

Vol. 1076
No. 1



Thursday,
20 November
2025

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 20 Samhain 2025

Thursday, 20 November 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy David Maxwell: The Select Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has completed its consideration of the National Training Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025 and has made no amendments thereto.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Messages from Select Committees

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Agriculture and Food has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for the public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 30. The Select Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for the public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 45.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Sports Organisations

1. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the details of each engagement he or his Department has had with an organisation (details supplied) over the past six months; the topics that were discussed; if discussion at any such engagement encompassed the safeguarding of Irish players and compliance with legal obligations in the context of international competitions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64623/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question is prompted by the situation the Ireland women's national basketball team found itself in because it was forced to play against an aggressor nation

team, namely, Israel. The question relates to the details of the engagement the Department had with Basketball Ireland over the past six months while this topic was being discussed.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputy for his question. While I have not met with Basketball Ireland over the past six months, I did meet with it in April for an introductory meeting regarding its development and other plans. I understand the question relates to playing of matches against Israel. In this regard, the draw for the 2027 Women's Euro Basket qualification group which placed Ireland in a group with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Israel and Luxembourg took place in July. I spoke on the phone to the CEO of Basketball Ireland who updated me on that at that point. Of course, it is important to make clear, as I would have outlined at that stage as well, that the Government and Sport Ireland have no role in determining the participation by national governing bodies of sport in international competitions organised by international sporting federations. National governing bodies of sport, NGBs, and international sporting federations, the International Basketball Federation, FIBA, in the case of basketball, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the organisation of sporting fixtures.

Regarding the topic of athlete safeguarding, Sport Ireland works with NGBs to ensure that appropriate policies are put in place to take a proactive approach to safeguarding by identifying and mitigating risks to athlete welfare. It also works with NGBs to ensure mechanisms are in place to appropriately deal with matters that may arise.

On a wider note, I can say that Ireland welcomes the agreement on the first phase of the 20-point plan to end the war in Gaza. The first phase of the plan, the ceasefire and hostage release agreement, is an important step on a road to peace. Our immediate focus must be on ensuring humanitarian aid into and throughout Gaza at scale. Ireland stands ready to play its part in working towards a sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine through the implementation of the two-state solution.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I presume the Minister of State would have been aware, or at least Basketball Ireland would have made him aware, of the predicament it was in and what it was facing in terms of playing an international fixture and that it was being threatened with fines up to €180,000 if it did not go ahead with such a match. This is despite the fact the international governing body for the sport, FIBA, had taken a different stance with regard to Ukraine and Russia in 2022. In fact, Basketball Ireland was ahead of the game because it had indicated at that stage it would not play Russia ahead of the international body. However, in this instance, the international body was threatening Ireland with huge fines if it did not go ahead with a fixture that was scheduled against the team. Was the Minister of State aware of that and what action or support did he give to Basketball Ireland and the women being faced with this match?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As was outlined in my response, it is a matter for the national governing bodies and international sporting organisations to make their own decisions in this regard. From the point of view of the Government, it does not have a role in any individual sporting organisation's decisions. However, when it comes to the issue of Gaza, the Government has led out internationally and has taken a very strong and forthright line and

approach regarding the war and the destruction that happened in Gaza. As well as seeking an outcome that will deliver peace, the Government was very much to the fore in leading out on recognising Palestine as a state, which many other states subsequently have done, and also in pursuing the occupied territories Bill, which a number of other states have now indicated they will follow. That is the approach the State has taken in relation to the war in Palestine. Regarding sporting organisations and their decisions to participate or otherwise in international competitions, that is entirely a matter for them.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We can have a discussion about Israel and genocide but that is not the purpose of this. International fixtures against genocidal nations is not a matter for the national sporting bodies alone. If Ireland had taken a stronger stance, and if the sporting body had gone ahead with a fixture against the Government's position then, I think, the Minister of State would have a different approach here. However, the match went ahead and, regrettably, the Irish team lost but there is a further match in March of next year. There is still time for Ireland to take a stance and to indicate to Basketball Ireland that it has the support of the Government in supporting the women playing for Ireland who did not want to play this fixture because of threats and intimidation from the other team and, in particular, because of the sporting boycott, which is a worldwide phenomenon at the moment against Israel. I thank Irish Sport for Palestine for its laudable work in profiling this case.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As a Government, Ireland has taken a very strong line in leading out and opposing what was happening in Gaza. I have already outlined that. However, the matter of participating in international competitions or otherwise is a matter for sporting organisations. That has always been the case and that will remain the case. It is not appropriate for the Government to get involved in an independent organisation's decision in that regard. That is the approach the Government will continue to take. I know the match took place in Riga, Latvia. Basketball Ireland had engaged with the international body given the fact it felt it was not safe for the match to take place in Israel given the backdrop. The match took place and the Irish team acquitted itself very well in that competition. It went to extra time and the team lost. However, the decision to participate or otherwise is entirely a matter for the national governing body.

Online Safety

2. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the steps An Coimisiún na Meán is taking to promote and enforce safety on social media and combat online harms, with particular regard to vulnerable groups such as children and vulnerable adults; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64384/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Last week during Questions on Policy or Legislation, the Tánaiste mentioned that the Minister was preparing proposals around online safety to bring before the House and expected to introduce them by the end of the year. I am keen to hear about the details of that, in particular the role for Coimisiún na Meán and how people will be protected and whether those protections will extend beyond those under 16 years of age.

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Online safety is a key Government priority. We have taken major steps forward in recent years and with Coimisiún na Meán the heart of our online safety framework, we have the tools to improve online safety, in particular for children and vulnerable adults. The online safety framework comprises the online safety code, the EU Digital Services Act, DSA, under which An Coimisiún na Meán is Ireland's digital services co-ordinator, and the EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation, for which An Coimisiún na Meán is a competent authority. The online safety code applies to designated video-sharing platforms established in Ireland, including TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and X, and Part B of the code contains specific obligations to put in place robust age assurance to prevent children from accessing adult content such as pornography or extreme violence. An Coimisiún na Meán is supervising compliance by designated services with the code. As digital services co-ordinator under the DSA, An Coimisiún na Meán works with the European Commission to ensure platforms put in place the systems and processes required to minimise the risk of exposure of children and young adults to illegal and harmful online content. The European Commission is investigating certain platforms with regard to their algorithms and the "rabbit hole" effect. Failure to adequately fulfil obligations under the DSA can lead to significant financial sanctions and continued non-compliance can lead to criminal sanctions for senior management under the OSMR.

Alongside this, I am working across Government to support robust age verification. In doing so, we must seek to ensure interoperability and respect users' rights, including data protection rights. To that end, my officials are working with the Government's Chief Information Officer and his office to look at practical technical solutions to age verification as part of the Government's digital wallet being developed using MyGovID. In addition, European Union member states are examining the so-called "digital age of majority" and Ireland is doing likewise.

I believe that any decision would be better taken by the EU and EU member states together but there are differing views on whether there should be an age of digital majority at all and, if there is one, what age it should be, or whether it should be an outright ban or a ban subject to parental consent.

9 o'clock

Finally, the upcoming digital fairness Act seeks to tackle dark patterns and unethical techniques or commercial patterns on social media platforms. I will continue to work across government and with stakeholders to improve online safety.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister. I have concerns. For a start, the focus being entirely on children and vulnerable people risks leaving behind the rest of the population. I am hearing more and more about age verification being a silver bullet to resolve everything. I have huge concerns about age verification, even if it is robust. It raises major privacy issues in that it would hand over official documentation to providers that have already proven that they do not respect our privacy. It has a cut-off point, which means that those who are not using age verification remain on a much darker Internet without those protections. We need algorithms turned off by default.

The Minister referenced EU law and said that is the best place to deal with this, but even this week we have seen rollbacks on the GDPR and potential rollbacks on the AI Act. I am not

comforted that the EU level of action around this is adequate. We have a specific role to play, given that so many tech companies are headquartered here.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: We have had extensive engagement in the Department on this, in particular in the context of Ireland's Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of next year. I am very conscious of the complexities of the issue and the fact that Deputy Gibney has raised an issue regarding age verification. How do we verify someone's age without having a data set that we know is verifiable? If someone says they are not prepared to hand over a data set, how can a person's age be verified? This is a very serious issue. In order to protect a child, we must have robust and strong data that shows he or she is over 18. If the Deputy is now saying that a person's rights with regard to their privacy trumps a child's age online, that is the start of a very big problem in the House.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am not saying that age verification cannot be used. Rather, I am telling the Minister that if it is used, it raises privacy concerns. My point is that it is not fixing the actual problem at the root because all of that nasty material remains online. We need to have recommender systems turned off by default because they are the issue. They are the things keeping our eyeballs on screens and making sure polarisation is driving clickbait and profit lines. There are fundamental ways in which these tech platforms need to be challenged that I do not see demonstrated by the Government.

We had an exchange in committee a number of months ago where the Minister mentioned that he had raised age verification with tech companies. When I asked him about this, we discussed raising the issue of platforms as publishers, for example, as a way to start examining much more stringent and clearer ways in which we can build guidelines and safety standards into the online world that mirror what we expect in the real world. That is what we are looking for in order to address these problems at the root.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am glad to inform the House that I inhabit the real world and most of the parents, teachers and people in the real world I speak to are concerned about children online and age verification. While Deputy Gibney might not think it is as important an issue as I do, as I said at committee it is important. Deputy Ó Snodaigh will recall that the last time we had to use the Government's data set for a particular piece of legislation, it floundered because some interest groups outside of the House were more interested in privacy than other issues and they got their way. The question of which is more important, privacy or the protection of children online, will be a difficult and salient one for the House. That is a question we will have to answer as a House soon because I will have to bring forward proposals, along with my colleagues the Ministers for public expenditure and reform and Social Protection. I hope all parties support that.

National Cultural Institutions

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the reason the projected costs of the refurbishment of the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork city are now calculated at over three times the original estimate of €28 million in 2020 to now being

estimated at nearly €94 million, and with a completion date of late 2028 at the earliest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64624/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question relates to the estimated costs for the welcome redevelopment of Crawford Art Gallery in Cork, one of the highlights for tourists visiting the city. The cost has increased substantially since the original forecast. Will the Minister outline the changes in design that have caused the increase?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for welcoming the fact that the work on the Crawford Art Gallery is going ahead. The national cultural institution investment programme is a key investment programme for the Department under the national development plan. All of the projects, including the redevelopment of the Crawford Art Gallery, are progressed in line with the infrastructure guidelines. The purpose of the infrastructure guidelines process is to develop and refine the project, including the cost estimates.

The redevelopment of the Crawford Art Gallery is a challenging and complex project that requires a combination of conservation and new-build elements on a restricted city centre site. The original estimate at preliminary business case stage was arrived at in 2020, prior to the planning and design phase, and the project has changed substantially since then. There has also been considerable construction inflation of just under 40% since 2020.

In 2024, the project went out to tender in the market. Following the outcome of the tender process to determine the main contractor, integrated design team and reserved specialists, the overall project budget estimate for the Crawford development is now €93.1 million, including VAT. To date, €6.5 million has been spent to bring the project through to this stage. This figure covers investigative surveys, design costs, the costs of decanting the art works and getting the art works into storage. The remaining capital costs are estimated at €86.6 million.

In line with the infrastructure guidelines, the final business case has been completed. As part of this process, there was a reappraisal of all options to deliver this key project. It found the proposed option remains the best to redevelop the gallery on a cost and quality basis. To proceed with the redevelopment now is the most direct, timely and cost-effective way to deliver a new and revitalised Crawford Art Gallery that will be a landmark artistic and cultural amenity in the centre of Cork city and bring to conclusion a project that has been planned for many years. The contractor is expected to be on site in early 2026 and the project will be completed in 2028. The gallery fit-out, commissioning and reoccupation will follow prior to opening.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Initially, the contractor was supposed to have been selected at the start of this year. What is the delay? Is the contractor signed, sealed and guaranteed to start work now that the gallery is closed? *The Obelisk of Bronze* by Michael Warren was removed recently, which signalled the closure of the gallery for three years. As the Minister said, in 2020 the estimated cost was €28 million. What is the point in having an estimated cost if no design work or proper planning is done? We have now arrived at a figure of €93 million. It is a good investment and I am not arguing that we should not spend the money, but the figure was €28 million in 2020 and there has been a big jump since. Has the project substantially changed from that which was projected to cost €28 million?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is quite right; there have been delays. We are now in a position whereby the contractor will be in place in January and it is to be hoped the project will be completed in 2028. The Deputy omitted to say, perhaps in error, that in the intervening period since the preliminary business case was completed, inflation in the construction sector has been running at 40% or more. It is a complicated and challenging site. It is a city centre site and heritage building. It is not straightforward. As with all of these things, there are elements that come to light after the fact that would not necessarily have been to the fore until the detailed design was initiated.

There is a significant cost differential. My Department has guidelines we have to adhere to. Those guidelines were adhered to. No moneys were expended prior to the initial response I gave a while ago, when I made reference to the figure of €6.5 million. We are now in a position, thanks to a Government decision arrived at in the past fortnight, to proceed. The Crawford Art Gallery is the only national cultural institution wholly outside of the city of Dublin and represents a massive part of our national development plan allocation in its entirety.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Perhaps we will address the fact that it is the only cultural institution outside of Dublin in the future and can examine how to make sure there are other national institutions outside of Dublin rather than concentrate all of them in one city. Costs have increased substantially. The gallery renovation will add an extra 50% in terms of space for exhibitions and so on. A lot of work will be done to make the gallery accessible in the future. Even a 40% increase in construction inflation would only bring the cost to €40 million. What exactly are the changes in the design or refurbishment that brought about such a substantial jump? It is a good investment and I have absolutely no problem with the figure. However, when a project is announced with a particular cost, the public starts to believe that is the amount it will cost until, all of a sudden, a new figure is announced. This makes us, as politicians, look a bit stupid.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Nobody wants to go out of his or her way to look stupid. The reality, as the Deputy knows as well as I do, is that when one goes under the bonnet of buildings like Leinster House, for example, one finds in the detailed design and in the final planning, as I saw in previous Departments I was in, that sometimes the depth of the problems associated with heritage buildings, in particular, is only discovered after the fact. I have made clear that I am not happy there is such a differential in the cost. The planning and design phase has led to the project changing considerably. I can get the Deputy the exact details on what has been added to the scope of works since the plan that was originally anticipated.

I welcome the Deputy's comment that we should see more NCIs outside Dublin. There is only one element of the National Museum of Ireland, for instance, outside Dublin, that being in County Mayo. There is an opportunity now under the NDP to see how we can incorporate something similar in other regions of the country.

Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Events

5. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the breakdown of the projected spend of €93 million by the State in hosting seven games of the Euro 2028 soccer tournament; and if additional funding will be given to local soccer clubs to increase participation in the sport and improve facilities in advance of the tournament. [64625/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I seek a breakdown of the projected State expenditure of €93 million on hosting the Euro 2028 soccer games. It is a welcome investment that will result, I hope, in greater investment in the sport. I am interested in what the breakdown is and how soccer clubs and communities around the country will benefit.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Euro 2028 is a really exciting opportunity for Ireland to co-host, along with England, Scotland and Wales, an internationally important soccer championship. We will host seven games in the competition, including a quarter-final. The Government will invest just over €92.9 million in supporting the event. It is anticipated the tournament will generate €449 million of socioeconomic benefits for the country.

The main elements of the expected expenditure include funding for stadium costs, safety and security, including Garda costs, transport, fan zones, Dublin City Council costs, sustainability investment and legacy programmes. The funding will be delivered through my Department, other Departments, Dublin City Council and relevant agencies. Furthermore, €6.2 million of our overall investment is ring-fenced for legacy initiatives and Ireland's national plan in this regard, which is being developed in consultation with the FAI. The legacy plan will focus on initiatives to increase participation and aims to ensure every child, regardless of background, gender or ability, can participate in football.

The expenditure of €93 million is made up of: €7.7 million for the Aviva Stadium upgrade and overlay; €2.1 million for central administration, transport and mobility; €5.7 million for fan zones; €10.6 million for other costs; €6.3 million for Dublin City Council costs; €37 million for safety and security; €6 million for the legacy programme; and €7.5 million for a general programme-level contingency. I can provide the Deputy with a breakdown of other, smaller items of expenditure.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: As I said, this investment is welcome, and also welcome is the fact it will generate a return of €400 million-plus. I recognise that a huge amount of money must be spent on security, Dublin City Council, etc. Out of the full €93 million, the €6 million on the legacy plan seems paltry. I encourage the Government to invest more or a greater portion of the allocation in that. In the past, the FAI and the League of Ireland have set out a vision for facilities investment, with the aim of helping clubs at the very lowest level to improve their dressing rooms, especially, and extend dressing rooms to enable more girls to play. I recognise that the Government has taken some steps on this but I ask that further investment be made out of this pot of money.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I take this opportunity to congratulate the Irish soccer team on its wonderful performance last Sunday and on the Thursday before that. Football has given us some of our best national memories over the years. The recent matches, particularly the one on Sunday, provided, once again, wonderful national moments that brought the whole country

together and brought great energy and excitement. I wish the team well in the draw taking place this afternoon for the play-offs that will be held in March. I congratulate, in particular, Troy Parrott, who gave a performance for the ages. Scoring five goals over two games is absolutely exceptional and a great credit to him. Credit also goes to the wider team for coming together, to Heimir Hallgrímsson for his leadership and to the FAI as well. We look forward to the excitement in the months ahead as we build up to the play-offs. I also congratulate our neighbours in Scotland. I did not think the end of Ireland's match on Sunday could be topped but, by God, it was some finish to the Scottish game. I congratulate the Scottish players on their qualification.

I take Deputy O Snodaigh's point. We have €6 million for the legacy plan and we want to make sure it has an impact and improves participation. That certainly is our objective.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I concur with everything the Minister of State said. Troy Parrott is an example to us all that if there is investment in sports, especially in areas that are disadvantaged, it can bring about huge changes in people's lives. That is why I am encouraging greater investment in the facilities programme of the FAI and the League of Ireland to ensure we get the best out of our youths and we do not end up with youths having to go abroad for academies and the like. I know from my own family of younger kids who had to go abroad to avail of the best standards in terms of academies.

I understand a delivery company was set up for some of this. I hope it will be able to deliver. When the Special Olympics were held here in 2003, there were hosts and host areas. I do not know whether that is being considered for Euro 2028 as all the matches are concentrated in Dublin. However, that does not mean all the investment must be concentrated in Dublin.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will be looking to see how we can maximise the benefit across the country. Young Troy Parrott is a wonderful example of the quality of young players we have in this country. That is something the Government is backing. As the Deputy knows, we stepped up very significantly in the recent budget by allocating €3 million to the development of football academies for the year ahead. We want to build on that. We recognise the changed circumstances post Brexit and the importance of making sure young players have the opportunity to maximise their potential within the country. We see the benefit of having those young players in the League of Ireland. We are seeing a renaissance and a flourishing in the League of Ireland, with some of those wonderful young players starring in that. We want to ensure that as many young people as possible have every opportunity through the academy system. The Government is committed to doing that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An extra €10 million or €20 million would not go astray.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We have made a massive start and it has been very much welcomed within the footballing community. We look forward to seeing it reap benefits in the time ahead.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Artists' Remuneration

6. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he intends to reopen the basic income for the arts scheme to new applicants. [64552/25]

7. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the status of the progress made regarding the establishment of a permanent basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64387/25]

23. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will expand the number eligible for the basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64162/25]

32. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will outline his proposals regarding the continuation of the basic income for the arts scheme. [64393/25]

56. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will extend the scope of the basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64161/25]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: When will the Minister reopen the basic income for artists scheme? We need to encourage the arts in Ireland. As a country that rates culture and the arts so highly, we must encourage new and emerging artists to thrive through every art form.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6, 7, 23, 32 and 56 together.

I was delighted to have secured an allocation for a successor scheme to the basic income for the arts pilot as part of budget 2026. While the detail of the future scheme will need to be agreed by the Government, this is a major milestone for the arts in Ireland. I am particularly pleased that the research my Department conducted provided the Government with a clear evidence base upon which to make the decision.

More than 17,000 submissions were received to the public consultation I held in August. This is a record for our Department and shows how much interest there is in this scheme. I also held a stakeholder forum to gather input from the sector on plans for a successor scheme. There were over 200 attendees from across the arts sector including resource organisations, local authorities and artists, both recipients and those not on the pilot. Eligibility criteria and parameters for a successor scheme have not yet been finalised.

The cost of the basic income for the arts pilot scheme was €35 million for a full calendar year for 2,000 artists to participate, with each recipient receiving €325 a week. There were over 8,200 eligible applicants to the pilot in 2022. To have funded all those eligible would have cost approximately €139 million per year. Agreement has been secured by the Government for a successor to the basic income for the arts pilot scheme with an allocation of €18.27 million in my Department's 2026 Estimate. I look forward to the design and delivery of the successor scheme. Consultations and planning in relation to this are currently under way. I can confirm

that the basic income for the arts pilot scheme will end in February 2026, which is when the final pilot payment will be made to the current cohort of recipients. We intend to announce a successor scheme and open for applications in the new year. While eligibility has not yet been finalised, a new cohort of recipients will be selected on the basis of eligible applications for a successor scheme. Therefore, it will not be the same 2,000 recipients. Applications to that successor scheme will be based on the eligibility criteria and parameters of that scheme. Those details will be published once they have been agreed by the Government.

The pilot scheme provides a weekly income of €325 to approximately 2,000 randomly selected artists and creative arts workers. The primary objective of the scheme is to help artists to deal with precarious incomes and to prevent talent from leaving the sector for economic reasons. The pilot is underpinned by a robust research project consisting of a randomised controlled trial with a treatment group of 2,000 and a control group of 1,000. It is clear from evidence collected to date that it has a positive impact for those in receipt of it. The data shows that the basic income for the arts is having a consistent, positive impact across all indicators affecting practice development, sectoral retention, well-being and deprivation. According to the data the Department has collected, 51% of artists who do not receive the basic income for the arts are living in enforced deprivation, compared with 16% of the general population. The scheme is therefore a means of addressing consistent poverty in the sector. The data also shows that at the start of the basic income for the arts scheme, the median income earned by those on the scheme was €19,200 per annum, which is 54% lower than the national annual median of €41,823. At the same time, recipients' arts-related income increased by over €500 per month on average, while their income from non-arts work decreased by around €280. Recently, I published a cost-benefit analysis showing that the real net fiscal cost of the basic income for the arts pilot was just under €72 million over the three years compared with a gross cost of €105 million for the three years. This is because the basic income for the arts generated returns in the form of tax revenues of €36 million and savings in social protection payments of €6.5 million. For every €1 of public money invested in the pilot, society received €1.39 in return. The cost-benefit analysis shows that audience engagement with the arts generated an estimated €16.9 million in social value over the three-year pilot and improvements in psychological well-being contributed almost €80 million to the total benefit. Dependence on social protection declined with recipients receiving €100 less per month on average and they are 38 percentage points less likely to receive jobseeker's payments. The cost-benefit analysis also shows that the scheme produced over €100 million in social and economic benefits. As I mentioned, for every €1 of public money invested, society received €1.39.

The findings of the latest basic income for the arts report on two years of the payment shows that basic income for the arts recipients, compared with those not in receipt of the basic income for the arts, are six percentage points more likely to have worked, spend on average 11 weekly hours more on their creative practice, are 14 percentage points more likely to have completed new works in the previous six months and invest more financially in their practices. The basic income for the arts research has developed a strong, irrefutable evidence base that the intervention has worked and has consistent positive impacts for those in receipt of it. Artists in receipt of the support are typically able to devote more time to their art, produce more pieces of work, experience a boost to their well-being through greater life satisfaction and reduced anxiety and are protected from the precarious nature of this sector to a greater degree than those who are not receiving the support. The research from the pilot has consistently demonstrated

both the positive impact the basic income for the arts has for those in receipt of it and how difficult it is to work as an artist in Ireland given the income precarity prevalent in the sector. The basic income for the arts successor scheme will help to sustain the careers of those artists who will receive it and retain their talent in the arts sector.

Based on the amount allocated to the basic income for the arts subhead in the budget of €18.27 million, the successor scheme will support the practices of at least 2,000 artists in 2026 at €325 per week with payment beginning in quarter 4. Stakeholder consultation and engagement with other relevant Government Departments on the design of the new scheme will continue to determine details such as the duration, eligibility and selection method, the details of which have not yet been agreed or decided. Once the parameters of the scheme have been agreed by the Government, I intend to publish them. I hope to take a proposal to the Government as soon as possible and will aim to open for applications at the earliest opportunity thereafter. While the detail of the future scheme will need to be agreed by the Government, this is a major milestone for artists and the arts in Ireland. I was delighted to have secured an allocation for a successor scheme as part of the budget.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister for his response. While Sinn Féin welcomes the six-month extension to the basic income scheme for artists, they are at a loss to know what is going to happen now. The date when the Minister intends to roll out this scheme would be very helpful. He said quarter 4 but what is the actual date? What are artists supposed to do if this extension only goes to February and the scheme is not reopening until quarter 4? I ask the Minister to look at that again. There was actually a €2 million cut in the budget to the scheme. This is going to have an effect on all the artists getting paid from this scheme. I also that people with disabilities be included in the scheme. They are being left behind again, stripped of their basic allowance and not allowed to apply for a medical card through the means test they are subject to.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We in the Social Democrats welcome this programme. It has been wonderful. My office has spoken to dozen of artists who tell me that no matter the medium, the scheme has meant they have been able to produce more art, has helped them to have healthier and happier lives and has allowed their art to get to more people. There are paintings, sculptures, poems and plays that simply would not exist without this scheme. We genuinely feel passionately that it is a positive element. It is helpful to know that the eligibility criteria will be published as soon as possible because I know people in the artistic community are waiting with bated breath to understand how it will run. I think I heard in the Minister's answer that those who have been in the existing pilot will not be eligible for the second scheme, or did I get that wrong? Will the Minister clarify? Will those who have been on the scheme be able to reapply? I share the same concerns that there is a six-month gap and people with disabilities are being penalised.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I welcome that people are so supportive of the scheme. There is a complication with regard to how the scheme runs forward because the pilot was due to end on 31 December, but out of savings in our Department's resources we are able to extend it to February to give an extra two months. At the same time, I mentioned the level of consultation we are doing in the Department. It is probably the largest consultative process we have ever

done in the Department. It shows the range of opinions. Not everybody agrees on the mechanisms that should be imported for a new scheme. There is a large cohort for whom this scheme was not an option. I have to make sure that whatever we do is fair and reflective of similar schemes the Government also runs with randomised selection and things like that. The people outside the scheme at the moment are every bit as anxious to know if they will get a chance to come in. If it is the same cohort who roll over again, that is not fair to the people outside of it. I think both Deputies would agree we have to make sure whatever we do is fair. There is also a level of engagement we have to do with the Department of Social Protection with regard to the issues raised. Ultimately, changes in eligibility for Department of Social Protection schemes are a matter for the Minister for Social Protection. I hope that once this level of engagement and consultation with the sector, which is ongoing and led by my Department, has finished, I will be in a position to bring forward shortly - I will not give a date - a proposal to the Government which will get its agreement. I remind the House that since my appointment as Minister for the arts, I have made sure this is to be put on a permanent footing. When I came into the Department, there was no prospect of this being retained. That should be seen as a big positive given the budgetary discussions we had.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: It is disappointing to hear that artists who have already been on it will not be considered. These artists deserve an ability to plan for their future. Some have been tied into mortgages, etc., and they are going to be at a loss with this. I also mentioned that people with disabilities were stripped of basic allowances and even medical cards through means tests if they participated. I ask the Minister to look at that again. I also ask him to look at comedians being considered under this tranche. It is disappointing, in the context of the Bill proposed by Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh that we debated last week, that artists and comedians are not allowed to apply for this funding.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is not the case.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Is the Minister telling me they are allowed to apply? In relation to the six-month gap, what are people to do in those six months?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister for the information. We share his passion for this programme. My concern is that it seems that a pilot was run and we are just getting another pilot. We need more certainty, more permanence and a broader cohort of people who can access it. I raised in previous sessions with the Minister the idea that a pilot should also be something that we capture the data from and potentially offer to other cohorts in society. At that time, he dismissed it. He said that he was just looking after his Department and that it was not fair to expect that he would be sharing those results with Cabinet colleagues to identify other cohorts in Irish society who could benefit from a basic income. In the last couple of weeks, in the culture, communications and sport committee, we have identified that a good group of people who would be eligible for this or would potentially benefit from it is journalists, who are within the Minister's area. I also would like to raise again that seasonal farmers are another group. There are lots of groups in Irish society to which this could apply. If we let this pass by without capturing this data, learning from it and seeing how we can apply it to others, we are missing a trick.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have a question down on this issue, but for some reason it has not been grouped with these questions even though it is on the exact same matter. How long will the new cohort be on the basic income scheme? Maybe the Minister has not worked that out. I think he said that €18 million has been set aside for next year. That indicates that this scheme will not start until June if it is the same funding of €325 a week.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I have not worked out that detail yet. As soon as I do, I will take it to the Government.

