3.4 million was awarded to charities involved in the care and welfare of horses.

More generally, the Department recently published a report by Professor Paddy Wall on equine traceability and welfare and has prepared an action plan to implement its recommendations.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The reason the number of horses that were collected is down is that they are simply not being collected. The problem is just being ignored and let go. I appreciate the Minister of State's response but on the ground, the reality is this continues to be an issue, predominantly in working class estates. I have absolutely no doubt that if these horses were tied to a lamppost and destroying green areas in more affluent areas of our city, the State would, rightly, not tolerate it, intervene and do its job. It is not doing it in the working class

areas. Why must those who live in working class communities have to endure what would not be tolerated anywhere else? It is simply not good enough anymore.

While the keeping of ponies and horses remains a tradition in many parts of Limerick, a tradition passed through the generations, unfortunately we cannot ignore that there are others who treat these animals with a lack of compassion and with cruelty. This type of mistreatment has been allowed to continue for years without robust State intervention. It is shameful.

The critical issue here is enforcement of the law; enforcement of animal welfare laws included. We need to see a deterrent from the misuse of animals in urban areas. We need to offer more support to animal welfare groups. I am constantly contacted by groups such as Limerick Animal Welfare and My Lovely Horse project which do tremendous work but they are overwhelmed by the sheer number of calls they get and often there is little I can do to help them.

I agree the local councils have an important role to play but the lead must come from the Department of agriculture. If the approach to enforcement by the Department *laissez faire*, it follows councils will not treat this matter with the emphasis and urgency it requires. If we enforce our existing laws, showing this behaviour will not be tolerated, we can protect these animals and improve our communities. We can give public spaces back to children. We can have clean footpaths and return pride to our communities. If we went as far as ensuring illegally parked horse boxes are removed and destroyed, it would show that those who ignore the law and those infractions will be punished.

We can enhance our communities. Those good horse owners I referenced would have nothing to fear from legislation being enforced. I know many horse owners treat their ponies with care and compassion but the thuggish behaviour of a few impacts the reputation of all horse owners. It is time we stepped up and acted. There can be no tolerance for this abuse and anti-community behaviour cannot be tolerated.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I will start by acknowledging and thanking the Deputy for the amount of work he has done and his dedication on this particular topic. I agree the issues merit the attention and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, is fully committed to building on the work already being undertaken to tackle the issue.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has lead responsibility within Government for animal welfare and takes its role seriously. It is committed to the policy that animal welfare standards are vigorously applied in a fair and even handed manner. The Department keeps animal welfare legislation under review with respect to developments in the areas of animal welfare and with regard to the practical lessons learned from the operation of the 2013 Animal Health and Welfare Act. The Department operates a confidential animal welfare helpline through which members of the public can report incidents of animal welfare cruelty and neglect for investigation.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.45 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 18 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 18 November 2025.