With regard to journalists, we have journalistic schemes that are operated from my Department, including the court reporting scheme and the supporting democracy schemes. The Deputy might not be aware of them but we support them. I have not dismissed other Departments using basic income, but I am not the Minister for agriculture, as I have said three or four times at this stage. If the Minister for agriculture wants to bring in a basic income for farmers scheme, that is his prerogative. I am the Minister for arts.

I never said that people on the existing scheme would not be able to apply for the new scheme. That is an unfortunate conflation Deputy Bennett is trying to do here. I do not know whether that is to try to instil fear in the artists. Let me be clear: I have not made a decision with regard to eligibility, or who will or will not be able to apply. As soon as I do, I will go to the Government with it and it will be brought back to the House. To be honest about it, a lot of people are worried. To use that fear today is not something the Deputy should do. Most people in the arts community are very welcoming of the fact that we have permanency of this scheme going forward. Deputy Bennett mentioned mortgages and things like that. She suggested that I am somehow going to scrap the existing 2,000. I never said that. She should reflect on that.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Thank you for the clarification.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: With regard to the Bill that was debated last week, Deputy Ó Snodaigh knows quite well my view with regard to comedy. That pertains to the Arts Council and Arts Council grants, which are a totally different thing. I have made my views clear with regard to the Arts Council and the funding of things like country music, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, comedy and other genres of arts which are currently not funded by the Arts Council. I am awaiting a report, which I am sure will probably be due any day now, from Professor Niamh Brennan with regard to the serious governance issues at the Arts Council. It is prudent and responsible to receive that first before I consider any other legislation with regard to the Arts Council that would involve having to come back after Christmas with a second Bill. I am sure people like the Deputy would be the first to ask why I did not wait for the report to be finished.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

National Broadband Plan

9. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the way in which the national broadband plan will address gaps in high-speed broadband connectivity

in larger towns such as Balbriggan and Skerries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64566/25]

Deputy Grace Boland: The roll-out of national broadband is delivering high-speed fibre to rural and urban communities. It is a success and progress has been made, yet we know that there is partial coverage in some towns and villages. For example, my own hometown of Skerries has partial coverage of fibre broadband and not access to the national fibre broadband. The Minister might give us an update on when we can expect full roll-out of the national broadband plan in all towns and villages.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Government is committed to the rollout of high-speed broadband right across the country. The national broadband plan, NBP, is the Government's initiative to deliver high-speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland where the commercial telecom operators' reach will not extend. In addition to the work being progress by National Broadband Ireland right across the NBP intervention areas, progress is also being made by commercial operators in expanding their next generation networks throughout the State and ensuring the targets set out in the digital connectivity 2022 strategy are achieved.

Skerries is predominantly located in the amber area on the broadband map, which is available on my Department's website. The amber area is to be served by the network deployed under the NBP State-led intervention. Balbriggan is largely in the blue area on the broadband map. The blue area represents those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high-speed broadband services. The Department defines high-speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30 Mbps download and 6 Mbps upload.

National Broadband Ireland has advised that the majority of premises in Skerries are ready for service, and 2,421 premises in the Skerries deployment area are available to order or pre-order. The remaining premises are currently undergoing survey work and have an anticipated date for connection of October to December 2026. The latest information on when high-speed broadband will become available to premises in the integration area can be found on the website. This website is regularly updated and provides the expected timeline for delivery and status of any works that are initiated at any point in time.

The activities of commercial operators delivering high-speed broadband within blue areas are not planned or funded by the State and the Department has no statutory authority to intervene or report in that regard. However, ComReg provides an online tool on its website to check the available broadband options at a particular address. NBI is bringing fibre broadband to 564,000 premises across the intervention area. The roll-out is divided into 227 deployment areas, each averaging 25 km, although some extend beyond town boundaries due to network design.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister and welcome his update. I have a concern in relation to the blue area. Part of Skerries is in the blue area as well. The Minister mentioned Balbriggan. The problem with the blue area is that the residents of an estate are being told that unless they come together as a collective of 20 to 50 residents who are willing to sign up with one commercial provider, they will not be able to access the fibre broadband, or it will not be delivered. That is not good enough. It also undermines competition. All the residents have to

come together and sign up to one fibre broadband provider. Skerries is 35 minutes from the city centre, and broadband is an absolutely essential infrastructure for businesses, for remote working and for our day-to-day lives. Our lives happen online. I would really appreciate if something can be looked at in terms of the blue area.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy. She is right in relation to the blue area in general. We continue to receive very high volumes of queries with regard to blue areas for high-speed broadband and poor speeds and services and things like that. Notwithstanding the fact that there are issues - if the Deputy wants to give me the particular details with regard to specific parts of Skerries and Balbriggan, I will have the Department look at them - I think people in general will acknowledge that some years ago, when I came into the Dáil first, Taoiseach's Questions, Leaders' Questions, the Order of Business and questions to the Minister were all dominated by broadband. Now I am lucky to get a question once every two or three months with regard to broadband in rural areas and in urban areas as well, which shows that the money allocated by the Government and by Deputy Donohoe in his former role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has been transformative. If it was not working to the extent that it is in constituencies like my own, we would be inundated with questions. There are issues - I am not saying there are not - but we will work through them. If the Deputy wants to give me the particular details, we will have a look at them.

Deputy Grace Boland: I agree that the roll-out of the national broadband plan has been a success. We just need to make sure that people, families, residents and businesses are not left behind. I will contact the Minister's office in relation to the specific areas.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: There is a Dublin-specific issue we have to address. Fadó fadó when cable television came into people's houses - we did not have that luxury in the country, I do not know whether An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach did and Deputy Ó Snodaigh probably did - they had to break footpaths when they brought in cables and in many cases, left no ducting so there is a significant problem involving ducting in a lot of urban areas, particularly in Dublin, that we will have to address with local authorities. It will cost an awful lot of money. I know it is a particularly big issue in suburban Dublin and, in many cases, prevents the delivery of high-speed broadband. It is probably part of the next generation of problems we will have to fix in suburban areas, particularly in Dublin.

We can see the transformation not only in rural Ireland but in urban Ireland over the past number of years with access to proper telecommunications and connectivity. This is only right. We will continue to work on outages and the problems that are there.

National Cultural Institutions

10. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his plans to expand and prioritise capital grants for accessibility upgrades in arts centres, galleries and theatres in County Louth, with a particular focus on improving facilities for disabled performers and disabled patrons and if additional ring-fenced funding will be made available to support essential works such as accessible backstage areas, adaptive performance spaces,

sensory-friendly infrastructure and improved mobility access throughout these venues. [64318/25]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I wish to ask the Minister about his plans to expand and prioritise capital grants for accessibility upgrades in arts centres, galleries and theatres in County Louth and nationally with a particular focus on improving facilities for disabled performers and disabled patrons and whether additional ring-fenced funding will be made available to support essential works such as accessible backstage areas, adaptive performance spaces, sensory-friendly infrastructure and improved mobility access throughout these venues.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As outlined in the programme for Government, the Government believes that culture and the arts are essential to a well-rounded society providing opportunities for education, expression and community engagement. My Department is taking a number of steps to improve, increase and widen access to the arts.

A network of cultural infrastructure exists throughout the country with the majority in the ownership of local authorities. Annual support, including programming and revenue supports, is provided to this arts and culture infrastructure by local authorities and the Arts Council.

Within my Department, the cultural capital scheme was originally launched in October 2019 with a total fund of €4.7 million. Both An Táin and Droichead Arts Centre in County Louth were awarded funding under stream B and stream D of that scheme. Some €1.4 million is now available under stream E of the scheme, which was launched in June 2023. Grants of up to €50,000 are available to not-for-profit arts and cultural organisations. Projects that address accessibility, including accessibility audits as well as the other works mentioned by the Deputy, are also eligible for funding under stream E.

As I announced after budget 2026, my Department has been allocated €6 million for the new arts capital programme in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. My Department is in the process of designing the specifications of the scheme, including the setting of eligibility criteria. This will see much-needed capital supports for arts and culture organisations.

The Arts Council also provides financial support to a number of initiatives aimed at increasing public access, participation and engagement in the arts. A new All In scheme developed by people with disabilities will support organisations such as theatres, museums, galleries and festivals to improve access, remove barriers and welcome more people with access requirements. The Arts Council is a partner in developing this new scheme with Arts Council England, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Wales and Creative Scotland.

Finally, as a follow up to the report of the night-time economy task force, the Department commissioned a survey in 2024 to examine the issues for patrons and artists with disabilities when going out at night and engaging in cultural activities. A report of that survey has now been finalised and it contains a number of recommendations that aim to improve access for patrons when going out at night. My Department is currently reviewing those recommendations with key stakeholders with a view to providing an action plan with practical measures towards creating a more inclusively accessible night-time economy.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Under the national human rights strategy, we have an opportunity and an obligation to really drive forward all those ambitious things mentioned by the Minister. It is about making sure we have a clear and ambitious plan to expand and prioritise capital grants specifically for accessibility upgrades. The Minister mentioned the new capital plan on which the Department is working. So many of our theatres are accessible but they are just accessible. The Minister mentioned disabled artists. We have forgotten about disabled artists in many ways. We need to be ambitious in our plan. Disabled artists deserve rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms and stages they can actually use. An Táin is accessible but is it comfortable for disabled patrons? I am not sure, so we need that funding for a really dedicated and ambitious plan.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is right. It is 2025. We should not have a situation where in some of our national cultural institutions, people with disabilities cannot go in the front door. That is the reality because of delays. Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I spoke about this a while ago regarding the rehabilitation of sensitive buildings and architecturally conserved areas. There are people with mobility problems who cannot go in the front door of our national cultural institutions. I find that intolerable. It really sticks in my craw that we cannot bring people in the front door regardless of their ability or mobility.

The Deputy raised a very interesting point in which I have a personal interest, namely, disabled patrons. Some of our cultural institutions can be a hellish experience, particularly for people with photosensitivity or neurodiversity, so the redesign and design of them has to be done in conjunction with people who are neurodiverse and have particular disabilities. I welcome the Deputy's proposals.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am really heartened by the Minister's really positive response because, as he said, culture belongs to us all. It is not just for people who are able to get access or enjoy it. I look forward to seeing the Minister bring that attitude to practical policies and ensuring that all our people can enjoy our culture and cultural experiences because we have much to offer and a lot of people are not getting access to it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will be bringing forward proposals to Government shortly regarding the new arts capital scheme. It will be along the same lines as the sports capital grant scheme. It is a small amount of money to start with. We are testing the waters in year one but I hope to grow it exponentially over the next couple of years. It will be local authority-dependent. They own most of the properties around the country. It will not be open to the national cultural institutions. To be honest, they have enough money, which they get directly from the Department. This will be designed for the smaller groups around the country that do not have access to capital works and capital schemes but I will encourage local authorities to come up with schemes and matched funding and to be ambitious. We will put our toe in the water in the first year but I hope to grow it and, with the support of colleagues in the House, to do for arts and culture what we have done successfully over the past number of years for sport.

Questions Nos. 11 and 12 taken with Written Answers.

Arts Funding

13. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the funding that has been allocated to a centre (details supplied) in Portlaoise, County Laois, over the past five years; the funding that is planned for the centre in the coming years; whether there are opportunities to access additional departmental or national funding streams to support its ongoing operation, programming, and development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63402/25]

Deputy William Aird: I am raising this question to get clear and committed support for Dunamaise Arts Centre in County Laois. This centre opened in 1999. Capital funding was supported by the then Minister for arts, Michael D. Higgins. Matching funding was proposed by me in the council chamber in Laois in 1999. Dunamaise Arts Centre has served as the cornerstone for cultural life in Laois and the wider midlands. I am asking the Minister to provide funding for the centre and outline the additional funding available to support its ongoing operation, programming and development.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As outlined in the programme for Government, the Government believes that culture and the arts are essential to a well-rounded society providing opportunities for education, expression and community engagement. My Department is taking a number of steps to improve, increase and widen access to the arts.

A network of cultural infrastructure exists throughout the country with the majority in the ownership of local authorities. My Department provides capital support for arts and culture infrastructure while annual support, including programming and revenue supports, is provided by local authorities and the Arts Council.

The centre in Portlaoise referred to by the Deputy has been awarded capital funding of over €340,000 under various schemes from my Department since 2006. Within the past five years, it availed of funding to the value of €9,996 under stream D of the cultural capital scheme, a scheme which was set up in direct response to Covid-19 to assist organisations with re-opening safely.

As I mentioned, annual support, including programming and revenue supports, for arts and culture centres is provided by the Arts Council. I understand the organisation in question is in receipt of annual funding from the Arts Council and was awarded €125,000 in 2024 and €145,000 in 2025.

My Department has a capital funding scheme open for applications called stream E of the cultural capital scheme. It focuses on enhancing the existing stock of arts and culture centres throughout the country and provides grants of up to €50,000. I believe the organisation in question is aware of this scheme and had been in the process of submitting an application in September of this year but has put it on hold and expects to resubmit the full application in due course. The Department would welcome this application as soon as the applicant is in a position to submit it.

Finally, as announced in budget 2026, my Department has been allocated €6 million for a new arts capital programme for arts and culture organisations across the country in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. My Department is in the process of designing the specifications of the scheme, including the setting of eligibility criteria.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister. For 25 years the Dunamaise Arts Centre has provided a home for drama, music, film, community groups, festivals and the visual arts in my region. It has supported both professional and amateur artists. It has built a reputation for excellence. The centre has vibrant, energetic and ambitious plans and is ready to expand and strengthen its role as the cultural heart of the county. However, the centre urgently requires renewed investment. Its technical and production infrastructure is now significantly outdated. Essential systems have reached the end of their lifespan, including lighting and power distribution, control desks and production computers. Much of the lighting is based on older, unsustainable technology soon to be phased out under EU regulations. Dunamaise Arts Centre needs full modernisation. The estimated cost is approximately €220,000 and this is not outrageous. Without this investment, the ability of the centre to safely and professionally host performances will be compromised.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: I am asking for the core infrastructure funding for the centre. It is ideally placed-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: -----for departmental cultural capital funds-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: -----Arts Council supports, Creative Ireland initiatives and sustainability-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy, thank you.

Deputy William Aird: -----based on funding schemes.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Minister to reply.

Deputy William Aird: There is nobody else here.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As I said a while ago, I understand Dunamaise Arts Centre is due to bring forward an application. It was to bring this forward in September, I think, but it has been delayed for some reason. Once that application is brought forward, it can be assessed. The important thing in the wider scheme for these centres is we will have an arts capital scheme that is the first of its kind, as soon as we have eligibility and a process in place. That has to be approved by the Minister for public expenditure before it can be formally launched. Regional centres and smaller centres around the country do not get as much money as some of the larger ones, especially those based in Dublin, and the national cultural institutions, which are wholly dependent on the State. These centres will have access to smaller levels of funding that can do

the things the Deputy was talking about such as sound desks, lighting, improvements to seating and ticket offices, IT enhancements and all that.

We will not be able to do everything. I imagine we will be inundated in year one but if we are I hope that will form the blueprint for us to have a bigger budget from the Department of public expenditure in future years.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister for his remarks. That is the most positive reply I have received since I became a TD. It looks as though we only have to put in the submission and the Minister will look after us reading between the lines. The Dunamais Arts Centre can serve its community for the next 25 years as it has for the past 25. I acknowledge the exceptional work of the team there including Ciara O'Connell, the CEO, Nick Antonm the technical manager and all the front-of-house, administrative and technical staff. This commitment has kept a vital cultural space alive through significant challenges. I encourage the people of Laois and all surrounding counties to continue supporting the centre.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The last point the Deputy made is the most important. All these arts centres will only be as good as the local community that supports them. No amount of schemes, interventions and grants will ever supplement what the local community can do by attending and supporting artists, whether touring or local. That is the most important issue. Whether they are in parish halls, purpose-built centres like the Dunamais Arts Centre, hotels or wherever, the most important thing people can do to have a vibrant arts community is to support the artists and go out on a Friday or Saturday night, or even the middle of the week and see what is on in the local area, be that in Portlaoise, Abbeyleix, Rathdowney or wherever. These events need support and do not survive without support and the Government cannot do it all on its own.

On the Deputy's comments about this being the most positive response he has received since he came into the Dáil, I am flattered and thank him very much. I encourage the Dunamais Arts Centre to put in its application. Obviously once that is in, that will be assessed according to the strict criteria within the Department.

Deputy William Aird: There have not been many who have spoken here this morning so I should be at the top of the list.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We move on. Deputy Aird is up again for Question No. 41. Or is that the same question?

Deputy William Aird: It is the same question.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): That question has been dealt with. We will take Question No. 72 as Deputy Ó Snodaigh is here and there is nobody else. He probably did not think we would get to that question.

Sports Events

72. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he has engaged with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and the Dublin and neighbouring local authorities to ensure that the city, neighbouring towns, communities and soccer clubs can welcome and host fans of the various international teams competing in the Euro 2028 soccer tournament; the social impact and community activity programmes will benefit from a €6.2 million spend as part of Ireland's €93 million investment in Euro 2028 soccer tournament; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64626/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I did not think we would get to this question but some of it has been discussed with the Minister of State in the context of investment in sport and where we finished off discussing Euro 2028. I am asking whether the city, neighbouring towns and communities and sports clubs can host fans and the international teams and create events similar to what happen during the Special Olympics in 2003.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We discussed this in good detail earlier, but the objective will be to ensure there is as much of a legacy and impact across the country from the hosting of Euro 2028 as possible. Being able to host seven games as part of the tournament, including the quarter final, is a great opportunity. I have no doubt it will really take hold of the country over the course of the period. As I said, we estimate the cost at €92 million to €93 million. The economic return to the wider economy will be much more significant than that and it makes a lot of sense from that point of view but we also want to ensure there is a return in the form of an impact on participation in football and sport generally and that we maximise that as much as we can. We are just under three years away from the hosting of that tournament. We are engaging in very strong detail with other organisations and national agencies to make sure it impacts as strongly as possible. We are also engaging with the FAI on discussions about the legacy piece and how we can best maximise the impact of that. I certainly hope we will have another football tournament to participate in between now and then, depending on how the play-offs go in March, but Euro 2028 is a very exciting opportunity for the country. We will work across the board with all stakeholders to make sure we maximise the impact of it in every way possible.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. We have an opportunity. While €93 million has been committed it is 2028 so there is an opportunity to add to that. The Government has committed to the €93 million. We know what the return is but between now and 2028 greater investment can be put into local clubs and communities to ensure we get the greatest benefit for Dublin and outside the city as well because even though the matches are being held here, this is the world stage. We need to ensure that similar to other large sporting events that have been held in Ireland in the past, and will be held shortly, we will be on the world stage and need to ensure that not just what happens on the pitch but what happens outside it works well. There is need for a greater investment.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are certainly determined, from a Government point of view, to maximise the opportunity and to ensure from a point of view of participation that every opportunity is taken to ensure it cuts through and gets people involved in football and other sport. The commitment of the Government in the most recent budget to football and the establishment of academies speaks to how we have been supporting football very strongly in

the country. While at Government level will be doing all we can, there is no doubt moments like last weekend and the inspiration provided by Troy Parrott and the rest of the team encourage participation and young people. I recall watching matches in tournaments in the past and I would be bursting out the door afterwards, even if I was on my own, to hit the ball. That is the type of thing that really cuts through and inspires and energise people to participate in sport. From a Government point of view, in terms of the investment and policy structure, we will be doing all we can to maximise that and provide the opportunity for people to participate and engage.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We have a once-in-a-lifetime - though maybe not in a lifetime - opportunity to enhance Ireland's reputation.

10 o'clock

In one small area of Dublin city, the north inner city, which has had bad press in recent times, Troy Parrott, Kellie Harrington and people like them have shown that, even when conditions are adverse, sports can shine through. The more we invest in sports and in those communities, the more we will see great sportspeople into the future, whom we can all follow and use to encourage other young people into sport. In an earlier response, the Minister of State mentioned that Dublin City Council will get about €6 million out of this. Again, I encourage him to look at that funding again and to increase it to ensure that the Dublin region as a whole and areas outside of it can get more from the investment.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We should not forget the support that we have given to football over the past number of years, which we continue to give. Some €75 million was allocated to the FAI between 2019 and 2024, with €30 million specifically to support football development aimed at promoting participation by young people. That has been added to in the most recent budget through the investment in the academies and the very significant ongoing investment through the community sports facilities fund, which supports the work of soccer clubs right across the country in developing their facilities, and through the large scale sport infrastructure fund, through which we have made significant commitments to the development of Dalymount Park, Wexford Youths' stadium, Sligo Rovers' grounds and, significantly, Finn Harps' Finn Park in Donegal. That is something we have been doing and that we continue to do. We now want to make sure the opportunity provided by Euro 2028 adds to that very significantly in a way that lasts into the future.

Film Industry

15. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his assessment of the current distribution of film industry infrastructure and funding across the State; if he will consider targeted supports or new initiatives to promote film-industry growth and infrastructure at regional level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64601/25]

Deputy Paula Butterly: Will the Minister outline his assessment of the current distribution of film industry infrastructure and funding across the State? Will he indicate whether he will consider targeted supports or new initiatives to promote film industry growth and production capacity at a regional level?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I had thought we were nearly finished but I thank the Deputy. A range of supports are provided for screen productions in Ireland, including regional productions. These are kept under ongoing review to ensure we remain an attractive location for inward investment and continue to develop our domestic industry. In 2024, Screen Ireland invested more than €6.5 million in productions, festivals, initiatives and activities that contributed to the nationwide development of the screen sector. This included €4 million awarded through the agency's nationwide additional production fund. Screen Ireland also provided funding supports for talent and skill development initiatives across the country, such as the agency's National Talent Academy network, which has key bases in Limerick and Galway.

In 2025, Screen Ireland ring-fenced funding of €5.5 million for nationwide development and Irish-language storytelling. Over 50% of live action feature film and TV drama in Screen Ireland's 2025 slate of productions is expected to be produced or filmed on location in regions outside of the traditional film-making hubs of Dublin and Wicklow. These regions include the counties of Donegal, Limerick, Galway, Monaghan and Sligo.

Ireland is home to several world-class film studios boasting state-of-the-art production and post-production facilities and various support infrastructures, which have helped to attract incoming productions from studios and content streaming companies, including unscripted productions.

Screen Ireland's National Talent Academy network includes: the National Talent Academy for Film and Television, which is led by Ardán in Galway; the National Talent Academy for Animation, which is led by Animation Ireland; the National Talent Academy for VFX, which is led by the Cultural and Creative Industries Skillnet; and three regional academies, which are currently managed by the Atlantic Academy in Galway, Film in Limerick, and the Clermont Enterprise Hub in Wicklow. The network has been established to develop a highly skilled and diverse talent and crew base throughout the country and offers a wide range of activities for the Irish screen industry, including courses, programmes and career opportunities.

Addressing innovation, skills development and sectoral growth, the national talent academies are the result of additional stimulus investment provided by the Department. They form part of a wider strategy to support skills development across all regions in the country. They also seek to address educational skills gaps in the screen sector and drive more Irish talent from all backgrounds into the Irish screen industry.

Deputy Paula Butterly: While all of this is very welcome, it is essential that funding and infrastructure be distributed fairly across the State and never concentrated in a small number of locations. County Louth provides a strong example of the potential that exists regionally when investment and opportunities are made available. The film "Skintown", produced by Keeper Pictures with the support of Screen Ireland and Northern Ireland Screen, was filmed in Dundalk in 2025, further cementing the area's role as an emerging regional hub for film and television. Dundalk and the wider region have a proud film-making tradition. One of our own, John Moore, the Dundalk director known internationally for major action films such as "Behind Enemy Lines", "The Omen" and "A Good Day to Die Hard", continues to contribute to the sector at home through initiatives such as the John Moore Film Award at Dundalk Institute of Technology. At this moment, I will reiterate the great news that Queen's University Belfast and

DkIT are going to merge and that Dundalk will be a university town. It has to be regional and not based on a few towns and cities.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I support Deputy Butterly on this. The Minister might update us. We had a regional film uplift fund in the past but, as a result of issues relating to EU supports, that could not continue. He will certainly be aware that, when filming has to take place outside of Dublin and Wicklow, crews have to travel and there is a cost to that. He has outlined the success we have seen with filming right around the country. He will also be aware that there are plans to develop Tara Studios, just outside Gorey in north Wexford. He will also know about the success of Troy Studios in Limerick and the filming that has happened there. As Deputy Butterly said, there are many locations right around the country where regional film, television and animations uplift supports is critical.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We previously had a regional uplift under the section 481 scheme, which was very successful in encouraging film outside of the east coast or the Dublin-Wicklow region. That was interrupted by the Covid pandemic. Has that been looked at again? Has a Gaeltacht uplift been considered in light of the great films that have been created in those regions, where investment has paid off?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank all of the Deputies for raising this really important question. I have done a number of trade missions to north America with Screen Ireland and the film sector. It is my intention to do another one to Canada and the United States of America early in the spring because there is substantial potential here. That potential is driven by talent, infrastructure, our climate and the existing section 481 tax relief. Since I have become Minister, there have been increases to the scéal scheme uplift, which is for smaller productions. In addition, we are the first country within the European Union to introduce an uplift for unscripted productions. There have been some discussions with regard to a regional uplift. As Deputy Ó Snodaigh has rightly said, there was one previously but the Covid pandemic put the kibosh on it so we do not really have full data as to what it would have done. I want to revisit it. I have had initial discussions with the Department of Finance on the matter. It would obviously require changes to next year's tax Acts. My priority for this year was to get an increase in core funding for Screen Ireland, which I did, and to bed down the unscripted uplift, which we have done. Over the course of the year and in the run-up to the next budget, I will be looking at regional measures under section 481.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am going to make a ruling. To be fair to everyone, I am going to take people's questions in the order they came to the Chamber. There is only time left for three questions. I will call Deputies Malcolm Byrne, Brendan Smith and then Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Questions Nos. 16 and 17 taken with Written Answers.

Arts Funding

18. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to provide an update on the planned arts capital programme promised in the programme for Government. [64150/25]

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I applaud the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's efficiency in the Chair. I thank the Minister for taking this question. It concerns the proposal in the programme for Government to develop an arts capital scheme. Will the Minister provide us with an update?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As I have previously outlined to other Deputies, the programme for Government contains this commitment because we believe culture and arts are essential to a well-rounded society and provide opportunities for education, expression and community engagement. A network of cultural infrastructure exists throughout the country, the majority of which is in the ownership of local authorities. Annual support, including programming and revenue, is provided to the arts and culture infrastructure by local authorities and the Arts Council. The Department focuses on providing capital grants funding for artists' development and to maintain arts and cultural facilities.

In the budget, the Department was allocated €6 million for a new programme of capital funding for arts and culture organisations across the country in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. The Deputy will be aware this scheme was one of the key recommendations of the Oireachtas joint committee report published in July 2024, when he was Leas-Chathaoirleach. This will see much-needed capital supports for communities, including funding for essential equipment for organisations such as amateur drama groups and musical societies. The Department is in the process of designing the scheme, including the setting-out of the eligibility criteria. This will need the approval of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation before it can be launched. It will also need to be brought to Government. In the interim, under stream E of the cultural capital scheme, grants of up to €20,000 are available for not-for-profit dedicated arts and culture organisations at 85% of the funding rate. Larger grants of up to €50,000, as I said to Deputy Aird, are provided under stream E, at a maximum grant funding of 70%. Local authority-owned facilities are subject to a maximum of 60%. This is a rolling scheme that is demand-led and full details are available.

Another cultural capital funding scheme available from the Department is the €6 million pilot artist workspaces scheme launched in June 2024. Under this scheme, local authorities are invited to propose projects which enable them to provide additional artist workspaces in their regions on a sustainable basis and produce workspaces which are fit for purpose. Funding of up to €300,000 is available for densely populated local authority areas and €150,000 for others.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The sports capital programme has been incredibly successful at providing support for sport within our communities. I welcome the Government's continued commitment but we have not placed the same level of investment in arts and cultural facilities in our organisations. I appreciate the point about stream E but, as the Minister pointed out, the maximum grant available is €50,000. In a capital programme, that is not a huge sum. I am thinking of a number of places in my constituency, including Gorey Little Theatre, KMH in Kilmuckridge, St. Brigid's Hall in Carnew and Tinahely's Courthouse Arts Centre. Arklow, for instance, does not have a dedicated arts centre. That sum will not go very far towards that. In

the same way as we have a sports capital fund that works successfully, we should introduce an arts capital fund. It is a clear commitment in the programme. I know the Minister is supportive of it but we need to roll it out as quickly as possible.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is exactly what we are doing. We are starting with a small amount because we want to test the water and get an understanding of how the scheme will work. When sports capital was introduced fadó, fadó, it started at a very small level. When I was Minister of State in the Department the last time, in 2016, the amount available for sports capital was paltry compared to what is available from our Department now - north of €250 million. We need to start somewhere. This is a small scheme. If we are inundated with demand, which I expect we will be, it will strengthen my resolve to increase the amount available in next year's budget. It is capital and not current so it has to be approved under the NDP. We have to see first who the interested parties are. The scheme has not been designed yet but I expect that when I bring proposals to Government, it will be levelled at the local authorities in the first instance to be the applicants because this is work they should be doing anyway. This should be assistance rather than subvention.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome that. Will the Minister outline a rough timeline for that? He talks of local authorities but not all venues are local authority-run or have local authority input. Many venues for amateur drama or the arts are run on a community or voluntary basis. It is about the process of application and capacity-building in the sector. Does the local authority have to be involved? I appreciate the scheme is not fully designed but will the Minister outline his intentions in that regard?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will take a supplementary from Deputy Brennan on this.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I am here again to speak about sports capital and arts capital. It is hugely welcome but I have asked - and I have the Minister's ear red on this - that areas that have not been supported before be given priority. The town of Arklow has 16,000 people but no venue to put on a show and no town park. These areas must be helped. I welcome the work the Minister has done to date but ask him to please prioritise Arklow and other towns like it throughout Ireland.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I agree with both Deputies. Whether it is arts or sport, we will prioritise areas with growing and burgeoning populations but without facilities. I am going to be very critical of local authorities again. Local authorities have in many cases allowed houses to be built all over the place and done very well out of development levy contribution schemes. Where has the money gone? We have to be honest. In many cases, the Government is being asked to plug holes created by local authorities. They have built thousands of houses, which we need, but amenities seem to be secondary to many local authorities across the country. You cannot build houses without building communities. I am anxious that whatever scheme we introduce is not an alternative to the local authorities doing their jobs. While many community groups across the country have taken on the initiative for it, this is in primary legislation as, first and foremost, a responsibility of the local authorities. In many cases, they have abjectly failed to do their job, walked away from it and made it the Government's responsibility.

Meanwhile, many of them are sitting on huge cash reserves from development levy contributions. We have to ask some difficult questions of our local authorities as well.

Questions Nos. 19 to 22, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 23 taken with Question No. 6.

Questions Nos. 24 to 31, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 32 taken with Question No. 6.

Questions Nos. 33 to 43, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Sports Funding

44. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when details of the next community sports facilities fund will be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [64199/25]

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach knows, the sports capital programme has been extremely beneficial across our two counties of Cavan and Monaghan. Voluntary groups and sporting organisations have worked hard to provide new and upgraded facilities. No matter what parish I go to, it is great to see the top-quality facilities available. Unfortunately, the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and I do not have county councils with large cash reserves. We do not have a strong rates base but our two councils, to their credit, are developing local facilities in conjunction with local sporting and voluntary organisations. I hope the Minister of State will be able to announce a new sports capital programme early in 2026.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. He has been a strong advocate, as has the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, for sports capital development and for backing clubs in his constituency. We are preparing to reopen to new applications for the community sports facility fund by the end of spring with the objective of making funding announcements by the end of next year.

The recent pattern has generally been a round every two years. The 2024 round saw record funding of about €270 million in total. Over 3,000 clubs across the country benefited from it. The round before that was about €160 million, so there has been a significant step change. The round two years before that was in double digits, around €80 million. That is a reflection of where the Government has gone to back the ambition of clubs and organisations across the country to develop sporting facilities. We are really ramping it up and we are seeing the benefit of it everywhere in terms of improved facilities. They are needed. We are seeing improved participation in sport across all age groups and massive efforts are being put in by the clubs and volunteers in terms of facilitating people and giving opportunities. Of course, that puts pressure on facilities. There is barely a club you could visit that is not under pressure for space and capacity. It is important we continue to support that effort and that is what we will do next year. We are completing a review of the outgoing sports capital - our community sports facility fund round - in relation to how it worked to make sure when we open it up next time around it is as practical as possible for clubs to apply and benefit from it. The objective is to have that ready to be opened by the end of spring.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Minister of State's announcement on the next round. It is a joy to visit any of our sporting clubs on a Saturday morning and see the huge numbers of people participating. Clubs who have relatively good facilities and even county boards with good facilities are always talking to us about the pressure on their grounds and their need for additional facilities.

It is welcome to see more and more participation in sport by young girls. I attended three county camogie finals in Cavan a few weeks ago and saw the crowd and the numbers. Each team was able to line out more than 30 on the panel. In my county and in Monaghan, a huge effort is made to encourage participation. The sports grounds and county grounds are made available as well to camogie and ladies' football, which was not always the way in the past. Working together, the men's games and the ladies' games, football and camogie, helps big time to increase participation, which is good for everybody.

The last two rounds have been particularly beneficial. A lot of good work has been done but costs are continuing to rise. When assessments are being done, I ask the Minister to ensure that costs are taken into account.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is something Deputy Smith is committed to and he has been speaking to me about it separately. I look forward to visiting the Deputy and Deputy Maxwell in the constituency in advance of the next round opening up, and making sure that we provide every opportunity for clubs to apply and to be funded.

It is wonderful to see the impact and the value for money that any investment by the Government results in. When it comes into a club, you see everyone come together. You see people giving voluntarily of their time, not only in terms of the work that goes on day in, day out, every week day and weekend, providing coaching but also when it comes to developing that club, with people coming together to work, often voluntarily as well, to make sure that whatever funding is there from the Government and through fundraising goes as far as it possibly can. We will be back at that next year with the reopening of the sports facility fund.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Minister of State's commitment in this regard.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): As agreed, we will go back to Question No. 14 for Deputy Ó Murchú.

Sports Organisations

14. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the engagement his Department has had with organisations (details supplied) or any other stakeholders following the publication of concerns regarding the welfare of athletes in the high performance programmes at one of the organisations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63389/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister the engagement his Department has had with organisations, in particular Rowing Ireland, or any other stakeholders, following the

publication of concerns regarding the welfare of athletes in the high performance programmes. In fairness, we have all seen it - anybody who has read Paul Kimmage or heard any of the podcasts he has dealt with. It is frightening. We have seen the huge success there has been in rowing and we would like to make sure these particular issues are addressed.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: First, and as I have previously and consistently said, it is imperative that it is made clear that there is simply no place for abuse of any kind in sport and that there is zero tolerance for any actions that endanger welfare, whether for participants, staff or those who work for and support sports across the country.

Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, works with national governing bodies of sport, NGBs, to ensure that appropriate policies are put in place to take a proactive approach to safeguarding by identifying and mitigating risks to athlete welfare. It also works with national governing bodies to ensure mechanisms are in place to appropriately react to and handle complaints or issues when they arise.

Sport Ireland has informed my Department that when alerted to athlete welfare concerns within the sport in question, it reacted sympathetically, promptly and robustly to the issues within the context of its own statutory remit.

Rowing Ireland, in consultation with Sport Ireland, undertook an independent review after the 2024 Paris Olympics and this prompted changes within its high-performance programme. The previous high-performance director, on conclusion of his contract, has departed the role and the programme is now operating under new leadership.

It is also important to note that all national governing bodies are independent autonomous organisations responsible for their own governance, including safeguarding procedures, personnel choices, and disciplinary and complaints processes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not going to get into the specifics of this. We have all seen it. We know those who have been named. We were even very shocked in relation to the people who, luckily enough, brought this to the attention of the world. What the Minister of State said sounds fine. It is just about ensuring not only that Rowing Ireland has sufficient protocols to ensure we are looking after the welfare of all those involved, including staff, but particularly those who are going out there and doing their absolute for this country. We have had huge success in relation to that but in terms of anything that relates to the issues I have read about, I am not going to go into it because I accept there is nobody here to defend themselves in relation to it. I accept what the Minister of State is talking about in relation to staff being dealt with but can we ensure that we have the protocols across the board, that we have the checks and balances, and that Sport Ireland is also playing its part to ensure that we do not have lapses or situations like this? We will never have a perfect system but we need to make sure that we look after those who are doing their utmost in the sporting field and in other fields.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Sport Ireland has a comprehensive approach to athlete well-being and that is reflected in its athlete welfare policy under the high performance strategy, which runs from 2021 to 2032. To support that policy, national governing bodies are expected to develop their own internal documents, which reflect best practice strategies in respect of athlete welfare.

In 2021, Sport Ireland introduced a culture evolution programme to support national governing bodies to protect and maximise the holistic experience and welfare of athletes, coaches and support staff. This includes a culture review process, an audit delivered by the high performance culture and integrity adviser. That high performance culture and integrity adviser was appointed in 2021 to support that process and to support that engagement with the national governing bodies as well.

In August 2023, a new national code of conduct template for sporting organisations was launched by Sport Ireland. That code of conduct template sets out the guidelines and principles and promotes the behaviour and conduct expected from our athletes, coaches, parents, guardians, supporters, referees, officials and club members.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate what the Minister of State said. As I said, I was shocked when I saw it, in particular in relation to the sport where we have had a huge level of success. I suppose the question is: how do we ensure this code of conduct is to a degree enforced or policed and that each of the national governing bodies has sufficient level of protocols, checks and balances to ensure we look after the welfare of all those involved from the staff and athletes throughout?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We do it by having the right policies and support network in place, as I said, in terms of the work over the past three or four years, in terms of developing the national approach and the programme to support this and, in particular, the appointment of the high performance culture and integrity adviser to support that work. The latter is an important piece to do with it. Sport Ireland certainly is leading out on this. We very much support that work and acknowledge the absolute importance of it too.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Cancer Services

75. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the level of new funding to be made available for the national cancer strategy; if she will implement multi-annual funding frameworks in 2026; when a review of the strategy will commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64612/25]

Deputy David Cullinane: My first question is in relation to the national cancer strategy. The Minister might be aware the Irish Cancer Society has been raising concerns over the past number of weeks and months in relation to access to diagnostics, staffing shortages across cancer centres and cancer services but also insufficient and inconsistent funding for the national cancer strategy. The Minister might outline to the House, if she can, what additional funding has been made available for the national cancer strategy and for cancer services in budget 2026.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): Funding of €27.4 billion, as the Deputy knows, has been allocated to the health service for 2026, an increase of 6.2%. Next year a new approach is being taken to funding allocation with health budgets being devolved

to the HSE regions, giving them greater autonomy to meet local needs while holding them accountable for ambitious targets and national standards.

The National Cancer Control Programme will continue to lead on service design nationally and implementation of the national cancer strategy. The programme also monitors performance and works closely with the regions to ensure the delivery of safe effective cancer services, continuing to work towards the delivery of multi-annual budgets in health over the coming years. Capital investment already operates multi-annually and it is a priority for me to introduce this across all areas of the budget.

Since its launch in 2017, the Government has allocated €105 million to the national cancer strategy itself to support cancer services and improve outcomes for patients. That, of course, is not the totality of funding for people who have cancer but to the cancer strategy itself. Since then, very significant progress has been made in improving cancer services and there are now over 220,000 living with or beyond cancer, 50% more than a decade ago.

One in two people is expected to receive a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime. We are seeing tremendous advances in cancer care and I am committed to ensuring that patients can take advantage of these developments.

Work will begin shortly on an evaluation of the cancer strategy, which will inform the development of a new strategy next year. The budgetary situation is that the letter of determination has been sent, which will indicate very clearly, as the Deputy outlined, that there is inequality of access to diagnostics and treatment within the different regions. It is a priority to try to achieve better equality. In the service plan, we will see the specifics of trying to acknowledge and achieve that in a better way.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Irish Cancer Society was before the Oireachtas health committee a number of weeks ago. It raised very serious concerns in relation to major delays in diagnostics and treatment, particularly in the areas of colonoscopy, breast and prostate clinics, imaging, surgery and radiation therapy. It raised concerns about severe staffing shortages in radiology, cancer nursing and radiation therapy.

I put down a parliamentary question on the number of scanners and the diagnostic equipment that is lying idle, is not being fully utilised or has reached end of life. It is staggering to look at some of the details that have come back. For example, in Sligo hospital, a CT scanner is not fully utilised because one additional whole-time equivalent radiology post is needed, which was approved, and the hospital is still waiting for that appointment to be made. In University Hospital Limerick, one CT scanner is under-utilised; there is a staffing requirement for two whole-time equivalent radiologists needed to run it full time. In Ennis, one CT scanner and one ultrasound machine are under-utilised because four whole-time equivalent radiographers are needed, as well as a radiographer assistant, nurses and so on. At St. Luke's Radiation Oncology Network, and this was very helpfully raised by Deputy Boyd Barrett a number of weeks ago, linear accelerator, LINAC, equipment is out of date and needs to be replaced. There is a dire need for investment in equipment and diagnostics in our cancer services. I have not heard from the Minister what additional funding, either capital or current, has been made available, specifically for the national cancer strategy.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We are talking about services that go beyond the cancer strategy. The Deputy correctly identified regional gaps that need to be filled by the regions, particularly where they are not meeting their targets or the same standard as other parts of the country. For example, this week, I was in Bantry, where there are two endoscopy suites, which are really important for bowel cancer and gastric cancers generally, but are under-utilised, although there are two theatres. That is a form of investment in cancer and in preventing, diagnosing and ultimately treating cancer. The two suites are there but are under-utilised. One of them is running for half of one week and the other is not being utilised at all, yet there is a list in Cork. The facility is there and we have to reorganise the resources. It does not necessarily need new people. It needs consultants from CUH to come out. Some of them are already doing that; others need to come out.

The totality of investment in cancer is around treatment, drugs, diagnostics and, as the Deputy correctly identified, utilising the infrastructure we already have in a more complete way. I am trying to do that, hospital by hospital and region by region, to make sure that is maximised. In the letter of determination in the service plan, it will be for the region to recognise where it is coming up short and to make sure it is allocating its resources in an appropriate way.

Deputy David Cullinane: I fully understand that cancer services go beyond the national cancer strategy. Of course that is the case. Across all of our acute hospitals, cancer services are provided that are outside the remit of the national cancer strategy. That strategy is also important in bringing together stakeholders. It is meant to bring consistency in services and it looks at where gaps are and so on. I had this discussion with the Minister at the Oireachtas health committee yesterday. I do not need to know exactly how the money is going to be spent because that is a matter for the regions. I do not have a quarrel with that. I supported the health regions and I believe in regional health budgets, but it is important for us to know what additional money has gone into any of those strategies or not. It is not what the health regions will spend the money on; it is how much new money they have been given, in addition, to invest in these services. That is what the Irish Cancer Society is trying to find out. It is what other organisations advocating for cancer patients are trying to find out. I cannot tell them. I have told them I have asked the question so many times and I cannot seem to get any answer. I do not know what other way I can raise it other than in here directly with the Minister.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is absolutely fair enough, except that this will happen under this service plan. On new money, we have additional money for new drugs, for example, in the drugs budget. We have an additional 3,300 people, which at a cost of €90,000 is all new money. They are all people who can be allocated not just to people with cancer, but people who have cancer with other things. This is the new money and the new investment. The distribution of that, which is what the Deputy is asking for, will be apparent in the service plan, which we expect in the coming weeks, having sent the letter of determination. It is a completely reasonable question. There is a process to work that out, particularly in this year 1 of a change. There will still be funding for the strategy itself, which of course is different. It is about research, programming and strategy. That is slightly different from the delivery of services, which we all understand, and that will be apparent.

We have to get away from, in particular in the regions, the idea that you can only do something if you have a new person. I gave the example of the endoscopy suites in Bantry for

the very reason that there is no point asking for new things at CUH when these exist at Bantry for the convenience of patients, who can get an endoscopy there instead of having to travel to CUH. It is the consultants who must go to the patients to make sure that diagnostic equipment is delivered and used in accordance with Sláintecare.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

76. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the steps she is taking to protect the incomes of front-line healthcare workers who continue to suffer from long Covid and who are in receipt of the special scheme of paid leave, which is due to expire in the coming weeks; if she plans to protect these workers by extending this scheme or recognising long Covid as an occupational illness; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64383/25]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to the special sick pay scheme for Covid sufferers in the health service. As the Minister knows, it is expiring at the end of this year. We spoke about this in June. The Labour Court ruled that it should be extended to the end of the year. What interventions is the Minister making to ensure those 120-plus workers have decent financial support into 2026 in recognition of the fact they acquired this illness in the workplace in the course of their work?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for raising this with me again. We should always acknowledge the extraordinary role, as the Deputy has done, of our healthcare workers and the role they played during the pandemic. They went far beyond the call of duty. Treating Covid in a front-line way at that time was an exceptional thing to do.

In recognition of that, especially from 2020, a temporary special scheme was introduced in July 2022 to support eligible staff who were affected by long Covid, in particular, in the public health sector. This was a scheme that no other sector had, which was important and appropriate. The scheme was designed to support those who had worked in high-risk environments, particularly before PPE and vaccinations were widely available and community transmission became more prevalent. At present, about 159 employees, as I understand it, remain on the scheme, the majority of whom have been supported with full pay for almost five years.

My Department has consistently worked to ensure these staff were looked after. At my Department's request, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation agreed to extend the scheme several times since its introduction. Following a Labour Court hearing in June of this year, a final extension was recommended to run until 31 December 2025, when it will formally conclude. Importantly, that does not mean all supports will end. Staff who remain unfit to work will move seamlessly into the public service sick leave scheme, which I appreciate is different but will ensure some measure of continuity of care and financial protection. Under that scheme, staff receive full pay for three months, followed by half pay for three months, and then have the option to apply for temporary rehabilitative remuneration, which can provide up to a further 547 days of paid leave. In addition, the critical illness protocol may provide supports for up to three years.

I am aware that the Minister for Social Protection has reviewed the EU recommendation on recognising Covid-19 as an occupational illness. It has been determined that Covid-19 does not meet the criteria required for recognition under the social welfare Acts.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Every long Covid sufferer out there will acknowledge that this scheme has been extended. They are very grateful that it has been kept going until now, but the reality is 159 healthcare workers are out there, including nurses, healthcare support workers, social workers and those working in mental health institutions, who face the prospect of a dramatic drop in income because of a condition they acquired in the workplace. Ireland, alongside Greece, is the only EU member state not to recognise long Covid. What will the Minister do to champion the rights of healthcare workers? As she knows, the temporary rehabilitation remuneration, TRR, scheme will only give workers just over a third of their full pay, at 37.5%. Some of these workers hope to go back into the workforce eventually. Some may never, but they should get the recognition they deserve for the illness they acquired in the workplace.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I appreciate what the Deputy is saying. I will make a couple of points in response. The public health sector recognised the risk that staff faced and because of that introduced a scheme that no other sector had. It was appropriate that it did, but it is important to state that so people have a full understanding of what was done. Eligible healthcare workers have had full pay for five years, which is important. The provisions now provide paid supports for a number of years beyond this current period. Recognition of Covid as an occupational illness falls within the Department of Social Protection. The Deputy has alluded to other EU countries. Many EU countries recognised Covid-19 as an occupational illness, but not necessarily long Covid. I am open to correction, but it is not clear to me that any country sustained full pay for workers suffering from long Covid in the way Ireland did with its public health workers through the special scheme. I am open to correction, but that is the information I have. It is important to set out how Ireland tried to treat its care workers in contrast to Europe and for the duration it has.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I do not think anybody is suggesting that full pay is sustainable into 2026 and beyond, but what should be sustainable for a small amount of money is a recognition that it is an occupational illness, with a new scheme put in place. The reality is that the science in 2021 suggested that people would be fully over long Covid at this stage. In June, I said I believed the Department was splitting hairs between Covid-19 and long Covid. The science and medical research are well established now in confirming what long Covid is. I know that are many long Covid sufferers and their families who are watching this debate are asking the Minister, with the rest of Government, to champion this such that it will be recognised as an occupational illness and a new scheme will be put in place in 2026.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I recognise the sufferers of long Covid and the change for 159 people who have been receiving full pay and are going onto a different scheme. While there are supports available on that scheme and its duration is also considerable, it is a change and I recognise that. My Department has championed the extension of that scheme, which enabled them to have full pay for as long as they did, on a number of occasions with the Department of public expenditure. As we thought that would end in June, there has been an

additional six-month extension. That is in recognition of the work they did, the significance of long Covid and the impact it has on their lives. As the Deputy has stated, it is not feasible to sustain that in perpetuity and there has to be a transition to a different scheme. That is simply the way it is, and we are trying to put those supports in place for as long as possible.

Hospital Waiting Lists

77. Deputy David Cullinane asked the Minister for Health her plans to reduce waiting lists for diagnostic scans; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64613/25]

Deputy David Cullinane: This question relates to diagnostic waiting lists and the number of patients waiting for various forms of diagnostic equipment in hospitals across the State. The numbers are quite high, as I am sure the Minister will see. What are her views and plans for how she will reduce those wait times and the number of people who are waiting for a diagnostic scan?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Waiting times for radiology and diagnostic services have been an issue for some time and the Government committed to the implementation of the Sláintecare report of 2017, which included a maximum wait time target of ten days for a diagnostic test. A key step to achieving that is fully understanding the current position. Implementation of the NTPF's national radiology diagnostic waiting list management protocol by all hospitals is the step to ensuring that patients are administratively managed in a safe, timely, fair and equitable manner while waiting, as well as facilitating approved data collection and reporting. Publication of the validated radiology diagnostic waiting list information will enable full analysis of the diagnostic waiting lists and provide a more complete understanding of how many patients are waiting, how long they are waiting and the specific services they are waiting for.

This year, the productivity and savings task force published an action plan for 2025 that commits to a range of services being available seven days per week, including diagnostics activity. It will also ensure that all publicly funded diagnostics are captured within the national integrated medical imaging system, NIMIS, by the end of 2025, thereby improving core co-ordination and reducing duplication of tests and procedures. I am informed that St. Vincent's hospital is going on that this weekend. That will have a bit of an impact, but it is important.

More important than anything else, as all of us here visit our local hospitals and different hospitals in the health system, is that question about the utilisation of diagnostics. It is that heat map of use. I have seen better clarity and analysis throughout this year. It was a source of considerable distress to me, for example, to be in one hospital and see that map going from red to blue at 4.30 p.m. on a Friday, when of course it should be driving hard on Friday evening into Saturday and so on. That is what we all want to see, although I do see more of that happening. I am seeing extended hours in diagnostics. I am seeing real efforts to make sure we are rostering five over seven. There is particular pressure in relation to radiologists and radiographers but we need to focus on the management of the assets and resources we have at the moment and make sure the culture is one where you should be able to get those scans as quickly as possible, and that is enabled in part by workforce planning.

Deputy David Cullinane: The most recent figures are that almost 300,000 people are on a waiting list for a diagnostic scan. Over 77,000 of those have been waiting more than a year and over 46,000 have been waiting more than 18 months. That is far in excess of any Sláintecare targets. I gave examples earlier of CT scanners and other diagnostic equipment that is not being fully utilised, partly because we do not have the staff. I agree with the Minister that we need to do everything possible to fully utilise existing scanners and equipment. Anything that can be done in hospitals, and consultants doing more, is of course part of it but we also have to recruit the additional staff. The Minister knows there is a shortage of radiologists, radiographers, radiation therapists and other specialties. I also put to her that we need to look at rolling out diagnostic hubs similar to the surgical hubs that were rolled out. They are a really important part of a patient's healthcare journey. Obviously, you go to a GP and then get sent for a scan. However, if you have been waiting a year or two years, particularly if you are concerned, which of course people generally are if they are sent to get a scan, it adds to the stress and the totality of a person's healthcare journey. We can reduce that if we invest more in diagnostics.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I completely agree with the Deputy. Looking at the number of diagnostic scanners and machines in public systems, we have 550 scanners of different forms, including 62 CT scanners, 28 MRI scanners and so on, but it is about the use of them. One of the things we need to consider is how we might use the scanners available in a complementary local injury unit sitting alongside a hospital and how we can maximise the use of all of those diagnostics in different ways. That is another opportunity to expand capacity. I happened to be in County Mayo, and we were talking to staff about how that might be better integrated. In theory, the machines are capable of being used 24 hours per day. That is obviously unrealistic, but you would like to get to the point where they are being used for between 12 and 14 hours per day at a minimum. That is entirely dependent on the staff and the way in which it is organised, and the Deputy correctly identified the shortage there. It is important to make sure, as we go hospital by hospital, that everyone is using the deployment of those staff in the most efficient way. I see examples of great improvement on that, and I hope to be able to report more thoroughly to the House after the series of regional meetings in January.

Deputy David Cullinane: I took an active interest in the area of diagnostics after my mother passed. She went for a check in an emergency department and was told she would have to wait for possibly 12 to 18 months for a CT scan. We had the money to send her privately. She had that scan done in a matter of weeks, was diagnosed with cancer and, unfortunately, within a year had passed away. I know how important it is for people to get that timely access. I can only imagine how difficult it is for a person who is told they could be waiting months. They are worried about a potential growth and about symptoms. They have been sent by their GP. There is a human consequence to this. Even if we are looking at reducing the length of time people are in emergency departments, very often people waiting for the scan or X-ray to come back is what can hold up their journey through an emergency department. I believe there is merit in diagnostic hubs. I have discussed this with the Department and the HSE. I am a great believer in elective hospitals and surgical hubs. However, on this one, if we want to reach those Sláintecare targets, we have to look again. The Minister mentioned some of it, and it is welcome that she has a grasp of it, but we need to look at the whole area of diagnostics. Yes,

we need more utilisation of what we have, but we also need other methods and investments to reduce wait times.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. I am also conscious that we have increased the referral pathways for diagnostics, from physios for example. They are all good things, but they increase the number of referrals and, therefore, the waiting time. It is particularly important that the Deputy highlighted a case like that of his mother, who was referred for a scan and really needed it. There is the contrast with an emergency scan in a hospital that might step across her scan. So many people in Ireland are quietly waiting for a scan and are concerned by that. The focus on urgent and emergency care can take from that in some ways, so we have to try to do both. I fully respect what the Deputy says about the expansion of diagnostics, the referral pathways, the ease with which people can get the scans more quickly, how we can utilise our existing efficiencies and then, as we build, including with the surgical hubs, how we can consider using those diagnostics in the broader way. We really need more radiologists and radiographers as well. We also need them to be rostered five over seven.

Addiction Treatment Services

78. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health if work is being carried out in her Department to plan for a medically supervised injection centre in Cork; if any such work will be carried out in advance of the findings of the 18-month pilot phase of the supervised injection facility in Dublin city centre; if any potential sites in Cork have been identified; if consideration is only being given to mobile supervised injection facilities outside of Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [65000/25]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: My question is about safe injection facilities. Last month I asked a parliamentary question about establishing a safe injection facility in Cork city. I was told it would not be considered until the 18-month pilot in Dublin was concluded. For the one in Dublin, it took nine years between Cabinet approval and setting it up. We cannot have the same level of delay in Cork city. We need a health-led approach to drugs and we need to start considering and planning a safe injection facility for Cork city. Failure to act here will cost lives.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for a very important question. As he knows, the independent evaluation of the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, assisted with the expansion of harm reduction in a significant way. Our new drugs strategy will be launched next year, hopefully. That is very important to us. We have found that the harm reduction initiatives were a central component of the health-led approach to drug use, with a focus on reducing the adverse health and social impacts associated with drug use.

One significant harm reduction initiative is the establishment of supervised injection facilities. Last year, as the Deputy said, the Department of Health granted a licence to operate Ireland's first supervised injection facility at Merchants Quay Ireland. I do not know whether he has been to see it but I have been out there a few times. It is an absolutely fabulous facility.

It opened on 22 December 2024. I am happy to report that to date the facility has assisted over 1,000 individual clients who have made over 7,500 visits. Crucially, there were over 120 successful interventions to prevent a fatal overdose. I have provided additional funding to extend the opening hours to facilitate this, which was important. The HSE is overseeing the evaluation of the 18-month pilot phase of this facility. The evaluation will inform decisions as to whether we continue this facility or look at opening new ones in other areas. I understand the HSE has recently completed its six-month interim evaluation and I will look at that now. I am committed to a health-led response to drug use, including the provision of harm reduction initiatives based on population need. The successor to the national drugs strategy will consider the next steps in delivering a health-led response, including the demand for additional supervised facilities.

Importantly, the programme for Government 2025 commits to exploring the establishment of mobile medically supervised injection facilities in areas of need, so we are looking at areas of need. The medical supervised injection facility operated by licence on the 18-month pilot basis, that is, Merchants Quay's own licence, will be thoroughly evaluated to assess this impact. The information will assist in assessing the potential need for the benefit of mobile injection facilities. The existing legislation does not allow for mobile supervised injection facilities as only facilities on fixed premises are specific on this.

I will come back to the Deputy with the rest of the answer.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: With respect, I asked about the facility in Cork. The facility in Dublin has been a success. That is why we want to see one rolled out for Cork. We know from research published by UCC that there are 859 problem drug users in Cork city. Thirty-five people die every single year in my city from problem drug use. This is a crisis, it is urgent and it needs interventions. We cannot wait for pilots and reviews. We need to act now on this. A mobile unit will not be effective. We know from the centre in Dublin that people go in, they spend 15 minutes injecting and then they have aftercare for 30 minutes. You cannot have that in a van moving around a city. What is crucial is the intervention with the person, that 30 minutes afterwards, that time to build a relationship and to provide them with other care or other interventions. That will not be possible with a mobile unit. Eddie Mullins from Merchants Quay Ireland has said that that would be ineffective. We need to listen to the experts. Cork needs a dedicated centre, not a mobile unit.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Everything is being assessed. The evaluation of what is happening with drugs around the country is being looked at. As I said at the meeting the other day, we have 610 services around the country. We are very mindful of that and that all have equal access to services. We are assessing every opportunity here, working within the Department, the HSE and, as the Deputy knows, our drugs task forces, which do huge work within our communities.

A few months ago, I announced detail of a further €1.89 million for community-based drug services in 2025. That happened with the community service enhancement fund. This funding will improve access to services in underserved communities, promote evidence-based innovation in service design and delivery and enhance services for people who use stimulant drugs.

Importantly, for budget 2026, I secured an additional €11 million in reoccurring funding for drugs and inclusion health services. These services are all being looked at through the different areas.

There is a lot of work being done. I assure the Deputy that we are looking at everything and making sure we have funding around the country.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Yesterday at the committee, we talked about the integrated health hub for homeless people in Cork city. This hub needs to be established and we need the capital investment for it. This is the prime location to have a safe injection facility in Cork city. What we need here now is not to miss an opportunity. We are establishing a new centre there. We can co-locate these services but the Department needs to do the planning and design now and needs to get this right. We need to think beyond just injection. Right across Europe, we have drug consumption rooms. Crack cocaine is on the increase. I met Cork Simon earlier this week and they said that in Cork city lots of people are smoking crack cocaine. What we need, therefore, is an expansion of the legislation to also include safe drug consumption and for the facility in Cork to be prepared for that, with ventilation and all the requirements around that. I do not think the required planning is going ahead. I want to see change to the legislation, I want to see a commitment to Cork, I want to see investment, I want that homeless hub opened and I want a sense of urgency around here. This is costing people's lives in my city every single year. It is not good enough.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Absolutely. All the Deputy's concerns are very important. We are talking about lives, and it is very important that we remember that one life lost is one too many. We have to do what we can to save lives and make sure we work with what we have and the services we have. We have to make sure that we deliver the services we can deliver and that people who want to access them can do so. We also have to work with their families. We have to make sure we have services there to help families. It is a matter of all of us working together. Like the Deputy, I understand that we need to put those services in place.

The Deputy spoke about the Cork homeless hub. That is being worked on. As I said at the meeting, there is a commitment from my Department for funding for the homeless hub. I have requested a meeting with the HSE. I hope to meet with it as soon as possible to try to get more information on this. As the Deputy said, a homeless hub would be another really important step forward for Cork.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As he said, it is a matter of services, how we deliver them and how we make sure we save lives. Working together, we need to achieve that. I thank him for his question.

Health Strategies

79. **Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty** asked the Minister for Health the reason, after at least 15 meetings of the hearing care plan working group, and meetings by subgroups, a report has still not been issued and has been delayed by over six months into a projected timeline of quarter 1 of 2026; the way in which the scope of the work could have expanded way beyond

initial expectations, as stated in responses to previous questions; the commencement date and timeline of the related public consultation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64788/25]

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: There have been at least 16 meetings of the hearing care plan working group and meetings of subgroups but a report still has not been issued and has now been delayed by over six months into a projected timeline of quarter 1 of next year. Will the Minister outline why the scope has expanded so much beyond initial expectations? Will she confirm a commencement date and a timeline for the related public consultation?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The hearing care plan working group was established to develop recommendations for a holistic and sustainable model of hearing care across Ireland. The group initially had a focus on the appropriate linkage of public and private provision to meet increasing demand for services in the short term and to consider the recommendations of the WHO World Report on Hearing in the development of the national hearing care plan.

As the group carried out its work, it realised, through its research efforts and deliberations, that the scope of the work needed to create a holistic model of care, as mandated by the published terms of reference, was greater than initially anticipated. The group saw that as an opportunity to ensure that every aspect of the national audiology service was being addressed thoroughly and, as such, the deadline needed to be pushed back.

While it is unfortunate that the final recommendations are delayed, as per the terms of reference, the group, I believe, will now be in a position to deliver a much more comprehensive and encompassing plan that factors in all aspects of the audiology space and ensures that patients will receive a greater benefit as a result. In response, the group has adjusted its focus and timelines to ensure that all relevant areas of hearing care are appropriately considered. A structured work stream has been established to support this goal, comprising a number of subgroups focusing on key priorities within the overall scope of the project.

The areas being examined by the group include: the existing level and distribution of hearing care provision across Ireland; capacity constraints and opportunities for service enhancement within the HSE; examining the current education structures in place to ensure an adequate number of graduates in public audiology services; workforce planning, with a particular focus on improving recruitment and retention within the public system; the appropriate level and framework for regulation for the audiology profession; improvements to referral pathways in the integration of services between acute and community settings; and mechanisms to strengthen linkages between public and private hearing care aimed at improving patient outcomes and reducing waiting time.

11 o'clock

It is wide-ranging work and it is the intention of the group to ensure the final report is comprehensive in the treatment of those matters.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Minister mentioned things like workforce planning and obviously there are other issues like paediatric screening, adult rehabilitation pathways and integration with primary care. Can the Minister give any timeline for the public consultation?

Will it definitely be in quarter 1 of next year? This arose back in August of last year when the then Minister, Stephen Donnelly, was basically implementing WHO recommendations on providing an holistic package of hearing services. I take the Minister's point and I welcome the fact that the scope has broadened to look at different things. However, has there been discussion of the regulation of the audiology profession? If that has been done, does it include the stakeholders on it? Has best practice abroad been looked at? If not, we are asking people to talk about their own industry.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right to identify the difficulty that would create. I do not have an answer at the moment as to the timeline of the public consultation, but I commit to getting that to the Deputy as soon as I can. The revised timeline for submission of a final report is quarter 1 in 2026 but that is more about the timeline for the broad work, as I understand it. Today or tomorrow, I will have a better answer for the Deputy on his very reasonable question on the public consultation element of it. I will also have clarity for him on the question of people reporting on themselves and making sure there is sufficient independence to be able to analyse what needs to be done, particularly on the regulation of professions.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I know the Minister would be kept up to date on the reports of the subgroups and as she mentioned there have been 16 of them so far and there will be a few more before we get the final report. Can she focus in some way on getting to monitor the specialists? Is there any scope to bring in experts from Northern Ireland, Scotland or England as part of one of the subgroups or is this already happening? This area is not a very well covered nationally but it is hugely important. Hearing loss is a major issue in Ireland and there is a certain stigma associated with it, which is why the WHO made recommendations about having an holistic policy in the first place. I welcome the Minister's response and hopefully we will get to the consultation stage soon.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I would like to have a bit more detail that I do not have to hand but I commit to getting it to the Deputy today or tomorrow if that is all right.

Question No. 80 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Cancer Services

81. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Health if there are any plans to introduce lung cancer screening; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64099/25]

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: November is lung cancer awareness month. Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related death in Ireland yet unlike for breast, bowel and cervical cancers, there is no national screening programme in place. The Marie Keating Foundation recently launched the Breathless Collection campaign to highlight key symptoms of lung cancer, including shortness of breath, chest tightness, shoulder pain and a persistent cough. It

is a simple message: symptoms cannot be ignored. We also now have the benefit of evidence from the lung health check pilot delivered in partnership with Beaumont Hospital, the RCSI and the ICS using a mobile low-dose CT model that has shown real promise in detecting lung cancer at its very earliest stage. My question today is this: when does the Department intend to progress this programme to a full national lung cancer screening programme?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am committed to supporting Ireland's population screening programmes which are a valuable part of our health service. The programme for Government commits to evaluate the current lung cancer screening pilot in line with the WHO criteria and to develop recommendations for a way forward. The pilot, which was led by researchers in Beaumont and the RCSI with support from the EU, the Irish Cancer Society and my Department, is under way. It has issued a call for proposals to advance research in this area focusing on outstanding uncertainties.

I have had several meetings with Gillian Ryan who is a leading lung cancer advocate and a leading advocate for a mobile screening service. I have met her in Cork and have hosted her and her daughter here in Leinster House. I met her again last week to unveil Ireland's first White Ribbon for Lung Cancer campaign. I know the Deputy was involved in that and did the breathlessness piece.

Lung cancer is a very serious condition, particularly for those who are not identified as being at high risk. For example, a number of non-smokers are getting lung cancer and they would not necessarily see themselves as being high risk. They deserve to have the opportunity to have themselves tested. I particularly favour the mobile unit but I recognise that we have a screening programme and screening advisory programme that have worked well for us. This is under broader consideration. We need to do a complex set of calculations to get a careful balance to deliver population benefit. I am told lung cancer is particularly challenging due to the very significant budget impact. There are difficulties with risk stratification and high levels of incidental findings that are not necessarily lung cancer that cause their own problems as well. As I am learning, there is a particular complexity to lung cancer screening that was not apparent to me on the first go. Nevertheless, we are continuing to try to assess what may be done through established evidence-driven protocols, as always. I very clearly hear the Deputy and agree with her that there is a particular need to look at this more closely.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: It is good to hear that the Minister is well disposed to putting more research into it and trying to assess whether it is an appropriate screening programme. We know from international evidence, including from the UK, the US and across the EU, that low-dose screening reduces mortality, particularly among high-risk groups such as long-term smokers and those with an extended smoking history. Having said that, I also know that many people who are not traditionally in this high-risk group are presenting with lung cancer and sometimes at quite a late stage. From ongoing work here in Ireland, we also know that there is a stigma around lung cancer and that awareness of the symptoms of lung cancer is quite low, particularly among former smokers. The Beaumont pilot programme has been very successful, especially in identifying lung cancer at a very early stage. We know that drugs exist to treat lung cancer at this early stage. When will the national screening advisory committee, which is scheduled to review the work, issue a report on the possibility of a pilot programme?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am not in a position to give that date at the moment but I will try to come back to the Deputy as soon as I can. Very few countries have introduced lung cancer screening because of the uncertainty around its effectiveness. That does not mean we should not explore it. As the Deputy has done, I want to commend the pilot programme that has been introduced, instituting a community-based lung health check programme by inviting individuals from north Dublin and the north-east region identified as being at high risk of lung problems to attend for mobile screening, for breath tests and for low-dose CT scans. I have met a number of people who were not high risk who have developed lung cancer. They run marathons and do not smoke, and yet they have lung cancer. As the Deputy has said, in those cases diagnosis often happens at a considerably more advanced stage, which is obviously exceptionally problematic. How do we best capture that group? How do we screen in that group? Under Europe's Beating Cancer plan, in 2022 the recommendation was for further expansion of cervical, breast and bowel cancer screening, and feasibility studies on gastric, prostate and lung cancers. We have to get that balance right around effectiveness. I am so glad to have the opportunity to discuss it in the Dáil today with the Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I appreciate what the Minister has said. I also congratulate her on expanding the home testing for cervical screening. People who are diagnosed with lung cancer at an early stage have an 80% survival rate. Being diagnosed at a late stage reduces the survival rate by up to 20%. I commend the Marie Keating Foundation and the Irish Cancer Society. The Marie Keating Foundation's Breathless Collection campaign is hugely important in highlighting awareness and also in supporting campaigns for a national screening programme. I ask the Minister to commit to publishing the implementation roadmap and the report from the advisory committee, and to confirm that we will hopefully see a lung cancer screening programme during the lifetime of this Government.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am not in a position to say that because I do not know what the recommendation will be. Thankfully this is a country driven by science and scientific evidence. This is a matter of real concern to me.

The Deputy referenced advances in cervical screening. While I have the opportunity, I want to reference that it is expanding and that there are home testing kits, which is a huge advancement for women who do not necessarily feel comfortable presenting for screening or who just want to avail of their sheer convenience. This will help us to make sure those screenings get done. In the same way, we have now extended bowel cancer screening through the community pharmacy agreement. I am so glad to see so many pharmacies sign up to this fantastic opportunity to diagnose common conditions and provide prescriptions to people right around the country from early next year. It also enables pharmacies to identify people within their cohort of patients or customers who should be screening for bowel cancer, register them for the system and give them the kits over the counter that may be used at home and sent back. These are life-changing interventions that can happen in people's homes. I ask anyone who is watching to engage in cervical or bowel screening or any of our screening programmes.

Dental Services

82. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to expand or improve dental facilities in Cork North-West, including the delivery of a new or upgraded facilities to meet growing demand in towns such as Macroom, Kanturk, Mallow and Millstreet; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64083/25]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: Are there plans to expand or improve dental facilities, including clinics, in north-west Cork? Are there plans for new or upgraded facilities to meet the growing demands of towns like Macroom, Charleville, Kanturk, Mallow and Millstreet?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy O'Shea. As he is aware, over €230 million is invested in public oral healthcare services annually. The dental treatment service scheme, DTSS, provides oral healthcare free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. Services are provided by private dentists and clinical dental technicians who hold a contract with the HSE.

In the north Cork HSE area, there are currently 33 active DTSS contractors, which is up slightly from the 31 who were active in the same period in 2024, although it is not enough. A package of measures was introduced in 2022 to expand the care available under the DTSS and to significantly increase the fees paid to contractors by approximately 40%, which is a very significant increase. Those measures should improve access to care as indicated by patient and treatment numbers which, to be fair, have increased since 2022.

The Department and the HSE are committed to the reform of services for medical card holders, particularly in the context of the design and development of packages for expanded preventative care. That will require a multi-annual programme of work which is currently being scoped by the Department. We are also trying to improve patient access to oral healthcare in a number of different ways through the implementation of the national oral health policy, which is a complete transformation of oral healthcare services and an expansion to children and adults. I am very focused on the deficits that are there today, particularly for children. There is a three-year implementation plan for the first phase of acceleration of reforms.

When I was in Cork last week, I had the good opportunity to attend the annual conference of the Irish Dental Hygienists Association, the members of which perform enormously good preventative work, cleaning work and identifying work. I commend their work to date. Hygienists can play an important role as part of the Government's priority to improve access to preventative oral healthcare, especially for currently underserved populations including people with disabilities, people in residential homes and children in certain areas. There is a body of work there that is not yet completed but is very possible.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for that update on dental services, particularly in north-west Cork, north Cork and mid-Cork. Certainly, there seems to be gaps in some areas where the DTSS is not available to many medical card holders. That is a serious issue we must try to alleviate. The number of contractors involved in the scheme has increased, but only slightly. As the Minister said, it is still not enough. I would like to see more people coming into that scheme and I would like it to be available for medical card holders. It is important to recognise the orthodontic team that works within the orthodontic service and not just dentists. The Minister mentioned the role of hygienists as well. I am very grateful that the

Minister attended a conference in Cork last weekend to see that we can all work together collectively to ensure there is a robust orthodontic service for the people of Cork and Cork North-West going forward. It is critical that people look after dental health. It is publicly available here. It is important to avail of that service.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will bring in Deputy Burke on the same question.

Deputy Colm Burke: I am concerned about the whole dental service. There used to be over 1,200 dentists working privately who offered to provide a public service to medical card holders, but that figure has dropped to under 600. Since 2012 or 2013, the number of dentists employed within the HSE has dropped from over 300 to slightly over 250. Even though there has been a huge increase in our population, the number of dentists publicly employed by the HSE is less than it was ten years ago. We need to deal with this issue. Some people are waiting up to five years for orthodontic treatment. This needs to be dealt with by the Department. We need to get our head out of the sand on this matter. I am contacted every week by a huge number of people who cannot get access to dental care for their children. This really needs to be tackled.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: In fact, there are 836 contractors on the scheme as of September 2025, although that is a reduction because there was a major data clear-out. There were 1,490 in 2019, when the number was reducing, and there are now 836. A number of inactive dentists were taken off the list in 2022. I can confirm that the fees paid to private dentists to engage in this scheme have increased by 40% to 60%, depending on the nature of the treatment. It is a matter of some astonishment and some disappointment to me that more of them do not wish to engage in it. Notwithstanding that, an additional 256,000 patients have been treated since 2022. As a result of the expansion of the dental facilities in Cork North-West, for example, an additional 44,208 patients were treated in 2024 compared to 2022. I will give this data to Deputy O'Shea directly. The fees to contractors went up from €49 million to €69 million in the same two-year period. It is a very considerable expansion. Indeed, activity in north Cork has increased this year with an additional 286 treatments provided. I recognise it is not enough, but it is a very considerable expansion within a two-year period.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for her response. I want to focus on the HSE dental services that are available to children and to adults with significant special care needs. The service provided over the last number of years has been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been a number of challenges in terms of providing orthodontics, particularly in ensuring there are enough staff to support clinics right across Cork North-West. We have clinics in Charleville, Newmarket, Mallow and Macroom. We also have St. Finbarr's Hospital and the Cork University Dental School and Hospital in Wilton to support that. However, it has been quite challenging to get the school programmes back up and running. Obviously, there is an opportunity for children in second class and sixth class to avail of dental examinations and appointments. There has been some improvement. I encourage the Minister to see if we can work with the HSE to make more improvements in that regard and make more clinics available more locally. It is a challenge for people in Cork North-West to travel into the city to accommodate clinic appointments in St. Finbarr's Hospital or the dental hospital. More clinics around the vicinity of Cork North-West would be of huge benefit.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I commit to trying to expand access to oral health and preventative oral health in every way. We need to look at the role of dental hygienists within the dental profession. In every other aspect of workforce planning in healthcare, we recognise that we do not have enough healthcare workers to meet our need. As I mentioned earlier, we are trying to have pharmacists work at the top of their expertise in their profession in order that they can diagnose basic common conditions. We now have an agreement with them that they will do that, but they should be working at the top of their expertise. We will try to have pharmacist technicians there to support them. In the same way, there is a much bigger opportunity for dental hygienists. We have advanced nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists. We have all of these advances in practice. Dental hygienists can play a particularly important preventative role and community support role. I am not saying they can provide all of the treatments - of course that is not the case - but I do not think we have come to the end of workforce planning in this respect. I know the people of Deputy O'Shea's constituency would welcome the opportunity to see a dental hygienist at a much earlier stage than has been possible to date. I have some work to do to try to support that.

Departmental Data

84. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Health the number of operations completed for complex laparoscopy for severe endometriosis to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64607/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: One in ten women in this country are affected by endometriosis, a condition that inflicts immense pain and suffering and is often unspoken about and misunderstood. Can the Minister advise how many operations have been completed for complex laparoscopy for severe endometriosis to date?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy Timmins. I think it may be closer to one in seven - possibly one in six - women who are affected by endometriosis, rather than one in ten. We are learning more about it together. Our specialist endometriosis services are monitored by the HSE's national women and infants health programme. At the end of September 2025, 719 specialist endometriosis surgeries had been carried out. The most complex endometriosis surgeries are performed by multidisciplinary teams. Some 263 of the reported 719 surgeries took place in our complex centres in Tallaght and Cork. Surgeries for less complex endometriosis may also be performed in our acute gynaecology services.

I am committed to expanding the scope and standard of our endometriosis services and improving supports for women. In recent weeks, I approved a plan to expedite access to care for women with endometriosis. The HSE will, as a consequence, carry out more than 100 additional surgeries by the end of this year. We expected 1,200 but will instead have 1,300 by the end of this year, an important addition. I have provided an additional €0.5 million directly for this purpose. By way of progress update, in October, 34 additional surgeries had been completed against a target of 33. The majority of these were excision surgeries. Complex and severe cases were prioritised. An additional colorectal surgeon is also being actively recruited to try to facilitate more complex surgical treatments.

On 18 October, I launched the national framework for the management of endometriosis. It is a necessary expansion of services. The HSE's budget will help to enable expansion and improve all of our services, including endometriosis. We have to increase awareness. I have written directly to all GPs to try to drive awareness where it is not already there and try to drive a better opportunity for women to have referral pathways much more quickly and a presumptive diagnosis, recognising that women are, of course, the most reliable narrators of their own experience and pain.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister for the information. I welcome the launch of the first national endometriosis framework and the recognition of the women and girls who have suffered for many years from this condition. I recently met a constituent in my office who has suffered for over 20 years. She has experienced bottlenecks regarding diagnostics. It is very clear that we must acknowledge the pain and impact this condition has brought to the lives of so many women and girls. We need to ensure the framework is actioned without delay. I understand Cork and Tallaght are super hubs. Is this correct? Do all of the surgeries take place in those hospitals? When is it expected that the additional colorectal surgeon will be in place?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Not all of the surgeries take place in Cork and Tallaght but the most complex ones do. I have expanded a scheme to treat women who require complex surgery abroad. It was the case that they would go abroad and get the funding back via the cross-border directive. We very quickly put in place a scheme whereby people could get funding upfront for such surgery in many clinics in the UK and Europe. I have actively asked clinicians in the HSE to visit two clinics in Athens and Bucharest that women report to me as being very good but which did not meet the criteria in the first instance. We are trying to expand services.

On 1 September this year, I held a patient voice forum in the Department of Health. The Chief Medical Officer, the CEO of the HSE and the chief nursing officer listened to the voices of 60 or 70 women with very complex and painful endometriosis. On 5 September, I put in place a new action plan, drawn up based on the needs of the women at that forum. From 1 October, we had a new plan for additional surgeries in Ireland to be carried out over three months. On 18 October, I launched a framework and plan to support women who are not able to get the scale of intervention they need here, so that they can get that help internationally while we collectively scale up our complexity on imaging and surgeries in Ireland.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister. It is obvious that she is making great progress and is giving this the priority it deserves. We must commit to increasing capacity and implementing the visiting consultant model. Bringing internationally recognised experts to operate alongside Irish surgeons would rapidly and affordably expand skills and capacity, which would be far more effective than relying on an overstretched endometriosis surgery abroad interim scheme, ESAIS. This is especially important if the quote of over 100 extra complex surgeries per month is to be met. Over 30,000 women are on waiting lists for complex endo surgeries. To send each abroad at an approximate cost of €20,000 would result in a total cost in the order of €600 million. For operations and treatment to be provided in Ireland under the visiting consultant model would be more cost-effective and have more long-term benefits. This would demonstrate real commitment to the care of women.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There are not 35,000 people with endometriosis on outpatient gynaecology lists. Approximately 700 are waiting for endometriosis surgeries. An additional colorectal post has been prioritised and advertised for recruitment in Cork University Hospital. The time it will take will depend on the interest generated but I very much hope it will be done as soon as possible.

The Deputy is correct. I do not necessarily want women to be travelling abroad. I would much rather they get surgery here but it is not an either-or situation. I want them to be able to get the right surgery as soon as possible. As we scale up, we must also facilitate women to be able to get the surgery they need. There will be a major conference in January, which will be driven by the Royal College of Physicians and the college of obstetrics regarding endometriosis and the skills available here.

One surgeon, who will remain nameless, offered to travel with her patient to a clinic in the UK to shadow the surgery and better inform herself in order to learn how to provide a better service to her patients. It is that sort of leaning in that I have seen from consultants in recent months who want to provide a service to women, many of whom have advocated for this and want to do more and better for their patients. I was heartened to hear that story from a patient about her surgeon.

Mental Health Services

83. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the funding being provided for mental health crisis supports and suicide prevention in 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64090/25]

Deputy Martin Daly: The question is in the context of significant additional funding for mental health services over the past five years, resulting in a €1.6 billion investment in mental health services for 2026. For the sixth year in a row, there has been an increase in staffing. I would like the Minister to make a statement on the funding provided for mental health crisis supports and suicide prevention in 2026.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. I am taking this question on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, who unfortunately cannot be here today. The total allocation for mental health services in 2026 is almost €1.6 billion, the sixth year in a row in which the mental health budget has increased. This increase in funding for mental health services will enable continued policy implementation and service improvements in line with our national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision, and our national suicide and self harm reduction strategy, Connections for Life. Across the board, we have seen mental health promotion and early intervention through specialist mental health services.

This record budget will allow for a focus on improving support for people in mental health crises in hospitals and in the community through an additional €15 million for crisis supports and suicide prevention. Significant progress has been made over the past three years to develop alternative crisis mental health pathways. However, emergency departments continue to see high volumes of mental health presentations.

Investment this year will be used to establish specialist nursing teams in all model 4 hospital emergency departments, three new crisis resolution services in Donegal, Kerry and the midlands, 12 additional suicide crisis assessment nurses and several Traveller-specific suicide prevention initiatives, the development of the new crisis response pathway for children and young people, increased funding for suicide prevention community and voluntary organisations and funding to implement the new suicide reduction strategy. As occurs each year following the budget, discussions take place with HSE on details relating to specific service initiatives in the context of preparing the HSE service plan for 2026, including that for mental health.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister of State. It is extremely important that we continue to progress investment in our mental health services. We still lag behind the internationally accepted norms for spending on mental health as a proportion of our budget. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has done some tremendous work in this regard. We have identified the tsunami of mental health issues that have arisen since Covid. As a practising GP, it is important to me that when we refer people who are in crisis that there are adequate pathways for them to achieve treatment. I have dealt with situations where young people in crisis, who are actively suicidal, have sat in emergency rooms for eight or nine hours waiting for an assessment. Putting specialist nursing teams into all model 4 emergency departments is a good initiative because it will provide an immediate assessment by a specialist nurse.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I absolutely agree. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is very passionate about this and has been working very hard on it. There are three new crisis resolution services, that is, crisis cafés, to support people in distress. They are located in Donegal, Kerry and Tullamore in the midlands. An allocation of €4 million has been given for this. Funding of €1 million has been provided for 12 additional suicide services where nurses support people in distress who present to GPs in the community. There is funding of €415,000 for several Traveller-specific suicide prevention initiatives, which have been codesigned with the Traveller community. There is increased funding of €1.7 million for suicide prevention in the community and for voluntary organisations, including Pieta. Funding of €1 million has been given to implement a new suicide reduction strategy. There is €4 million to develop a new crisis response pathway for children and young people, with 19 new CAMHS specialist doctors for out-of-hours emergency liaison, as well as five new adult liaison psychiatrists. There is more but my time is up.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome all those initiatives. It is really important that they are integrated with existing mental health services. Initiatives must be even and consistent throughout the country, with adequate access. In addition, we need to look at acute mental health capacity in its totality in terms of beds. In the acute psychiatric unit in Roscommon University Hospital, up to a third of beds are taken by people who would be better served in supported situations in the community. In County Roscommon, there were many community hospitals and problems were identified with them. However, after the closure of the psychiatric hospital in Castlerea, there has been no replacement capacity in the community to step people down into those beds and create space for acute presentations to the psychiatric unit in Roscommon University Hospital.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I certainly will go back to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on those very important points. I absolutely agree we need more beds. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is very much aware of that. It is something the Government is looking at and the Minister definitely will work on it.

There is a challenge in dealing with suicide in extremely complex cases. We have seen cases where a single event is the factor that leads someone to take his or her own life. There are huge issues there. We need to get supports in place for families, individuals and communities. An action the Minister of State is working on is the new suicide reduction strategy. It is being drafted and will include information on beds and so on. Implementation of this new strategy will be developed in quarter 1 of 2026. I will convey the Deputy's concerns about the need for more beds and I thank him for highlighting it.

Medicinal Products

85. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Health the reason the osteoporosis drug Prolia, denosumab, is not routinely available free of charge to men with confirmed debilitating osteoporosis in Ireland in the same manner as it is available to women in equivalent clinical circumstances; and the steps her Department is taking to ensure equitable access for male patients in the Roscommon–Galway constituency who could benefit from this treatment but currently face significant financial or access barriers. [64522/25]

Deputy Martin Daly: I apologise to the Minister as this question contains incorrect information. I contacted her team to convey that message. I will ask the question and she might get back to me on it. I gave her short notice in respect of it. Romosozumab is a licensed treatment for post-menopausal women with advanced osteoporosis that does not respond to all other therapies. I have had a representation from a young middle-aged man who has a rare form of osteoporosis that has rendered him disabled. He does not have access to this drug by virtue of being a male.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for raising this case. He is right that this drug is reimbursed for post-menopausal women with osteoporosis. I would like an opportunity to check this but, as I understand it, the European Medicines Agency, EMA, originally assessed the drug for use in both women and men. However, the company withdrew the male indication during the process following concern over the benefit-risk profile. It has been added to the HSE reimbursement list for post-menopausal women at high risk of fracture but it is not licensed for use in men for that reason. As prescribing it for men would be off label, the HSE does not extend reimbursement to male patients. There is no licence to use it to treat osteoporosis in men. The company marketing the medicine withdrew the licence application for that use. I am sorry to tell the Deputy there is nothing I can do about that.

Deputy Martin Daly: I appreciate the Minister's answer, which is given at short notice. I am glad I raised the question on the floor of the House. The young man I mentioned is in difficulty. He is a self-employed businessman and is now disabled with multiple non-traumatic fractures. He asked whether there was a possibility he might be reimbursed for this medicine.

However, it is down to the company to apply for a licence, as the Minister said. I accept that completely. We will have to revert to the company. I appreciate her reply.

Ambulance Service

86. **Deputy Brian Brennan** asked the Minister for Health for an update on developments with the ambulance service in the south east; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64352/25]

Deputy Brian Brennan: It would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to mention that people from north Wexford have experienced a number of serious medical emergencies abroad. I thank the Minister and her staff for their prompt response and service in these sensitive matters for the families concerned. The responses by the Departments of Health and Foreign Affairs and Trade and the HSE have been really appreciated by the families. One case is still ongoing and I am working closely with the family on it. I must mention one of the Minister's staff, Bríd, who has been more than helpful.

My question asks for an update on developments with the ambulance service in the south east.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Government remains committed to investing in and developing the National Ambulance Service, NAS, including in the south east. The allocation in 2025 includes an additional €28 million of new service development funding for up to 180 additional posts. Those posts will focus on strengthening front-line emergency services, expanding alternative care pathways and developing specialist services, including critical care retrieval.

Government investment in NAS has increased by 64% since 2020. The HSE Dublin and South-East region is served by 14 NAS ambulance bases. Two NAS pathfinder teams aimed at older persons operate from Waterford and St. Luke's hospital in Kilkenny. Four NAS community paramedics also operate in the region. The south-east region has benefitted from two additional 24-7 emergency ambulances based in Tipperary and Arklow. Additionally, it is served by the NAS national clinical hub, which offers alternative pathway options for low-acuity patients.

The Deputy will be aware of ongoing NAS capital projects in the region, including new ambulance bases for New Ross and Gorey, which are scheduled to proceed to detailed design phase shortly. In addition, a new ambulance base regional training facility and business support hub project is planned for Carlow town and is proceeding towards detailed design phase.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I welcome the strong investment. The Gorey and Arklow area is one of the fastest-growing areas in Ireland. When we add in the coastal area between Castletown and Cahore, there are an extra 40,000 people every summer. The capacity really is stretched. I ask for continued investment in specialised advanced paramedics and community paramedics, who provide a vital service in communities. Second, what is the status of the promised national ambulance training college in the area? The model in Limerick was rolled

out very successfully. I understand we are looking at the nursing residential triage tool that allows patients in nursing homes to be treated *in situ*.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We continue to invest at pace. There are an additional 500 NAS staff since 2020, with the total going from approximately 2,000 to 2,500, which is a very considerable increase of 26%. That increase is needed to ensure the distribution of staff and the different ways in which they can try to keep people close to home, particularly older people whom we do not want having to present at acute hospitals. The south-east region currently has 14 ambulance bases, with 277 whole-time equivalent staff, including paramedics, advanced paramedics and advanced emergency medical technicians. We have new development funding in 2025 for two additional 24-7 ambulances. There is the new rapid response vehicle operating from Newcastle, County Wicklow. The south-east region is served also by 50 active community first responder groups, which play an enormous role. Further aeromedical support is provided to the region by the NAS helicopter emergency service and the Irish Coast Guard. These are the different ways in which we are trying to provide support and divert lower-acuity patients.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I ask the Minister to give a further commitment of funding for non-emergency patient services. In my constituency, Arklow Cancer Support is an example of a charity doing incredible work providing a wonderful transport service for vulnerable cancer patients to and from appointments. It operates on a shoestring and spends a huge amount of time and effort on fund-raising. All the measures we have discussed will put less pressure on Wexford hospital, which provides an excellent service in the south east but is stretched. Although this issue is under the remit of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, I must point out that the lack of acute mental health services is a real issue in the south east. The measures I outlined will put less pressure on Wexford hospital.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I recognise the work done by volunteer groups like Arklow Cancer Support and the support they give to cancer patients travelling for blood tests, infusion services and so on. The HSE is not a land development or transport company. I recognise there are many different groups providing an enormous service to cancer patients, some with some measure of State support and others not. While the HSE will never be a transport company, I have met Volunteer Ireland to ask it to compile a list of all the different volunteer groups who provide transport services for health patients, cancer patients or in the disability space - many overlap and intercept. When I have that complete list, I will sit with the Minister for rural affairs, Deputy Calleary, and in particular the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, who sits both in the Department of rural affairs and the Department of Transport. There is something we have not yet imagined in terms of rural support services and transport services. It is not the responsibility of the HSE. It should not really be. We cannot do high-quality cancer care and transport. That is not the role but there is something better, more imaginative and more co-ordinated that can be done. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss it today.

Health Services

87. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Health for an overview of the recently launched national endometriosis framework; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [63981/25]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to raise this matter again. It is fantastic to see the amplification and awareness of endometriosis in Ireland. That is part of what the framework is trying to do. We launched the framework on 18 October. I will set out the timeline again. This was in gestation for some period but it was becoming very clear that we were not meeting the needs or responding or perhaps hearing the acuity of what women were describing in terms of their pain, suffering and the impact on their lives. I also have to recognise the very many women in Ireland - I have met and discussed it with them - who received treatment that was absolutely satisfactory for them but perhaps they are at a different level of acuity. For the most complex and severe cases of endometriosis, it was not the case that we were meeting that need. We were not recognising it either in our public awareness of the impact on a person's life in terms of sport, attendance at work, opportunity to look for promotion and to participate in life in a normal way and how that impacts women and girls and can do so for a very long period of their lives. It is also not recognised that many women got surgeries that were successful here but at the more complex end were travelling abroad, paying considerable sums. In many respects they got all or much of that back through the cross-border directive or the treatment abroad scheme but after the fact.

It is not satisfactory to me that women should have had to do that and that the surgeries were not available to them here. Part of what we are trying to do is upskill what we are doing here and the complexity of surgeries. We are recruiting additional colorectal surgeons in Tallaght and Cork to try to enable more complex surgeries. We need to improve our understanding of the diagnostics and imaging. Endometriosis is very difficult to see sometimes. Different types can be very difficult to see. We need to do a lot better on that and upskill more broadly our capacity to do complex surgeries. In the meantime, I want to try to provide women with upfront support to those who need to travel abroad.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am an endometriosis sufferer. It is physically, mentally and emotionally draining. Some days I come into this House and I am in absolute agony. I negotiate how I sit down and I am afraid I am not fit to finish the day. As the Minister knows, our job is demanding. It is people-facing. It feels like a knife-fight is going on inside you quite often. Many women and girls have to tolerate that pain and agony day in, day out. It is chronic and absolutely exhausting. I am grateful for the Minister's work and that it is recognised and that we have a national framework. I feel emotional about it because it is so important. I was diagnosed and I was absolutely alone. There was no space. I am grateful to the Government for recognising women's health is specific and deserves specific frameworks.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I did not know that. I am sorry I did not. I am so glad the Deputy and I have the opportunity to describe the pain women face every day. As she said, it is like a knife fight inside you and yet she comes to the Dáil, working an extraordinarily demanding job, as everybody here knows. It is exceptionally physically and emotionally difficult and that is just the job. That is on top of all the things we bring to work with us. It

has not been understood. The Deputy knows that better than me. She does not need me to explain that to her. I am glad we have a different understanding. I attended a fund-raising last night for a local rugby club and a gentleman came up to me to talk about his 28-year-old who had been in precisely the same situation for a very long time. The impact on women's participation in normal life has to be understood. Teenage girls cannot participate in sport and perhaps cannot sit their exams. There are women who have gone through university, doing phenomenal jobs in the workplace, taking significant periods off and are not able to explain or have that understood by their employer. This impacts women's lives. It is important that it be broadly understood and named. It is a series of cells that can move through the body with exceptional pain right through from pelvis, through the diaphragm up to their shoulders, thoracic region and into women's brains and eyes. It is exceptionally painful. The more we try to explain that pain women have been going through, it will be better understood. It helps me to generate urgency around improvement in services.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The Minister is absolutely correct. I ask for mental health supports alongside the framework and fertility education and counselling for women who are not ready to have children. I am blessed that I have four children. I bucked the odds. I am eternally grateful my body was able to do that for me. We need that GP training and dedicated research funding. This is an autoimmune disease. In Ireland, we have quite a lot. Women are more inclined to have autoimmune diseases. We probably do not have a test bed because of the island are. We could be doing clinical trials and looking at research funding for endometriosis and autoimmune conditions in women. I cannot tell the House how important it is to move forward - go big or go home. The Minister is improving women's health and families. When a woman is sick in their home, it impacts the family. When we improve their health, we improve families and communities.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will do everything I can do try to drive clinical trials and research. I am launching the clinical trials oversight group this evening. This is an obvious space. It is under-researched more broadly though there is an opportunity for us in France that I might to talk to the Deputy about separately. It is really important that she mentioned fertility. Fertility is inextricably linked to the experience of endometriosis. Many women have not been able to have children, have had to postpone fertility to try to receive endometriosis treatment and there are women trying to work out that intersection. This is why awareness is so important. I have met teenage girls who have had it suggested to them by professionals in the medical system that they have a baby because that would release the symptoms of endometriosis. If it was a once-off case, I would not say it in the Dáil. I have listened to women of different ages, including teenagers, who have been told, go and have a baby; that will fix it. Of course, it will not. I have spoken to women who have had children and it does not necessarily fix it-----

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I have had four. It does not fix it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----or women for whom it has come as a consequence of pregnancy. Can we just put a line under that now that it never happens ever again in an Irish medical facility that a teenage girl is told to go and have a baby and that will sort her endometriosis?

Hospital Facilities

88. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health to request the management of the HSE to utilise the existing hospital building at St. Vincent's, Mountmellick, when the new wing opens, which would increase the bed capacity in the facility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [64160/25]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the framework for endometriosis as well. It is something I have raised with the Minister in the past. I support that work.

It is very important the capacity at the hospital is increased.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): St. Vincent's Community Nursing Unit, Mountmellick, County Laois, is a public nursing home that currently provides 56 long-stay beds and one short-stay bed. Phase 1 of the current capital project for St. Vincent's consists of a new two-storey development containing 50 single en suite rooms adjacent and linked to the existing facility. The project is expected to be construction complete in the next few weeks.

It is currently expected that St. Vincent's will be operational in Q1 of 2026, following the transfer of residents, the reviewing of staff rosters and the application to vary the registration with HIQA. When complete, St. Vincent's will be registered for 58 beds consisting of 57 long-stay beds and one short-stay bed.

The eight-bed dementia unit in the existing building will continue to operate. The HSE has advised that they are reviewing plans in respect of the future use of the existing facility. However, the main kitchen, canteen, laundry, and storerooms will continue to be accessed by staff. The church will also continue to be accessed by residents and staff as required, and daycare will remain operational in its current location.

The scale and scope of future additional phasing of capital works at St. Vincent's is currently being reviewed by the HSE, and once completed, the specific scope for phase 2 of the capital project will be determined.

Specifically on the matter raised, as I said, the HSE is currently reviewing plans in respect of future use of the existing facility. More particularly, the HSE is currently in the initiation phase of project planning for utilisation of the existing building, necessitating complete refurbishment, taking account of the demands for additional rehab, long- and short-stay beds in the community nursing unit, CNU. Any development in the old St. Vincent's building will be subject to capital and revenue funding approval.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. There are 58 beds there at the moment. The important thing when the new wing is opened, which I welcome as it is a €31 million investment we have been long waiting for, is that we increase that bed capacity of 58 beds. The reality is that 25 of the existing beds are in a ward that was refurbished in recent years at huge expense. There are double-glazed windows and completely refitted en suite rooms. It would be outrageous were those 25 beds to be taken out of use. There is capacity here to get the hospital up to 83 beds. There are brilliant staff there. It is a very well run

facility. As I said, they are totally refurbished rooms. A total of 25 beds could continue. There is a shortage of nursing home beds in the county. The Minister of State knows the situation he dealt with personally with regard to the residence. I thank him for his work on that and on the private ones. We have lost Ballard Lodge, a private nursing which closed down and which was a good facility. We need extra capacity in the county. I plead with the Ministers of State and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to do everything they can to try to ensure that they increase the capacity to 83.

Deputy William Aird: I put in a parliamentary question and received a reply on the 14 October, outlining exactly what the Minister of State has said. Funding of the sum of €23.7 million was allocated for a 130-bed facility in St. Vincent's in 2016. The project is being carried out in phases, including work on a new 50-bed unit. Will the Minister of State give a firm commitment that the overall capacity will be a 130-bed unit when all phases are complete? I refer to the existing facility in St. Vincent's in Mountmellick, which I know very well because my late mother was a nurse there for many years. A special occasion was when we went to look at the Christmas decorations at Christmas and to visit the patients who were there. I want to make sure we can keep the number of beds we have there. As a politician - we are all politicians at the end of the day working on behalf of the people in our communities - the single biggest issue raised in my clinics every day is by people who are trying to get their loved ones into one of the nursing homes. It is very difficult. There is no capacity in any private residential nursing homes. As has been said, the nursing home in Portlaoise is closed at the moment, which puts huge pressure on the situation. I am asking the Ministers of State and the Minister if they can do everything possible for us.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputies Stanley and Aird for raising this matter. As I said earlier, the HSE is currently reviewing matters in respect of phase 2 and, more particularly, in respect of the use of the existing building in terms of pure logistics. The person in charge is in contact with HIQA. There was a request for a preliminary visit of the area in respect of the new building and specifically in respect of the existing building. As I said, the eight-bed dementia unit will continue to operate in the existing building. The HSE advises it is currently reviewing plans in respect of the future use of the existing building. More particularly on that, the HSE is currently in the initiation phase of project planning for utilisation of the existing building in terms of complete refurbishment. I take on board the point the Deputy Stanley made about the 25 beds and the point Deputy Aird made about the increased capacity. We have taken account of the demand for additional rehab, long-stay and short-stay beds in the CNU. Developments in the old St. Vincent's building will be subject to capital and revenue funding approval. I take the points both Deputies made on board. I commit to working on what they have raised.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The first thing I want to say in reply to the Minister of State is that €31 million is the cost that I have been given for the new 50-bed unit that is being developed there. In response to a previous parliamentary question, the Minister said that "scale and scope of phasing of these works is currently being reviewed with service colleagues, and once completed, the specific scope for Phase 2", which is the next wing of the 50, "will be determined." That is a change of from the original plan of three phases. I am trying to be practical about this. I know money cannot be pulled out of the sky but we have 25 beds there

out of the existing 50. The first thing is to keep them there. The second thing is to move onto phase 2 for the second 50 beds because we need them. There is a growing elderly population. I do not need to tell the Minister of State that the demand is there for it. A lot of families are coming to me about it.

I was not aware that you could come in on the back of a written question at oral question time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You can.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is a new procedure in the Dáil. Maybe the Standing Orders have been changed and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle might advise me afterward.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I allowed him in.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is good to see such strong cross-party representation from the constituency of Laois. On the particular matter Deputy Stanley raised, there are two aspects. They are currently reviewing the scope for additional works under phase 2. More particularly, both Deputies raised the point in respect of the existing building. I followed up with the HSE yesterday in advance of our debate. I got the update the Deputy is looking for, which is that it is currently looking at the use of the existing building. It is looking at it in the context of the refurbishment that was referred to, the 25 beds, which I will bring up with it, and the need for additional rehab long-stay and short-stay beds. The first step is that the HSE completes its work in that area. We then need to look at funding. I will be following up with the HSE on that particular matter.

Hospital Equipment

89. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if she will commission a feasibility study into the provision of CT scans in Monaghan hospital. [64412/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The decisions by previous Governments to remove all services from Monaghan hospital has proven to be absolutely disastrous for the health services across the region. It has been a battle a day ever since to establish new services at Monaghan hospital. The most recent battle was in relation to an MRI scanner, that eventually we are told will be in place over the next 18 months, which is still far too long. I am asking the Minister that we do not have to go through the same rigmarole and process to get what is blatantly needed, which is a CT scanner in Monaghan hospital. Will she ensure that this is put in place?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Cavan and Monaghan operate as a single entity with integrated managerial and clinical governance systems, care pathways and support functions. They are 46 km apart from each other. Cavan and Monaghan hospitals currently have two CT scanners and one MRI scanner. Two CT scanners is one more than is available to the people in Mayo, where there is only one CT scanner in Mayo university hospital. There is no business case submitted by Cavan and Monaghan hospital for a CT scanner. The hospital does not have plans to seek additional CT capacity as clear clinical pathways exist to support the region. The

replacement to the existing MRI has been approved. Works are expected to be completed by the end of the year. It is clear to me that the number of scans done at Cavan general hospital this year is very considerable and has increased but the opportunity to do more also exists.

12 o'clock

Up to 31 May 2025, around 22,000 CT scans took place in Cavan and Monaghan hospital, which is a year to date increase of about 6%. As I look at the operating hours, there are normal working hours of nine to five, two outpatient scanning per week from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. and 24-hour seven-day-per-week emergency department services provided. There is always a well-acknowledged challenge in respect of radiographers and radiologists but it certainly shows that there is capacity in the existing CT machines with additional staffing and rostering to considerably increase utilisation. A business case has not been submitted by Cavan and Monaghan hospital for a third CT scanner.

I have heard about Monaghan hospital a number of times. It is really important to express how much investment in additional staff have gone in there. The budget has increased by 54% since 2020 and the number of staff in the Monaghan element of the Cavan and Monaghan hospital has increased by 70%, which is an outstandingly large outlier having regard to all of the other hospitals.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I invite the Minister to go back and read her statement and those of her predecessors about an MRI scanner at Monaghan hospital and several other issues. She is right. There have been staff increases in Monaghan hospital and services have increased in terms of provision. Every single one required a sustained campaign to force the Department and the HSE to see logic. When it came to the minor injuries unit when Monaghan hospital was operating at the lowest operating hours anywhere in the State, we had to fight tooth and nail to get the same operating hours as everyone else. The then Minister said the exact same as the Minister is saying today. When it came to the MRI scanner, I put down questions to Ministers countless times and they gave the exact same answer as the Minister is giving with regard to a CT scanner yet eventually the logic has become apparent and an MRI scanner will be provided. That is the result of pressure put on the Department and the HSE. The Government should cut out the middle man, cut out the messing and deliver. It should carry out a feasibility study on a CT scanner for Monaghan hospital because it is what the county deserves.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is nothing the Deputy likes better than a good campaign and nothing he likes less than a few facts. Staffing has increased by 70%. I am so glad to hear him acknowledge it today because there are so many times when I do not hear that about Monaghan.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister had to be dragged kicking and screaming.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That may be the Deputy's perception of all things but if he had been here he would have heard the dialogue around diagnostics, including from his party spokesperson, and the utilisation of them - he is sitting beside Deputy Conway-Walsh,

whose county does actually does need a second CT scanner in Mayo University Hospital and the local injury unit. I was there this week.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Deliver it. We have none in Monaghan.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy does not like answers that do not operate as convenient for him. He is the only Deputy this morning who talked across me as I was trying to give him an answer. He does not like facts.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Because she is not giving an answer.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy does not like an answer. I am entitled to give him an answer to his question. He asked me about Monaghan hospital. Here is his answer. Cavan and Monaghan have two CT scanners and an MRI scanner. They are the same unit. Staffing has increased by 70%. The budget has increased by 54% for Monaghan alone. What the Deputy does not like is how my colleague, Deputy Maxwell, reminds him of the number of hospitals and services removed in the adjoining area in the North of Ireland that have been closed under Sinn Féin's watch. It is about time Deputy Carthy recognised the totality of services for people in that region as the rest of the country does.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirfeadh na figiúirí ar fhoilsigh an rialálaí inné maidir le riaráistí fuinnimh inní an domhain ar dhuine ar bith. Tá rabhadh mór dearg ag splancáil do theaghlaigh atá ag streachailt cheana féin leis an mhéid atá in ann dóibh don gheimhreadh. Tá sé seo go léir ag tarlú toisc nach bhfuil faic déanta ag an Rialtas le dul i ngleic leis an sáinn nó chun smacht a chur ar phraghasanna. Tar éis dó gan rud ar bith a dhéanamh fad is a bhí na billí ag dul in airde i gcónaí, bhain sé an creidmheas fuinnimh a thacaigh le daoine teacht slán tríd an gheimhreadh seo caite.

The energy arrears figures published yesterday by the regulator are nothing short of alarming - a flashing red light for what households are already enduring and what lies ahead this winter. They tell us that over 300,000 households are behind on their electricity bills and gas bills tell the same bleak story. A total of 180,000 households are now in arrears with their gas. This means that over one in four households in this State cannot pay their gas bills. This does not even include all the households that are just managing to keep up. These are not just numbers. They are cold living rooms where families sit wrapped in coats because they cannot risk switching on the heat. They are older people rationing warmth terrified of opening their next bill. They are parents hiding final notices hoping their next pay packet will stretch far enough to keep the lights on.

All of this is happening because the Government has done nothing to tackle the rip off and get prices under control. What has been its response to rising bills? It pulled the energy credits that helped people survive last winter. Instead of relief, households are hit once again with Energia, SSE Airtricity, Pinergy, Bord Gáis Energy and Flogas all imposing fresh price hikes pushing 1 million homes into an even more impossible situation than the one they are currently in. What makes this even more galling is that energy companies are refusing to pass on the full reductions in wholesale costs. Families are being squeezed from every direction - by suppliers, by inflation and by the Government's decisions. Let us be clear. These arrears figures only go up to July. That was before we had the cold weather we now have, before the last round of price hikes and before people even turned on their heating so God only knows what the numbers are going to look like this Christmas if this crisis continues.

This Government cannot plead ignorance. It refuses to take on the energy companies; it refuses to empower the regulator; it refuses to reform hedging prices; it refuses to deal with a pricing system, the PSO and the network charges; and it refuses to stop more and more data centres driving up costs. It will not act. It will not intervene for customers so here we are with the worst period of energy arrears since records began in this State. I will ask the Tánaiste plainly because he cannot deny the fact that we have never seen so many people who cannot meet their basic bills of electricity and gas. How can he justify cutting energy credits when bills are higher now than they were this time last year and are rising even more? How can he justify taking away those energy credits people were dependent on when 300,000 households are behind on their electricity bills, over one in four households cannot pay their gas bills and arrears are rising faster than records have ever shown? Does the Tánaiste acknowledge that the number of families in energy arrears is increasing under his watch and that unless the Government intervenes, we will see a serious winter of discontent for so many families?

The Tánaiste: I am very conscious of the cold weather in the past number of days and the fact that a cold weather alert issued from Met Éireann in the past hour or so but I want people at home - I want to speak specifically to people at home - to know that unlike the assertions made by Deputy Doherty, this Government is intervening and taking real actions to help people with fuel poverty this winter and in the here and now. We have done a number of things to help. In the budget only a few weeks ago, we took the decision to increase the fuel allowance. The fuel allowance is now worth over €1,000 per year for that fuel allowance period we are now in. More people, families and households than ever before are getting access to direct assistance with their fuel bills from the Government. This is an action we took. I would encourage everybody to look at the broadened criteria and put in their application for the fuel allowance.

Second, not only have we increased the fuel allowance, we also expanded it to those receiving the working family payment. The Deputy talks a lot about working people and working families in this Dáil. This is why we have decided to make sure that people who are in receipt of the working family payment are able for the first time to receive the fuel allowance. This means that over 450,000 households or roughly one quarter of all homes in this jurisdiction will qualify for the payment.

We are supporting over 500,000 households, many of them pensioners, with an allowance of €420 towards their gas or electricity bills. Under the household benefits package, 532,000 homes are receiving support, another practical measure being funded by this Government. We

took the decision in the budget only a few weeks ago to freeze VAT at the lower 9% rate on gas and electricity bills for the next five years to provide that reduced VAT rate not just in the here and now but for the lifetime of the mandate of this Government. We have reduced the PSO levy to directly help people save money on their bills. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has met the four largest energy companies and they have confirmed they each have hardship funds in place and are working to support vulnerable customers.

I want to be very clear that this winter, nobody should be afraid to turn on their heat during the cold weather. I hope everyone will help us amplify the message that any person under serious financial pressure can seek an additional needs payment, in addition to what I outlined already, for heating costs through their community welfare officer. On top of these direct financial supports, we are also investing record funding in retrofitting to help people upgrade their homes, make them more energy efficient and make sure people's homes are warmer. The budget for the warmer homes scheme has increased to €280 million, which is an elevenfold increase since 2020. I want to specifically address the issue of disconnections. A disconnection moratorium is in place for registered vulnerable customers from the start of this month until 31 March, and indeed for all customers for the winter period in a few short weeks' time.

Yes, there is always more to do, yes, the cost of energy is a real cost and, yes, we need to look at how we can drive down the cost of energy, move more quickly to renewable energy and how we can do even more to support people, but please do not mislead people, particularly people who might be tuning in to this debate, in terms of the fact that there are supports available to them. There are decisions we have taken that are available to people in the here and now. I would encourage people to know that, to not be cold this winter and to seek the supports and assistance that are in place.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is going to be cold comfort to people who are listening to this.

The Tánaiste: They are real people.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do not be cold this winter. Does the Tánaiste listen to the facts? Does he not listen to what is being said by the CRU and the hard, unvarnished facts? Seventy thousand more households, more families, more individuals - real people - could not pay their electricity bill in the first six months of this year. The record number we are seeing is from the middle of July, the warmest month of the year. There are not just more people than ever before who are in electricity and gas arrears, but the amount by which they are in arrears has also increased. This has happened even with the energy credits supplied last year. The Government's response has been to withdraw those energy credits. How in the name of God does the Tánaiste think these families are going to survive? How does he think they are going to meet their needs this winter? He is telling them not to go cold this winter but people are cold today. People are making these real-life decisions today not to turn on the heat in their house.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: People have had to make the decision not to pay their gas and electricity bills because of the decisions of the Tánaiste's Government. I put it to him the

Government has consciously made it impossible for people to stay warm this winter and I ask him to bring forward energy credits-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----to support these families and provide them with a lifeline during these winter months.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I am sure Deputy Doherty accepts that in those numbers - those large numbers - are many people who are benefiting, and will benefit, directly from the financial assistance from this Government towards energy costs that I have just outlined, but he never makes those points. His party has a partitionist approach when it comes to energy policy.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: And health.

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin does not think it is enough for somebody in County Louth to have €1,000 in fuel allowance but thinks someone up the road in Armagh should get by on just £100.

Deputy John Cummins: Exactly.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty's party leads the Executive. The First Minister of Northern Ireland is from Sinn Féin. The finance Minister in Northern Ireland-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: How come Fine Gael is not running candidates in the Six Counties?

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin Deputies get upset when I bring this up.

Deputy John Cummins: They do not like it, do they?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Why does Fine Gael not run a candidate up there?

Deputy Matt Carthy: We do not like partition; that is the problem.

The Tánaiste: The finance Minister in Northern Ireland is from Sinn Féin.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fine Gael could not find it on a map.

Deputy John Cummins: Shout, shout, shout.

The Tánaiste: The economy Minister in Northern Ireland is from Sinn Féin. The Executive is headed up by Sinn Féin. It is the largest party in the Assembly.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fine Gael is not even up there.

The Tánaiste: It has not brought forward a cost-of-living package. The fuel allowance is a paltry £100 to £300 compared with €1,000 here.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: We do not control the fiscal policies in Northern Ireland.

The Tánaiste: To the people at home this winter, access our supports but do not fall for Sinn Féin's hypocrisy.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Mark Ward.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Fine Gael and partition.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does he think that washes with people?

Deputy John Cummins: They do not like the truth.

The Tánaiste: Where is the Sinn Féin plan?

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Why does Fine Gael not stand in the North?

The Tánaiste: Where is Michelle O'Neill's energy plan?

Deputy John Cummins: They do not like the truth.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Mark Wall: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus go raibh maith agaibh go léir.

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You have had your opportunity, Deputy Doherty. Deputy Ward, will you please put your question?

(Interruptions)

Deputy Mark Wall: I tried.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is no election so the Tánaiste does not care. Simon Harris, true to form.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty. Deputy Ward, please.

The Tánaiste: Cold in Armagh. No plan for Armagh. Sinn Féin wants more for Louth.

Deputy Mark Wall: Go raibh maith agat arís, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I raise the car parks the motorways into Dublin have become, especially the M7 and N7.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mark Wall: I am clear in my support for increased public transport for Kildare South, but we know this extra capacity will take years. Commuters on the M7 and N7 cannot wait that long. Since I first raised this, I have been inundated with messages from commuters across Leinster and north Munster. Thousands of people are spending their lives stuck in daily traffic for up to three hours as they try to get to work. They are leaving their family homes at 6 a.m. to barely make it into work for 9 a.m. It is not just workers who are affected. People are missing critical medical appointments like chemotherapy because of these delays. Cancer patients are telling me they are having to pull over to the side of the road because they are so unwell and cannot make their appointments. Can this House imagine what it is like to be undergoing cancer treatment and be trapped in traffic for hours on end?

The problems for commuters are because of the pressure and availability of housing, the lack of timely and fit-for-purpose public transport, a Government flexible working policy that is simply not fit for purpose and an inadequate response to minor accidents and breakdowns compounded by driver frustration and education and a lack of transport gardaí on our roads. Last week, I called for Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the Minister for Transport to set up an emergency response unit for the N7, M7 and other major motorways that are experiencing massive traffic delays. This is already in place on the M50. It is, of course, not a silver bullet but it would allow for better responses to minor road traffic incidents and would help prevent traffic coming to a standstill at rush hour.

Many people in rural Ireland south of the capital cannot get a public bus or train because there are too few options. For many the times of public transport will not allow them to get to work on time. In many parts of rural Ireland, people have no choice but to use their cars to get to work. Where public transport does exist, people are crammed onto trains and are ringing their public representatives to say the bus did not show up. In Kildare South, I am fighting for an hourly train service along the Waterford to Heuston line. This would make a massive difference to people living in Athy, Carlow, Kilkenny and other places along the line. The first train from my hometown of Athy is at 6.41 a.m., with many commuters failing to get to work for 8 a.m. and having to revert to their cars.

The Government's code of practice on flexible and hybrid working is not working. The call back to the office and the workplace is a problem highlighted by many commuters who have contacted me over recent days. The Government needs to legislate for a real right to flexible

and hybrid working. Will it launch a new Operation Freeflow and instruct Transport Infrastructure Ireland to provide an emergency response to accidents and breakdowns on the car park that is the N7 and M7 to reduce the congestion for so many commuters?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Wall very much for raising this issue. The N7-M7 corridor is, of course, a critical part of Ireland's national road and motorway network. I will get to some of the challenges, but there has been significant investment in recent decades, most recently the completion of a major upgrade to the motorway between Naas and Newbridge in 2021, which also included a bypass for Sallins. The Deputy is also right that since 2019, traffic levels on the M50 have grown by at least 11%, which equates to about an extra 50,000 trips per day. We are seeing the impact of that congestion on our road and motorway network. The Deputy was also right to highlight the fact there are real-life impacts from this. He gave the very harrowing reality of a cancer patient stuck in traffic trying to get to a crucial hospital appointment. I can think of the impact for people trying to get to an from childcare providers and meet school collection times. That is stress, as well as, of course, the environmental impact of being stuck in congestion and the impact that can have on air quality. We are very much aware of the congestion. I am aware of the regular accidents on the route and the safety issues as well. We intend, through our national development plan, to invest a huge amount in transport via upgrades to the road network but also to address the points Deputy Wall made on making public transport work more effectively for more people who wish to use it, once it works for them. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will shortly outline the sectoral investment plan, which is basically the outworking of the new national development plan funding in terms of the advancement of projects. I will ask the Minister to take on board the comments Deputy Wall has made here today and the constructive suggestion he has made in relation to TII and what more it might be able to do.

The Deputy has rather cleverly and appropriately linked this to the debate and discussion on the development of policy with regard to remote working. As he will remember, we gave a commitment that there would be full public consultation in relation to the policy on remote working. A lot of good work has been done in this area. I am informed that there are now more than 400 connected hubs. Indeed, I opened a remote working hub in my own hometown very recently. The roll-out of our national broadband plan, which was opposed by many but which has worked and been delivered on time and on budget, has made a real difference in giving people that crucial infrastructure to work remotely. Only on Tuesday of this week, my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, launched a public consultation as part of a legislative review of the right to request remote working. I inquired as to how that review was going the other day and was told that over 2,000 people had already made submissions. That is quite incredible. Roughly 1,600 of those 2,000 responses came from workers while around 400 came from employers. I encourage the Deputy and everybody else to make their views known. We will consider what legislative steps to take, what to review and what amendments to make to legislation on the back of that public consultation.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Tánaiste said my comment was clever and deliberate but it is the reality. The commuters who are coming to me are asking for remote work and flexible working. There is a public consultation. I believe the closing date is 9 December. We need that discussion and we need new legislation.

However, I am today asking the Tánaiste for a new Operation Freeflow for the M7 and the N7 because that is what is needed for the thousands of people who are trapped there every day. Will the Government commit to additional signage and to deploying additional gardaí on the road to assist with the flow of traffic? Will the Tánaiste commit to hourly trains to Dublin as part of the Government's housing plan, through which it plans to build thousands of much-needed homes in the commuter belt? Will consideration be given to the use of hard shoulders for public transport? Many issues are being raised with me. TII needs to act. We cannot continue with the way things are. Productivity is down and the mental health of commuters and those travelling into Dublin is affected every day. It is simply not good enough. I ask the Tánaiste to revert to the Minister for Transport and TII as quickly as possible. This is urgent.

The Tánaiste: I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to take on board all of those sensible suggestions. I will ask him to come back directly to the Deputy and to engage with TII and the NTA with regard to Operation Freeflow, signage, gardaí and the frequency of the trains. I join with Deputy Wall in encouraging people to make their views known on the consultation on remote working. We should remind ourselves that remote working at scale in Ireland arose very quickly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pace at which people, employers, public services and, to some degree, education changed their work practices was huge. However, if we are honest, it was also somewhat unplanned. There was a global pandemic and people were trying to keep the show on the road. We then legislated for the right to request remote working arrangements. That came into force for all employees on 6 March 2024. This was a big step forward in terms of entitlements and having a legislative framework for the first time. It is right and proper that we now consider it. If we get remote working right, it will result in huge opportunities, including the opportunity to expand access to the labour force and to address issues of congestion. However, we must also get it right as regards supporting our economy and making sure our public services work in the way our constituents expect. This consultation is an opportunity for everyone to have their say.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Survivors of gender-based violence have just held a press event calling for Government action and for people to attend global marches taking place on Tuesday, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. I welcome Natasha O'Brien and Becca Clarke to the Gallery. They are among the survivors who just spoke. I also send solidarity to the loved ones of Stella Gallagher, who was killed in Cork this week.

Violence against women and LGBT people is a global epidemic. The UN recognises it as such. Even ten minutes, a woman or girl is killed by a family member. The femicide report in the UK says that more women are killed by their sons than by strangers. There are no riots or calls for debates in here when we hear statistics like that but it is the actual reality. Across the globe, women and people of all genders will march. There is going to be a shutdown in South Africa. In Ireland, ROSA is calling for protests at City Hall in Dublin at 5.30 p.m. next Tuesday and in Limerick and Cork, also on Tuesday.

The UN is highlighting online violence and online misogyny this year. There is no doubt that spreading misogyny is the bedrock of violence against women. This week, the US President said to a reporter "Quiet, piggy." The *New York Post* is asking whether women ruined the workplace. We are seeing a huge backlash against women's rights. Companies that are based here and enjoy huge tax breaks are participating in the grooming of young boys and the

spreading of the manosphere and of misogynistic ideas such that traditional attitudes, as they are called, are re-emerging.

What is in the Tánaiste's control is the justice system. I will quickly raise two issues. The first is the fact that, over the last decade, the DPP has opted not to prosecute 13,000 cases of sexual violence. People like Nikita Hand and Becca Clarke, who is here today, had their cases turned down even though they were among the 5% of people who actually try to prosecute a case. The other issue I will raise with the Tánaiste is that of the Bill regarding counselling notes that is being drafted by the Minister for justice. This is something I have raised with the Tánaiste before. The fact that their therapy notes can be used by the defence has been identified as a misogynistic and traumatising issue for many survivors. The justice committee, the National Women's Council, the Rape Crisis Centre, all of the professional therapists and psychologists and all survivors want a complete ban on this. The Tánaiste needs to tell his Minister to go back to the drawing board and to find a way to make it impermissible to introduce counselling notes as evidence. They are third-party notes. In fact, they are hearsay. They are not evidence fit for a trial. We need a complete ban on this now. There must be no more messing around and no more retraumatising people who actually have the gumption and stamina to take a court case in this country, which is very rare.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising this really important issue. I also thank those in the Gallery for being here today. Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a global epidemic and it is an epidemic in Ireland. We should call it out for that. We should acknowledge the advocacy and bravery of those who come forward and seek to bring about much-needed change in this area. It should not be seen as an issue to be addressed by women alone. It involves leadership from all of us in all political parties right across this Dáil, across these Houses and across society.

I do not mean to be argumentative but the Deputy said there are no debates in this House. I beg to differ. Perhaps there is an argument that we could have more debates in the House, and we should, but I certainly welcome the fact that there is now much more discussion on legislation, in Oireachtas committees and in Cabinet committees with regard to issues of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I will also inform the House that it was agreed at the North-South Ministerial Council that we will work on this on a North-South basis. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland for their engagement with us on this. That is an indication of how seriously this issue is being taken, as it should and must be, across the island of Ireland.

I will not use all of my time to let people know what we are doing in this area.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Please do not.

The Tánaiste: We are doing things. We have established Cuan, the national agency. We have a zero-tolerance strategy. We are seeing funding for additional safe spaces. The Minister for justice is taking this matter extraordinarily seriously. He has secured Government approval to progress the criminal law (sexual violence, domestic violence and international instruments) Bill 2025, which includes measures to allow perpetrators of domestic violence to be included on a new register run by the courts and to strengthen the law further in relation to sexual

consent, which is a very important step to take. I will not comment on the work of the DPP for fear of challenge in respect of the separation of powers but I take the Deputy's point on our criminal justice system and legal system needing to take this extraordinarily seriously. Instinctively, I agree with what the Deputy has said about counselling notes. Cases should be heard on the evidence before them. When somebody goes to seek counselling or therapy, that confidentiality, privacy and sensitivity matters. I will not say something in this House that turns out to be legally wrong but the Government will try to get as close to what the Deputy suggests as is possible. We will take very seriously the recommendations of the justice committee and the recommendations and work of the likes of the Rape Crisis Centre, which has a very significant degree of expertise. I will commit the Government to working collaboratively and closely across the House on this matter and will specifically engage with the Minister for justice on the issues the Deputy has raised.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was here on a Thursday for the last debate on gender-based violence. It was pretty empty and it was many months ago. I get Leaders' Questions once a month, so I would appreciate if the Tánaiste could focus on the issue of the counselling notes and the DPP. He did at the end there; fair play.

On the counselling notes, the Minister has drafted a Bill under massive pressure and after campaigning by survivors who should not have to do this. Sarah Grace told the world she would nearly rather be attacked again than go back into our courts system. That should be a cause for real concern. One of the issues has been therapy notes being used by the defence. The Minister has drafted a Bill but it leaves the option open. A judge will decide if they can be included. Even the fact that such a decision could be made is traumatic. It is forcing many people to choose between therapy or a trial. What the Minister is proposing is the easy route but not the correct route. I ask the Tánaiste to ask him to go back to the drawing board. With his legal acumen and all the legal expertise the Government has, he should be able to come up with a way to rule out counselling notes as evidence in a fair trial in line with the Constitution.

Maybe we could return later to the question of the DPP, if not today. It is a real problem for Nikita Hand, who had to take a civil case - God knows the difference she made by doing so - and people like Becca, who did every single thing right but did not get her day in court.

The Tánaiste: Nikita Hand is an incredible woman who I have had the honour of speaking to. I think our media need to reflect on the amount of coverage they give to some people who represent the very worst of us - vile individuals - versus the attention and focus they give to courageous, incredible people like Nikita Hand. How these issues are framed in the media should also be considered. I am not disagreeing with the Deputy on this. I do not think anybody in this House, regardless of party politics, will disagree with the idea that counselling notes should not be part of a criminal trial. I accept fully the logic of the point about the chilling effect of the possibility of notes being used. I agree with the Deputy on that point. I accept her challenge in terms of understanding the legal advice available to the Minister as to why the Bill as currently drafted is the way it is, and seeing if there is the possibility of making further changes. I do not want to make a commitment on the floor of the House that I cannot deliver on, but I am committed to having that conversation with Government colleagues and coming back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last week in the Dáil, I spoke of how two of my constituents were refused an exchange of their Belgian driving licences and will have to get provisional licences and retake the test. As they live in rural west Cork, they are essentially going into Covid lockdown for five months, unable even to get to the shops for a bottle of milk. This is the case the length and breadth of this island for many people. It is demeaning, distressing, unfair, extremely expensive and an unnecessary burden.

Irish citizens left Ireland in the difficult times to find work in the USA. Many are now looking to return to Ireland to raise their families or retire, bringing with them their skills and wealth. We are telling these Irish citizens, many of whom have been driving for over 40 years and originally held Irish licences, that they now need to get L-plates to drive in their own country. Our younger citizens have been driven abroad in a time of full employment by the high costs of housing. Now we are trying to attract back the skilled doctors, nurses, construction workers and engineers the country badly needs but when they come back, they cannot drive to their jobs.

The IDA has been working tirelessly in this difficult global environment to attract and retain companies from the USA to invest in our economy and create high-paying jobs, but the senior executives of those companies are being told they have to put L-plates on their company BMWs. This country should be better than that. Many in the Dáil may be familiar with former GAA president Larry McCarthy, who returned to Ireland in 2021 and had to hire a driver so he could do his job, despite having originally held an Irish licence and then a US licence for 37 years.

As an immediate action, will the Tánaiste direct the Minister for Transport to require the Road Safety Authority, RSA, and the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, to revise their policy and recognise previous Irish driver licences without the ten-year limit? This is a straightforward action that would have zero impact on road safety. It would immediately support the Irish diaspora and returning Irish citizens. In parallel, as a solution to the broader problem, will the Tánaiste request the RSA and the NDLS to develop a proposal for a pragmatic and risk-based process for exchange of foreign driving licences, building on best practices and precedent from other EU countries?

The current RSA approach of seeking reciprocal driving licence agreements with individual US states is getting us nowhere. I am not surprised as I have not been able to find a single example where an EU country has a reciprocal driving licence exchange agreement with even one US state, most likely because US state licensing regimes are incompatible with EU standards. I expect the Minister and RSA are well familiar with that fact. I know we are unlikely to meet the commitments made in the programme for Government. Instead, Ireland can and should follow the example of many European countries such as Belgium, Finland, Denmark, Austria and Portugal, which have a unilateral licence exchange process, which includes the USA, operating in tandem with these reciprocal agreements. The RSA should leverage practices and precedents from our EU partners in a risk-based manner to revise our current restrictive system.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. There are probably two parts to the question. The first part relates to the ten-year limit after which the licence expires. My understanding is that because our Irish driving licence operates within a framework of EU law,

the driving licence legislation is EU legislation which all member states must comply with. I always get nervous saying that as though we are blaming the EU. We are part of the EU so we can always explore these issues with partners. However, the standards for testing drivers are set at an EU level. The benefit for all of us is that opting into this EU system enables us to have a driver's licence that works across the European Union. Rather than it being an impediment to an Irish citizen, it is a great gift with the primary benefit of allowing a universal EU licence. That is of huge benefit to people from Ireland and across the 27 member states. I understand an Irish driving licence can be renewed in Ireland up to ten years after the date of expiry; after this time, the licence cannot be renewed and the person is no longer considered a qualified driver. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will explore this further but that is the best information available to me.

The second point relates to our diaspora. I have to acknowledge this comes up a lot. In my past posting, when I met Irish people abroad who were considering coming home, the issue of the driving licence came up time and again. The Deputy is right to highlight it. Our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, is leading for the Government on this in the context of the new diaspora strategy. I was going to say that we are working through this and trying to reach agreement on it with a number of US states, but the Deputy has expressed concerns about the speed of that. I will ask the Minister of State to come back to him directly on that. He is doing some very good, focused work with our embassy and consular network in the US. They have started with states where there is a high number of Irish people, which makes sense. I will also ask the Minister of State to reflect on what the Deputy said about learning from other EU countries which, he perceives, do this in a more efficient or effective way. He mentioned Belgium and a number of others. The way we do it at the moment is this: Ireland may make bilateral licence exchange agreements with non-EU jurisdictions. It is a technical and independent process. Reaching agreement is therefore not just a matter of political will; it has at its core competency around road safety, which is something we all take very seriously. I am told that on average the technical independent assessment process takes approximately two years. On foot of the Deputy raising this matter today, and given that we will have a new diaspora strategy next year, which the Minister of State is currently finalising and will bring to the Government next year, I will ask that he specifically reflect on the issue of reciprocal arrangements in relation to driving licences.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Tánaiste very much for his reply. I ask the Government to get rid of the ten-year limit on Irish licences for returning emigrants. These are people who passed a test in Ireland, held an Irish licence and currently have a valid driving licence. To now deny them a licence is arbitrary, unjust and indefensible. This is a slap in the face to Irish citizens returning home. This is not how we should be treating our people.

It has zero impact on road safety. This straightforward action would immediately support the Irish diaspora and returning Irish citizens. The ten-year-old limit is not required under either Irish law or EU law.

It is in the programme for Government to resolve that, so the Government has discussed this around the table. Last week I sent this correspondence to the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney, and he forwarded it to the NDLS. That is kicking the can down the road. We cannot kick the can down the road on this issue. It is hugely important that we deal with that issue

immediately. As far as I am concerned, the senior Minister could amend this requirement tomorrow with the stroke of a pen. Can that happen?

The Tánaiste: Without being argumentative, I am not sure he can, based on the information available to me on the importance of anything we do in Ireland being in line, in relation to that ten years, with European legislation, but let me check on foot of the Deputy raising it here today. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond.

What we certainly can do, though, is look at how we can get those reciprocal arrangements in place. We are determined, not only at a political level but from the Irish ambassador to the United States down in terms of our diplomatic network there, that there is real work going on in terms of trying to reach those agreements.

The Deputy is right to identify the issue, as the programme for Government does, because we want Irish people back in this country. We want their ingenuity. We want their contribution. We want to bring people home. Often we need their skills as well. Their families want them back. This is something that comes up as a barrier in the long list of things people are trying to work through when planning on relocating to Ireland, perhaps with a family and the likes, and if there are hurdles we can remove here, we certainly should. I will speak to the relevant Ministers on foot of the Deputy raising this and in the background of our new national diaspora strategy.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Carol Nolan: As the Tánaiste will be aware, the midlands and County Offaly, in particular, are the areas most impacted by the just transition. The loss of Bord na Móna created a significant ripple effect in communities right across the county. Most recently, we have been hard again with the planned closures of Cardinal Health followed by Fastway Couriers in Portllington only a few short weeks ago. There is an air of major uncertainty in terms of our economic development and jobs into the future and many constituents and, indeed, small businesses have conveyed that to me.

Into that mix, we now have a fairly damning report on the Just Transition Fund and its implementation in the region by European Movement Ireland. Despite being vehemently pro-EU, the report makes it abundantly clear that there has been significant and well-grounded criticism from local community groups that Just Transition Funds' have been allocated unequally across counties and with inadequate consultation. Indeed, comments by Dr. Gillian Kennedy, policy manager at European Movement Ireland, were also reported by the *Offaly Independent* recently. Dr. Kennedy states in the report that the findings demonstrate that there have been challenges in the fund's roll-out and that there have been barriers preventing communities from fully benefiting from it. Beyond job creation, ongoing structural issues in some of the designated territories were also identified. For example, on the implementation of funds, local councillors in Offaly have also been critical of the lack of joined-up thinking and the structural challenges linked to tourism, accommodation and infrastructure that cannot be tackled by the just transition process alone. These comments indicate that the predominantly

project-based aspect of the tourism regeneration funds will be insufficient without parallel investment needed in infrastructure in Offaly and in the midlands.

In terms of solutions - and I want to be solution-based here in my approach today - Dr. Kennedy pinpoints out simplifying the application process and ensuring fairer access to funding are critical to making the transition truly just and, indeed, more importantly, more equitable. This is vital as the report notes widespread concerns over the complexity of the funding system with both farmers and community groups citing difficulties in accessing support. What we have here is effectively a just transition process that was posed as a solution to the problem but instead it has ended up causing a whole range of distinct new problems in its place.

I am asking the Tánaiste to take note of this important report and its findings and to commit to using every piece of leverage he has at EU level to ensure that the process does not descend any further into a web of funding barriers that would result in communities in Offaly continuing to suffer from a process that was imposed and foisted on them without adequate consultation. We should not be left carrying the financial and social can here for a project that is rapidly losing whatever limited appeal it had.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising the matter and the constructive way in which she has brought forward suggestions. I visited County Offaly recently with my colleague, Deputy Clendennen, and Councillor Noel Cribbin, in Edenderry and I was pleased to see lots of good work going on in terms of swimming pool plans, school plans and big work being done on the main street, which I know had caused some temporary disruption for shop owners but the benefit of which they recognise as well.

I want to see central government working with local government, working with Offaly and working with communities in the midlands to make a fair stab here of the Just Transition Fund and to make sure that the benefits are felt, that the bureaucracy is minimised and that we can get things moving as well. We are absolutely committed to a just transition. The aim here is to ensure that no one is left behind as we take action in relation to climate. Deputy Nolan is correct. The midlands is doing a lot of the heavy lifting in this area. That is why we will step up and help too.

The national Just Transition Fund, as the Deputy will be aware, was established in 2020. It was a key pillar of our plan for the midlands to try to support workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat extraction by Bord na Móna. There was €22 million made available to local and community-led projects in eight midland counties to implement innovative plans supporting the transition across a range of activities, whether support for local business, for community development, research, tourism, heritage projects, the development of greenways and opportunities for education, training and re-skilling.

The EU Just Transition Fund programme is providing up to €169 million to support the longer term economic transition of the region arising from the end of that peat extraction and peat-fired power generation. Fifty-six projects have been successful in their application. These included 18 projects in County Offaly.

I take the point the Deputy makes about the need to make sure at an EU level that we are doing all that we can in relation to ensuring that we benefit here in Ireland and that the midlands benefits and County Offaly benefits too. I suggest we reflect on how we can use our Presidency of the Council of the European Union which will take place in the second half of next year to perhaps showcase some of the good work that has been done but also perhaps to showcase some of the challenges that we need to overcome in terms of how such schemes are administered as well. I am certainly committed to working with people in a constructive manner in relation to this as well. I am happy to receive any correspondence or insights from the Deputy in relation to this.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Tánaiste for his response and, indeed, his commitment to look further at this. I believe we need to look at it urgently because, as I said, of the unexpected job losses that we have suffered in the county on top of bearing the brunt of the job losses in the midlands - County Offaly bears that brunt. We need to act, urgently and swiftly, and we need to support the local community groups that are trying to put in applications. It has been conveyed to me on many occasions that there are challenges in providing 50% matching funding and the bureaucratic maze that the applications, in particular, the EU forms, require. What is required there is above what a small rural community group can do in terms of time, skill, expertise and administration. I acknowledge the role of Offaly County Council which has been good and hands-on in guiding groups. One solution might be if we were to provide Offaly County Council with more staff to help the community groups to get the applications in and to ensure that we benefit. At the end of the day, Offaly bore the greatest brunt of job losses and we have had job losses in the two companies, Cardinal Health and Fastway Couriers, as well.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is getting the benefit of the challenge, depending on her perspective, for the fact that I visited her county recently on Deputy Clendennen's invitation. I had a chance to meet some of the local authority officials. I share the Deputy's view that they are very good people. I am often quick enough in this House to say when I find a local authority that is not lifting enough weight or not doing enough. I was very taken by the people I met in the town hall, or municipal district office, in Edenderry, which is a beautiful building. There is more that can be done. The Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, was involved in conversations there with councillors and others on the idea of EU funding officers. It is about how we make sure our local authorities are empowered to be ready - I say that in a supportive way - to draw down the maximum amount of funding. Let me explore that. I am also conscious we are having this conversation against the backdrop of the very difficult situation around job losses in the county recently. I am thinking of the Fastway workers and others, and their families, at what is a difficult time.

On the EU Just Transition Fund programme, I take the point that we can always look at how we can make things better and cut bureaucracy. I am a fan of that but we have seen 15 calls from that fund between October 2023 and December 2025, with over €93 million in funding now committed to projects. That funding is now being distributed to grantees. It is expected further project announcements will be made in the coming weeks.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Given the long discussions we have had in this House about SMEs, businesses and so forth, it is appropriate that we acknowledge Freda Hayes from Blarney Woollen Mills, which is celebrating 50 years in business, who is in the Public Gallery. It is quite a success story. She is here as a guest of Deputy Ken O'Flynn.

Members applauded.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I put to the Tánaiste a truly disgraceful situation that exposes the consequences of the Government's failure to properly fund our schools. Parents at Darver National School in County Louth were contacted this week and told that the school could no longer afford basic hygiene supplies because Government grants had fallen so far behind rising costs. The principal was forced to ask every child to come in with their own hand towel and roll of toilet paper. This is the Ireland the Government has created. It is an Ireland where primary schools cannot afford toilet paper, where principals are left pleading with parents for essentials that no school should ever have to ration and where families are picking up the tab for the Government's neglect. It is an absolute disgrace. Will the Government urgently look at the inadequate capitation our schools are getting? This school applied through all the channels for emergency funding and was refused. This principal did not want to have to send out this email but this is exactly the situation the Government has put this school in and, unfortunately, other schools like it.

The Tánaiste: I have heard this raised a couple of times. I would certainly like to hear more in relation to this. We have increased our funding levels to schools each and every year. We increased our capitation funding in the budget this year. I have never before heard the idea that children have to bring their own toilet roll to schools. This needs to be explored and we need to understand more comprehensively the rationale behind the sending of any such email to parents. That is not a widespread practice across our schools.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No money.

The Tánaiste: It is not widespread. Are there schools in Donegal or Wicklow asking people?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They-----

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second. Do not shout me down.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are doing a bake sale next week. We are doing a fundraiser next week.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You need to allow the Tánaiste to speak.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is here long enough. He asks and I get to speak.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You asked me a question.

The Tánaiste: That is how it works.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You asked me the question.

The Tánaiste: It is a democracy. Remember that. The Deputy asked me a question and I will answer it how I wish. The answer I wish to give is I want to understand exactly what happened in relation to that situation from the Department of education because the practice the Deputy referenced is not widespread. Nor is it reflective of this Government's commitment to investing more in education, most particularly when we saw an increase in capitation funding for all our schools in the recent budget, quite rightly so, because investing in education is key to our economic success.

Deputy Mark Wall: Almost 50,000 people in this country suffer from Crohn's disease or colitis; I am one of them. Will the Government support my Bill for a no-wait statutory card for those people? I am working with a Kildare woman, Maria Crowe, in relation to this. The Tánaiste and other Members will be familiar with the need for a statutory card. Many organisations have a non-statutory card but people are refused the use of toilet facilities again and again. This is so common, it is unbelievable. It is time we legislated for this and brought in this statutory card. I hope the Minister for Health will support this card as well.

The Tánaiste: As a Crohn's sufferer, I have a conflict of interest here as well. I will talk with the Minister in relation to this matter. More broadly, and I say this to be helpful, while there is sometimes a need to change laws, and we will always consider constructive Bills that Deputies like Deputy Wall bring forward, sometimes there is just a need for a bit of common sense in making sure there is clarity in relation to the use of toilet facilities and the likes. As always, the Minister will constructively engage. Sláintecare is bringing us on a journey that is trying to overhaul a lot of the structures in place around long-term illness and so on. That work is under way but I look forward to considering the Bill.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Met Éireann has issued a status yellow weather warning for ten counties, with temperatures expected to fall to -3°C in parts of the country. People are now facing freezing conditions with some of the highest heating bills in Europe. The Government had a clear opportunity in the budget to target energy credits to those who need them the most. Instead, it decided to scrap them outright leaving vulnerable households afraid to turn the heating on. It is as if the cost-of-living crisis was forgotten about and ended by Fine Gael as soon as the election was over. The budget was a disaster for those already struggling to get by but the Tánaiste should not take my word for it. Social Justice Ireland, the ESRI and the Parliamentary Budget Office have all concluded that the budget is pushing more people into poverty. Will the Government reverse its decision to push more people into poverty? Will it bring in a targeted energy credit to help those who need it most?

The Tánaiste: I make the point that the budget, by any objective standard, was a progressive budget. It was a progressive budget that helped those with the least the most. That is how progressive budgeting works. It is there in the ESRI SWITCH model and the likes as well.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It shows the worst-off are worse-----

The Tánaiste: I have outlined very clearly what the Government is doing to help those most in need. I appreciate the fact the Social Democrats have brought forward a proposal around targeted energy supports. One crowd here wants a universal support, another does not want any supports and the Social Democrats wants targeted supports. If this is a united left, I would not like to see them divided.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Will the Tánaiste answer my question about poverty?

The Tánaiste: I answered it at great length from the Deputy's coalition colleagues.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Charles Ward: Once again, the Government has waived pre-legislative scrutiny on the defective concrete Bill. On 14 June 2022, the Taoiseach said, we will get on with it. With that attitude, 205 homes have been partially built in Donegal; 579 have works ongoing and 43 homes have been completely abandoned. There are 3,000 applications, most of which are stuck, including mine. I have been stuck in this scheme for five years and cannot progress. I agreed with the Minister, Deputy Browne, that scrutiny on caps, rates and amendments would be waived if nobody was left behind but amendments have also been pushed through without public debate. We roll with the headlines; billions are being spent on a scheme that people cannot access because it is too hard and is worthless. It is all figures but nobody is getting on it. A sum of €1.4 million has been spent on a security hut but 43 taxpaying families have been abandoned. As Minister for Finance, will the Tánaiste include in the upcoming Bill the 43 homeowners and deliver side-by-side building for vulnerable families so that nobody is left behind?

The Tánaiste: I appreciate the Deputy's strong mandate to represent people in this House on this issue. I respect the fact he engages with us on this regularly. I will point out that the figures we cite are not just headlines. They are a genuine commitment to provide from the Exchequer an extraordinary, quite rightly, sum of money to try to assist people with this issue. I accept there are challenges that we are all trying to work our way through constructively, including Government Deputies, such as the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. That is why there are commitments in the programme for Government and legislation is coming forward. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to specifically come back on those homes the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I attended the launch of the Religious Freedom in the World report this morning. It is shocking reading. It estimates that two thirds of the world's population live in countries where practising their faith can cost them their livelihoods, their freedom and their lives. The report states that all faiths are under pressure in different parts of the world. I

welcome that the war in Sudan was raised in the Dáil this week. It is a catastrophic event leading to the brutal murder of so many innocent civilians. Nigeria is also witnessing a surge of violence, especially against Christians. Armed groups, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, ISWAP, have carried out large-scale attacks on churches, villages and religious leaders. In just one month in two states in Nigeria, thousands of people have been displaced, 1,100 Christians were murdered and 20 clergy were killed. Will the Tánaiste and the Government use all the international leverage we have to try to end the murders that are happening and bring about peace in these regions?

The Tánaiste: Yes, we will. I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Religious freedom matters. It matters in our own country too. Sometimes, there is an effort in what is sometimes called the progressive agenda to try to exclude the conversation on this, including parents who want to send their child to a school of a religious ethos of their choice, which is that parent's choice. I welcome the publication of the report today. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, probably as we speak, is raising at the issue of Sudan at the Foreign Affairs Council.

1 o'clock

Ireland specifically asked that Sudan be tabled as a substantive item at the Foreign Affairs Council today. I will also ask the Minister to take up the issues the Deputy referenced relating to Nigeria and other parts of the world.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am not sure if we are witnessing a heave in real time in front of us, but there seems to have been a shift of numbers.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I raise the importance of our economy and funding of public services, and a particularly vital public service referenced in the programme for Government. I do so from the seat in Dáil Éireann that I first pursued and held in 2011. While doing so, I offer some words of acknowledgement and thanks to those who have allowed me to be here and to discharge my duties. I thank the many communities of Dublin Central for their support, kindness and respect over many years and say to them how proud I was to represent them. I thank all of the staff at the finance and budgetary oversight committees and here who make this more than just a place to work. They make it a Parliament that we are proud to serve in. I thank them again for their support and courtesy during my tenure here. I thank my own team, who have worked so closely with me over so many years to allow me to do my work as a Minister and a representative of Dublin Central. I acknowledge that this is a complex and tough week for them, and I thank them for all they have done for me to allow me to do the work I have been trusted and privileged to do.

The particular matter I want to raise is the relationship between our economy and public services. I am confident and certain that whatever progress we have made in recent years in our economy, which I believe is real, will only be built on and further improved by the Tánaiste as Minister for Finance. As he is doing that, I ask that he keep one public service in particular in mind and that is our libraries. I am proud of the investment we have made through our local authorities in recent years in the funding, and opening, of new libraries. They are cradles of decency. They are beacons of light in a world in which things are changing so much. We should be proud that we are in a country that values them, invests in them, that recognises the

value of reading and that recognises the value of a place that offers both solitude and community at the same time. I ask the Tánaiste that he reaffirms the support of the Government to continue this investment and in his time, and in the many budgets that await under this Government, that he and his colleagues continue to prioritise that, and prioritise this vital public service upon which so much depends.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his support in the many committees I have appeared in front of that he has chaired and the relentless but always fair way in which he has discharged his duties. I wish everybody in this Dáil happiness, health and success in representing their constituents.

Members applauded.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Donohoe, and I wish you the very best in your new position.

The Tánaiste: I never quite thought there would be a day when Paschal would ask me to spend more money but it did come on his final day. I really want to thank you, Paschal - Deputy Donohoe - for this question. It is fitting on your last day in Dáil Éireann that you are talking to us about borrowing, but now about borrowing books instead of borrowing money. When I walked into what was your former library yesterday, I thought I had taken a wrong turn and walked into a library, such was the collection of books you have built up there. Thank you for your support for our various library projects around the country during your various Ministries. They include projects in Kinsale, Virginia, Macroom, Trim, Castleblayney and Thomastown, so many of which you visited and all of which your fingerprints have been involved in.

Can you believe it is 5,364 days since you stood and made your maiden speech? That day you talked about diversity, stability, addressing the banking crisis and creating jobs. In the subsequent days before you ever became a Minister, you contributed frequently, thoughtfully, philosophically and with immense knowledge and understanding. You have stayed entirely true to your values over those thousands of days. I cannot help thinking of your time as a Trinity student and the famous quote in the Long Room that states, "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." I think that might be a vision that you share. However, as you address this Chamber for the last time and depart the Dáil, I was trying to think of how best to define you and your great contribution to our country. I turned to one of your favourite authors, and from a book you gave me a couple of weeks ago by Timothy Snyder, in which he states:

A patriot ... wants the nation to live up to its ideals, which means asking us to be our best selves. A patriot must be concerned with the real world, which is the only place where his country can be loved and sustained. A patriot has universal values, standards by which he judges his nation, always wishing it well - and wishing that it would do better.

Paschal, you have been nothing if not a true patriot.

Deputy Pa Daly: I wish the former Minister, Deputy Donohoe, all the best.

The Government is developing a new diaspora strategy. The Coventry Irish Centre has been supporting Irish immigrants since 1953 and it continues to do that in welfare, health,

befriending and helping people with passports. It has supported 500 survivors of residential institutions since the 1990s. However, it has no permanent home and has had to move five times since 2015. In the new strategy I ask the Tánaiste to include a provision whereby all of the great work the centre is doing with survivors, and sometimes with the elderly Irish community in Coventry and all of the west Midlands, can be supported so it can have a permanent home.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. While I do not believe I have had the pleasure of meeting with the Coventry centre, I have had the pleasure to meet with many centres working in the UK. I share his view that they are doing incredible work. I visited one in Camden Town in London relatively recently and I am aware of the work it is doing with survivors of residential abuse and mother and baby homes. It is incredible work. I will ask, in the context of drawing up the new strategy, our embassy in London to see what we can do to assist, and I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Minister for housing issued a directive to local authorities to rezone land. However, there is an opportunity for developers to abuse this. They could buy land that is not currently zoned for housing and sit on it to wait for a change in zoning. The Coldcut site, which is owned by Dublin Bus members, is up for sale. This site is over 10 ha. It straddles north Clondalkin and Palmerstown. Many local soccer clubs use this facility. The all-weather pitches are always extremely busy. I attended a public meeting this week with Collinstown football team, Palmerstown Football Club, North Clondalkin Running Club and Clondalkin autism parents. They all want to see these lands remain as an amenity for the people of north Clondalkin and Palmerstown. There will be a public protest on Sunday morning. I am aware that South Dublin County Council is very interested in this site but it could be outbid by a private developer. Is there anything in the directive to local authorities to rezone land that could prevent developers from land hoarding and sitting on land, given once this amenity is gone, it is gone forever?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I take from his contribution the depth of feeling there obviously is in his community in relation to this and all of the sports clubs, autism families and others that he highlighted. In light of his raising it I will ask the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, to take a specific look and to come back to him with an informed view on this. The Government has taken a number of measures to prevent land hoarding, as the Deputy called it, including the residential zoned land tax. We are also going through a process of meeting with chief executives of country councils individually, that is, myself, the Taoiseach and the Minister for housing. I will arrange that we meet South Dublin County Council shortly. I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Grace Boland: I wish the best of luck to Deputy Donohoe. He is the standard to which we all aspire in Fine Gael. I thank him for all of his support.

Skerries, Rush, Lusk, Garristown, Balrothery and Oldtown are all principally served by Balbriggan Garda station. Balbriggan is the youngest large town in the country. It is the most culturally diverse town in the country, yet we have not had a permanent superintendent at the Garda station for well over a year. I hope the Tánaiste will be able to give me some news as to

when we will see that appointment. It is vital for the community. North County Dublin is a rapidly growing area, and a permanent superintendent appointment is essential.

The Tánaiste: I could not agree with the Deputy more. I have been with her in Balbriggan. It is a great town but I know how fast growing it is and how important this appointment is. Indeed, she has chatted to me about it in recent days as well. I have made inquiries. I am informed that, as we will recall, the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 changed how the Garda fills its vacancies at senior ranks. It now runs the competitions for the vacancies. This was a major legislative reform and necessitated a temporary pause in promotion competitions for certain ranks, namely superintendent and above, until the Act was commenced and regulations signed. That happened on 2 April. As a result of that, a promotion competition was run for the rank of superintendent. I am assured that that competition has been undertaken and will enable the filling of outstanding vacancies. I expect the vacancy to which the Deputy has referred, a new superintendent for Balbriggan, to be filled imminently or very shortly.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I want to raise a big issue in north Dublin, namely the Oscar Traynor Centre. I also want to raise the Northside swimming pool, which has been closed. The Oscar Traynor Centre is a grassroots football centre built by people in Coolock and Kilmore. Why and how was it effectively handed over to a professional club when local clubs have been effectively cut out? Hundreds of young girls and boys cannot use the centre now. Why was it sold for a fraction of its valuated price? I would love the Tánaiste to look into this. I was in Kilmore recently, where a playground had been burned down. These young children have been cut out of the sports centre.

The Tánaiste: It is very fitting the Deputy should raise this because while we have been in the Chamber the play-off draws for the World Cup have taken place. I believe we will face the Czech Republic - that is the "check" I have been thinking about most in the Department of Finance today - with a possible home final against Denmark or North Macedonia. That is just the latest soccer information. The Deputy is right, and that is the backdrop against which he asks his question. While we all cheer on our national team and we are all so proud of the progress made, including by Troy Parrott, and the Hungarians being as sick as a parrot, we need to use this as an opportunity to make sure we continue to invest in and support grassroots football and sports facilities.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: How many Troy Parrotts will not develop because of this?

The Tánaiste: That is exactly the point I am making. I will make immediate inquiries with the Minister for sport, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, about the Oscar Traynor Centre and will ask him to talk to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Once again, I wish Paschal Donohoe, setting aside our significant political differences, the best on a personal level. I know he is a reader of books, and one book I know he has read, because we have talked about it, is by Thomas Piketty about the growing inequality in wealth in the world. The Deputy might therefore be interested in, or

indeed maybe supportive of, my appeal to the Government not to increase income inequality affecting in particular some of Paschal's constituents in Dublin city, where there is significant concern among council residents, and a protest next Monday outside the Dublin City Council offices, about plans to increase the proportion of income council tenants will pay in rent from 15% to 18%. That would be a significant jump for, it should be remembered, some of the lowest income households in the city and in the country. The assumed income of certain categories of employee will also be increased significantly from, for example, €500 to €750 in the case of taxi drivers. The cap on subsidiary earners will also be increased. This will mean significant hikes in rent for some of the lowest income families. Eighteen per cent of a tiny income is a lot; 18% if you are a multimillionaire is not a lot. This is a cost-of-living hike for some of the lowest income families in Dublin city. It will affect other places too. The income thresholds have not been raised. I emphasise that this is the reason this is being done. We used to have people with higher incomes in social housing. Now they are excluded from housing lists, segregating the lowest income households and meaning the rental revenue coming back to local authorities is lower. The lowest income people should not be asked to pay the bill for that.

I ask the Government to intervene on this, stop the rent hikes on council tenants and start to raise income thresholds for social housing eligibility.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. Both he and Paschal would be disappointed if he did not point out their significant political differences while doing so in such a courteous way.

I am going on my memory here but I believe we did increase the income thresholds for social housing in the previous Government. I acknowledge that we probably need to do more on this over the lifetime of this Government. I see it in my constituency where incomes have risen, thankfully, but, as a result, sometimes people can miss out on eligibility and, therefore, there can be a poverty trap there. I will talk to the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, about his plans on this and specifically the issue Deputy Boyd Barrett raised in relation to Dublin City Council and its decisions on rents.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy John Paul O'Shea.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I notified the Ceann Comhairle's office on Tuesday that I would take this question, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Is that in order?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, go ahead.

Deputy Michael Murphy: On Monday of this week the High Court quashed a section 5 declaration applying to Dundrum House Hotel. This site is no longer planning compliant, yet we maintain a multimillion-euro IPAS contract with a company whose shady business dealings are before the High Court. There is no accountability, no transparency and no due diligence. This is not about IPAS; this is about the taxpayer and the people of Dundrum. Since we have entered into this contract, we have lost a golf course. Some 780 members can no longer drive a golf ball on the golf course. We lost all the ancillary activities as well. This is about standing up for the proud people of Dundrum. More importantly, it is about standing up for the taxpayer. I ask that this multimillion-euro contract be brought to a halt.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue in the House, as he has done on many occasions. I will not, for understandable reasons, comment on matters that are the subject of a commercial dispute before the courts. I understand that the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, has agreed to meet with the Deputy next week to discuss the broader matter he raises on behalf of the people of Dundrum. When I have been in his constituency I have met many local kind, decent people who want to have a conversation about this issue.

It also raises a broader issue. As we form our new national migration policy, which we must do because immigration is a good thing but so too are rules and structures, we need to move away from the reliance on hotels and private facilities, which is causing real difficulties and challenges, particularly in rural Ireland. We will ensure that the Deputy has a meeting with the Minister for justice next week, and I will continue to engage with the Deputy on this.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I wish the Tánaiste well in his new role. I also thank Paschal Donohoe for his service as Minister for Finance and in other roles. One of the last reports he published as Minister, and one of the most important, is the Future Forty report, which sets out the long-term direction for this country. Part of that is the demographic challenge, whereby we will grow from having about 860,000 people over the age of 65 now to potentially 2 million in 40 years. What is critical in that is that we have a healthy older population during that time and that we keep older people active.

With that in mind, I refer to budget 2025 and the commitment in the programme for Government to consider the introduction of tax relief for gym membership and other particular measures to provide supports to encourage greater activity among older people. I would be grateful to know the Tánaiste's views now, as Minister for Finance, on the proposal for a tax relief for gym membership in the programme for Government.

The Tánaiste: In my new role I must be even more disciplined in commenting on various tax changes and the likes. I have been watching Paschal do this for a few years. I am committed to the programme for Government, of course, as is the Government. The sequencing and advancement of various initiatives in the programme will be a matter for individual budgets. The Deputy is entirely right: this was put into the programme for Government because of his view and the view of others on the importance of helping keep our population fit and healthy, particularly as we age. Future Forty is a great gift to all of us as policymakers across this House. It is a treasure trove of various scenarios and the like that may unfold over the time ahead and it will help us plan better. Specific timelines for specific tax measures are a matter for future budgets but we do intend to honour what is in the programme for Government.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I too wish Deputy Donohoe the best and echo his call for investments in libraries. I have raised the issue of Cork city library. We have been waiting four years for a new-build library. Perhaps that is one the Tánaiste could invest in. It would be crucial and would be part of Deputy Donohoe's legacy.

The issue I want to raise is relates to the census. I welcome the decision to include questions on sexual orientation and gender in the next census. For the first time, a hidden part of our population will become visible in official State data. This census data matters because we can measure the health, economic and housing disparities faced by gender and sexual minorities.

However, it comes with challenges. There are concerns in the community around confidentiality. There is a fear of disclosure among older members because of the history of criminalisation by the State. There are also issues with accuracy and under-reporting that will result. It is also regrettable that there is not going to be a question on sex characteristics to include intersex people.

I would like to see the Government take four actions. Research needs to be carried out early next year to better understand these complex issues. There must be concrete steps to ensure that the census is confidential at an individual level. We have to ensure that the new questions are inclusive of intersex people. Finally, I urge the Government to pass the disregard Bill to disregard historical convictions for men, which has been co-sponsored by six Opposition groups.

The Tánaiste: I am glad the Deputy reminded me of that Bill because we should try to make progress on it. I will seek an update on that. On the library issue, we have a public library strategy 2023 to 2027. We are genuinely committed to continuing to invest in our libraries. The evolution of our libraries has been a source of collective national pride at a time when other countries are reducing their investment in and funding of their libraries. Some are even closing down libraries.

It might be useful for me to arrange for the Deputy to have a briefing with the CSO or officials as appropriate on this. The census is a highly important moment in gathering data. We need that data to help us develop services and plan for our future. I have been learning about this recently. The CSO has gone through a very extensive process with an advisory group but the questions the Deputy raised are valid. I do not have the expertise on the floor of the Dáil to answer them accurately. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, who has responsibility in this area, to come back to the Deputy and arrange for him to have a briefing and direct answers to his questions.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I too wish Paschal Donohoe the very best of luck for the future. We managed to disagree agreeably most of the time. I want to recognise the contribution he has made to political life. I ask him to consider taking a lead from his former leader Leo Varadkar in terms of the work that he has done as an ambassador for the reunification of our island. There are many issues that are facing us that can only be tackled on an all-island basis. There are some wonderful books and academic papers that he can refer to in all of that.

The issue I want to deal with today is the lack of child psychology services in Mayo. In 2023, there was a two-year waiting list, which was totally unacceptable. Now, there is a three-year waiting list. That is not good enough for the for the children of Mayo. We are told that it is due to a range of factors. I want more psychologists in there. I want to end the ridiculous situation whereby if a child psychologist or anybody else goes on maternity leave, we wait until they are on maternity leave to then try to recruit. I am deeply concerned about the number of young people who are dying by suicide in Mayo and then even their families and the communities around them cannot get child psychology services.

The Tánaiste: When the Deputy asked Paschal to follow Leo's lead, I thought she was going to ask him to write a book.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: He can write a book too.

The Tánaiste: I think it would be a very interesting one, but that is for another day.

The Deputy raised a very serious matter about the wait times for psychology services in County Mayo. She also highlighted the very serious issue of death by suicide in her county. I will ask both the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has responsibility for mental health, to come back to the Deputy directly specifically on child psychology provision in County Mayo.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise an important industrial dispute with Dublin Fire Brigade over the proposed implementation of a new computer-aided dispatch system. The membership of Dublin Fire Brigade have overwhelmingly voted for industrial action up to and including strike action over it. Effectively, there is a proposal to bring all fire brigades in the country under one dispatch system. However, the problem with the proposal is that it will not include Dublin Fire Brigade's ambulance fleet, meaning that the fire brigade side would be included but the ambulance fleet would not be included and it would fragment the existing resources. There has been no consultation with front-line firefighters on this and they make a strong case that splitting fire and ambulance services into two dispatch systems creates a clear risk to both public health and firefighter safety. It is an integrated fire, rescue and ambulance service and it is necessary that it has one dispatch system to reflect that. I do not know if the Tánaiste has come across this issue or if the Government can intervene on it.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising it. I have been around long enough to know that disputes are generally resolved by engagement and consultation so I would encourage everybody to engage intensively with Dublin Fire Brigade, which does an incredible public service, and indeed with the ambulance service. I know that from quite a while back, in my memory, these issues with ambulance and fire brigade provision in the city of Dublin have caused points of friction at times in industrial relations. I really urge the State side and the union sides to engage to try to find a way forward. The use of technology is always a good thing, but I take the point about the particular situation in Dublin with a fire brigade service and an ambulance service and the need for alignment. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, whose Department has responsibility, to come back to the Deputy on it.

Dog Welfare (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for animal welfare considerations in the operation of dog breeding establishments, including but not limited to a cap on the number of breeding bitches, the age of bitches allowed to breed, the age of pups when removed from their mothers, a staff-to-bitch ratio, and to prohibit the use of surgical artificial insemination; and to provide for related matters.

There really is nothing cuter than a little puppy - all big paws, big ears, wet noses and just a bundle of energy and pure love. However, the horrible reality behind that cuteness is often an

absolute horror story for the mammy dog living in the most inhumane conditions that produced that puppy. They are often caged with no room to move, lying in their own faeces and urine, matted, cold, dirty, often without water, without food, without bedding, with no access to light or to fresh air and certainly no access to love or kindness. They often have serious health conditions or are covered in sores. They are just bred over and over again until they serve no further purpose. It is a truly miserable existence and most people in this country would be horrified to know exactly what these poor animals are put through.

That is why I am introducing today the Dog Welfare (Amendment) Bill. The reality is that puppy farm owners do not care about these dogs because all they care about is money. All they see when they see these dogs are euro signs and it is a very lucrative business. It is estimated that approximately 100,000 pups are bred each year in Ireland, with buyers paying thousands of euro per pup. Many of these pups are now being sold overseas to buyers in the UK, Europe and Asia. Some people are making an awful lot of money on the misery of these poor animals. When the female dogs get too old to breed any more or when puppies get too old and have outgrown their cuteness and their best-before date passes, these dogs are often dumped or indeed just left to die.

Ireland is a nation of animal lovers, but I believe that most in the Irish public assume that there are regulations of puppy farms to protect these pups and dogs. It really could not be further from the truth. What are the rules at the moment? There is no cap on the number of dogs that are bred in a breeding establishment. It would not be unusual to have 300 female breeding dogs on site with potentially thousands of puppies. Females as young as four months old can be bred, when they are just pups themselves. There is no maximum age on a breeding female. They can have up to six litters in their lifetimes. There is no mandated staff-animal ratio and harmful practices such as surgical insemination remain legal. The door is left open to unregistered breeding.

The Bill that I am introducing today, the Dog Welfare (Amendment) Bill 2025, will cap the number of breeding females at 30 per site. It will introduce a 16-month minimum age and an eight-year maximum age for breeding. There will be a maximum of one litter per year per breeding female; a maximum of four litters per breeding female during her lifetime; and a minimum age of ten weeks for pup separation. It will mandate a 10:1 animal-staff ratio for proper care. It will outlaw surgical artificial insemination and other harmful practices and update fee structures to reflect new welfare standards.

I take this opportunity today to pay tribute to the hundreds of rescues around this country that pick up the pieces of this broken system. These are often volunteers who just have to fundraise for their own rescues. They put all their love and passion into caring for these dogs and pups. They take it all on board themselves. The Minister knows the work they do and how hard it is for them. Despite being overwhelmed by the numbers of dogs and puppies needing help, they do their best to re-home these dogs and show them the care and love they have never had before. I want to mention Wicklow animal rescue, where I got my gorgeous dog Dolly, and Mollie Moo's Pet Farm where I got Poppy recently, A Dog's Life and Pauline's Rescue, which I have also rescued dogs through. This is where all my lovely doggies came from.

I want to give credit to the *pro bono* team at Fieldfisher Ireland, who dedicated an enormous number of *pro bono* hours to prepare their report entitled Key Reforms to Dog Breeding in Ireland, which was published on their website last year. Many of the changes referred to in this

Private Members' Bill come from the Fieldfisher paper and it was hugely helpful in my research, so I want to thank them. I also give credit to Dog Law Ireland, founded by three amazing solicitors who absolutely adore dogs and are doing everything they can to help them. I have been working with these three solicitors over the last number of months to prepare this Private Members' Bill.

I ask the Minister to consider the recommendations in this Bill. I believe we will be getting to debate it. I really hope he could give good consideration to it. It is something everybody in the Chamber, I would hope, will be able to stand behind and give support to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.32 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.32 p.m. and resumed at 2.17 p.m.

Haulage Costs for SMEs: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on road haulage costs and how the Government is supporting this critical sector. I will share my time with the Ministers of State, Deputies Christopher O'Sullivan and Jerry Buttimer.

Geopolitical events over the past number of years and the storm damage to Holyhead at the end of last year have highlighted the importance of the road haulage sector and the contribution it makes to our economy, facilitating domestic and international trade. During this period of instability, the sector has demonstrated resilience and a willingness to work with policymakers to overcome challenges and promote careers, skills development and sustainable employment in the wider logistics and supply chain sector in Ireland.

While nobody would deny events such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine have driven up costs in what is already a sector with a tight profit margin, there are reasons to be positive about the trajectory and future growth of the sector. At the end of 2024, my Department reported that over 44,500 commercial goods vehicles exceeding 3.5 tonnes were taxed in Ireland. This was an increase of 4% from almost 42,800 in December 2023 and the second year in a row that the numbers increased. There were almost 4,000 licensed road haulage operators registered in Ireland in 2024, with 24,300 vehicles operating on these

licences. Approximately 65 of those haulage operators are licensed to operate internationally, with the other 35% operating domestically. While there was a decline in road freight activity in 2020, all available measures, such as the number of laden journeys undertaken and tonnes carried, have increased year-on-year since 2021 and were above the 2019 levels by the end of last year.

I want to draw the attention of the House to the recently published Freight Transport Association Ireland manager's guide to distribution costs 2025 report. It is positive to note that this year's report shows a continued slowdown in the average rate of increase in business and transport overhead costs and that operating profit margins are increasing year-on-year. However, it is crucial that the Government continues to support the sector and I would like to provide Deputies with an overview of the strategies being implemented by officials in my Department aimed specifically at the sector.

In December 2022, the Government published Ireland's road haulage strategy 2022-31 following two phases of public consultation. The strategy highlights the importance of the haulage and rail freight sectors and identified 39 actions, split into short-term priorities expected to be completed within the next two to three-year timeframe and enablers for medium to long-term progress that will ensure the delivery of policy objectives over the full term of the strategy. Implementation of the short-term actions has progressed well since publication and two annual progress reports have been published to date.

A key action identified in the road haulage strategy was to establish a road freight forum with representatives from Departments, agencies, the haulage and freight industry and the logistics sector. The road freight forum held its first meeting in February 2023. It is chaired by my Department and its membership includes representatives of the National Transport Authority, NTA; the Road Safety Authority, RSA; Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII; the Freight Transport Association Ireland, FTAI; and the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA. The forum formalises engagement between key stakeholders and builds on the work done in response to the international crises I mentioned earlier. It supports collaboration, which is key to identifying practical and effective solutions to support the sector to maintain Ireland's essential trade and strategic supply chains. The forum also monitors the implementation of the road haulage strategy and provides an opportunity for stakeholders to identify emerging challenges at the earliest opportunity.

The road haulage strategy provides a roadmap for how the sector can decarbonise to meet the targets set out in the climate action plan. Given that the Irish haulage sector is currently almost exclusively fuelled by diesel, I am sure Deputies will agree that decarbonisation will be a significant challenge for the sector in the medium term to 2030 and beyond. My Department has provided targeted supports to assist the sector on its journey to zero emissions. The zero-emission heavy-duty vehicle, ZEHDV, purchase grant scheme has a budget of €3.5 million in 2025. It supports the purchase of zero-emission vehicles and associated charging infrastructure. The fleet assessment audit offers businesses an assessment by an independent energy adviser, who will provide guidance on the transition to zero-emission vehicles. Two tax incentive schemes that allow operators to reduce their immediate tax bill against company profits when investing in zero-emission vehicles are in place. My Department is also looking at the charging infrastructure requirements for heavy-duty vehicles, HDVs, through the HDV electrification pathway working group. The group has been tasked to develop a strategy to set

out a pathway for the electrification of the heavy-duty fleet in Ireland. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of this important work.

In regard to the ongoing reliance on diesel, I remind Deputies that the diesel rebate scheme, DRS, has been in place since 2013 and remains available to licensed haulage operators in respect of vehicles over 7.5 tonnes. At diesel prices over €1.43, including VAT, a maximum rebate of 7.5 cent per litre is provided. While not all haulage operators qualify for the scheme, it should be noted that the total number of DRS claimants in 2023 represented only 46% of the total number of eligible road haulage operators in the State. All operators are encouraged to make the best use of all available Government grants for which they are eligible.

As we cannot afford to wait for electrification measures to have an impact, the use of renewable fuels in the interim must be encouraged. We need to increase the blend of biodiesel in the national fuel mix to deliver a level of emissions savings from the existing fleet. The renewable transport fuels obligation scheme requires suppliers of mineral oil to ensure a percentage of the motor fuel they place on the market in Ireland is produced from renewable sources. For diesel vehicles, the current fuel blend available at garage forecourts is approximately 7% biodiesel. My Department intends to raise this to 20% by 2030.

I am aware, as I am sure everybody in the House is, that the cost of renewable fuels is higher than the cost of diesel and that the haulage sector has called for the introduction of subsidies for alternative fuels. While the interaction between fuel prices, taxation and a wider shift away from fossil fuels is complex and a matter of tax policy for the Department of Finance, Deputies may find it helpful to know that biofuels are fully relieved from the carbon component of mineral oil tax. This means carbon tax does not apply to biofuels, such as hydrogenated vegetable oil or biomethane, used in road vehicles, whether private or commercial.

Ireland's carbon tax is an integral part of the Government's response to the need to address climate change and meet the legally binding commitments established in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. As annual increases in the carbon tax are implemented, the differential in tax costs between biofuels and fossil fuels will continue to widen, further incentivising the uptake of biofuels. However, demand for renewable transport fuels is growing across many sectors and supplies are likely to remain constrained given current global production capacity.

My Department recently finalised a study on the use of hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, in the heavy-goods vehicle sector, including the likely future availability and price, the decarbonisation potential and potential transitional incentives. The conclusions of the study indicate that unless the renewable transport fuel obligation is also reformed, increasing the use of HVO in the HGV sector will simply shift biofuel use to HGVs and away from other road sectors, thereby leading to only modest reductions in overall emissions. In addition, the study also forecast that a subsidy to equalise the price of HVO with diesel by 2030 would cost the Exchequer €502 million. That is the single-year cost of this type of subsidy and, as I indicated, the overall reduction in emissions would be minimal.

Although the financial costs of implementing sustainability initiatives can be a significant barrier for the haulage sector, I am heartened to note in the FTAI 2025 report that more than three quarters of those surveyed have sustainability policies in place. We must continue to support this transition. I will outline the concrete measures that can be implemented right now

at little or no cost. Eco-driving techniques can help drivers to reduce their fuel use and emissions, while enhancing road safety for all road users. A national standard for eco-driving courses has been established and a range of subsidised or fully funded eco-driving training courses are available to HGV drivers. The promotion of digital and operational efficiencies such as load sharing and logistics consolidation hubs are also being explored by my Department.

The logistics and supply chain skills group was established in 2019 to support the promotion of careers, skills development and sustainable employment in the logistics and supply chain sector. The group has been making great progress, with support from officials in my Department, to address systemic challenges. In 2023, the group organised Ireland's first ever logistics and supply chain skills week to promote careers in the sector and engage with supply chain executives on the new skills needed now and into the future. It has become an annual event, with a plan under way for 2026 to coincide with the 19th European Supply Chain Day. Skills week also includes a dedicated event for transition year students organised by my Department that highlights the potential careers in the sector. Next year's transition year event will take place on 23 April at the National Basketball Arena in Dublin.

New training and educational opportunities developed in recent years include the transport operations and commercial driver apprenticeship scheme, the logistics and distribution one-year traineeship and the seven-month professional HGV training programme. The logistics and supply chain skills group has been working collaboratively to address the immediate driver shortage. This has resulted in several positive actions, including the removal of the quota for employment permits for HGV drivers from outside the EU-EEA. Almost 1,400 work permits have been issued to HGV drivers by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment since 2023.

My Department is working to increase the number of licence exchange agreements with non-EEA countries. We currently have agreements with Australia, Georgia, Gibraltar, Guernsey, the Isle of Man, Japan, Jersey, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Korea, South Africa, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Agreements with Moldova, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are at various stages of development. Ukrainian drivers who are resident in Ireland on a temporary basis under the temporary protection directive can exchange their licence and work in Ireland once they have completed driver certificate of professional competence, CPC, training.

We need to do more to make the process of recruitment from abroad easier to understand and as efficient as possible. Officials in my Department are working across Departments to identify areas for improvement and to eliminate duplication where possible. This year, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has agreed to no longer verify driving licences as part of the work permit application. This is a welcome development that will reduce processing times. Work is ongoing to introduce a single permit application portal but this is a medium-term action as IT developments are required.

My Department is also engaging with the Road Safety Authority on driver CPC training. Professional drivers are required under law to maintain their driver CPC by completing 35 hours of training over a period of five years. The RSA recommends completing one module per year to meet the 35-hour requirement. There are six modules in total, with each module taking seven hours to complete. Bus and truck drivers are obliged to complete modules 1 to 4,

plus either module 5 or module 6 if only a single licence is held. If a driver holds both a bus and a truck licence, they must complete modules 5 and 6. It is critical that drivers maintain their CPC to ensure road safety. This is something we cannot compromise on. However, I have heard from stakeholders that the training material would benefit from review and updating. I am pleased to inform the House that an RSA-chaired review group reviews the CPC modules on an ongoing basis. Relevant stakeholders, including sector representatives, are invited to participate. The review of module 1 was recently completed and updated training material will be ready for roll-out to trainers in the coming weeks. A review of module 4 will begin early next year.

The RSA is also examining the legislation to see where comparable training can count towards CPC requirements. For example, if a driver has a valid ADR certificate for the carriage of dangerous goods and has previously completed one full cycle of CPC training, they do not need to resit module 2. Over 600 drivers have engaged with the RSA to avail of this exemption with approximately 150 exemptions granted and 50 applications being processed. Officials in the Department will continue to engage with the RSA to consider best practice examples in other countries and whether there is scope for additional enhancements to training. While acknowledging that there is room for improvement in the process, it is also important that we do not lose sight of the fact that driver CPC is working well in the main and meets the requirements of EU legislation. Over 46,500 training days were delivered between January and September this year. There are 92 training organisations with 475 active trainers providing training at 220 training centres throughout the country. Private companies and trade representative bodies can apply to be approved as a driver training organisation which would allow them to arrange training to suit their individual needs.

While recent years have been challenging for the haulage and road freight sector, the Department provided financial support to insulate operators from the sudden and severe spike in diesel prices following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and associated ongoing cost pressures faced by hauliers. Some €15.6 million was paid out by the Department in 2022 and 2023 to 3,085 and 2,828 operators, respectively, representing approximately 81% and 74% of the overall road haulage operators licensed in the State. The support scheme operated under the EU temporary crisis framework on state aid was adopted to address the economic impacts, in particular on energy prices, of the war in Ukraine. In January this year the Department received a request for financial compensation from industry representatives to support Irish hauliers impacted by the Holyhead Port closure at the end of 2024. The Department engaged constructively with the request over the intervening months, working with industry representatives and outlining the additional information required to assess the financial impacts of the closure on hauliers and to consider whether financial support could be provided. While some information was provided to the Department, it did not provide the level of detail necessary to substantiate the evidence base for the request for support. Department officials are willing to engage further with representative bodies should they be in a position to submit the additional documentary evidence needed to assess the request for compensation.

Deputies are no doubt aware that new requirements in relation to the use of smart tachographs were introduced under EU law in recent years. This includes the need to retrofit such devices in older commercial vehicles if the vehicle is engaged in international commercial activity. The requirements have so far only applied to heavy goods vehicles and passenger vehicles but will apply to vehicles over 2.5 tonnes from July 2026. These requirements are necessary to ensure

the highest level of safety on our roads and to allow authorities to monitor compliance with transport-related legislation and drivers rest periods. The shortage of commercial drivers is well known to everyone in this House. We must support our drivers by ensuring they are afforded proper protections including adequate breaks and rest times. Smart tachographs allow for rigorous monitoring and enforcement of these entitlements. I have received requests for financial assistance to support the initial cost outlay associated with the retrofit obligations. The retrofit obligation was adopted in 2020 and came into effect in stages from the end of 2024, providing reasonable time for businesses to plan for the associated costs.

The costs of retrofitting tachographs are not unique to Ireland and will be similarly experienced by transport operators across the EU and the UK including Northern Ireland. I assure the House that the retrofit requirement does not apply to passenger vehicles if their only international commercial activity involves journeys to the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. Officials in the Department, in agreement with the European Commission, have also agreed that the retrofit obligation will not be enforced for freight vehicles that simply pass through Northern Ireland as part of a journey, provided certain conditions are met. The journey through Northern Ireland must be undertaken because it is the most efficient route from a starting point in Ireland to a destination in Ireland and goods cannot be dropped off or collected when passing through Northern Ireland. If goods are to be dropped off in Northern Ireland, regardless of whether this will happen as part of a journey through Northern Ireland or as a separate journey, the retrofit obligations apply. A similar situation arises for UK vehicles moving from or to Northern Ireland through Ireland; for example, goods arriving on a ferry to Dublin Port using the M1 to deliver the goods to Belfast. This arrangement will be in place until the end of June 2026. Officials will continue to engage with the EU in an effort to formalise this agreement with the UK before the temporary arrangement expires.

Earlier this year, I was asked to consider engaging with UK officials in relation to the HGV road user levy. This levy was introduced in 2014 and applies to all HGVs driven on all UK roads, including in Northern Ireland. Prior to its introduction, the Irish Government engaged with UK authorities seeking to exempt Northern Ireland from the charge because of the potential impact on cross-Border trade. The UK ultimately decided to maintain the levy with only very minor exemptions for Northern Ireland. The levy was suspended in August 2020 to support the haulage sector during the Covid-19 pandemic but was subsequently reinstated from 1 August 2023 with amendments to align the levy with the environmental performance of a vehicle in support of decarbonisation goals. Zero-emission HGVs are exempted from the charge. While I appreciate that the levy imposes additional costs on HGV operators, including Irish hauliers, its application is a matter for the UK authorities.

I will provide an update in relation to toll discounts, which were raised with me by road haulage representatives earlier this year. It is important to point out that the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This includes day-to-day operations regarding national roads including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls. Officials in the Department have engaged with TII to consider whether the applicable discounts can be applied in a user-friendly manner, similar to how the discount is applied on the M50. I understand that the current system is cumbersome for hauliers and that an integrated system is preferable. An attempt was made in 2016 to implement an integrated system but it was unsuccessful. Ultimately, it is not within the remit of the Department or TII to introduce such a system, nor can the operators be obliged

to change their practices. It is important to point out that toll revenues received by TII contribute to the funding of essential services on national primary and secondary roads as a whole. This includes general day-to-day maintenance and operation of the network such as pavement repair and renewal, incident and emergency responses, winter gritting, safety barrier repair and renewal, energy supply and maintenance of route lighting. These essential services are necessary to ensure the national road network is managed and maintained. TII relies upon tolling revenue along with funding from the Exchequer to fund this work. It is important to point out that if tolling revenue did not exist, it would be necessary to use additional Exchequer funding to ensure that the national road network is maintained.

Everyone in this House appreciates the challenges posed to the haulage sector in recent years. I acknowledge the resilience demonstrated by the sector and thank it for its contribution to the wider economy. While ongoing challenges such as driver shortages and decarbonisation cannot be resolved immediately, I am confident the strategies being implemented by the Department will have the desired effect in the medium to long term. Officials and I are actively engaging with the representative bodies. I urge them to continue to work constructively and collaboratively with officials over the lifetime of the road haulage strategy.

This morning, I met the working group chaired by Minister Ken Skates in Wales in relation to Holyhead. A working group was set up which finalised its business this morning. Out of that, there will be a continuation of the work bilaterally between the UK, Wales and ourselves. We will continue to work to find more efficiencies and resilience on the Irish Sea between Ireland and the UK going forward. That is a plus that has come out of the disaster that happened in Holyhead last year.

Deputy Pa Daly: Last night, the Government had a chance to vote for measures that would cut the cost of living. Instead, it stood firm and decided to continue the rip-off. The irony of the Government putting statements out the day after it rejected the very measures that would have brought down the cost of driving and haulage for SMEs should not be lost on anyone here. I cannot say that I am looking forward to the excuses. For the Government, today's debate is a box-ticking exercise that allows it to lip service to a problem it is unwilling to fix. Last night, it could have agreed to reverse the carbon tax increase to cut the cost of petrol and diesel, to end rip-off insurance premiums and hold insurance companies to account, to stop further toll hikes, to hold energy companies to account and to end financial penalties for those who have to pay their motor tax in instalments. These real and practical measures would have eased the pressure on workers, families and the struggling haulage SME sector. Instead, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the regional Independents and their supporters chose to pile on more costs, a move which has become the hallmark move of this Government. As a result, ordinary people and our SMEs are under unbearable pressure. According to them, jobs are at risk.

In Kerry, local businesses are telling me the same story. Rising fuel costs, insurance and toll hikes are all pushing them to the brink. According to Chartered Accountants Ireland, costs have increased for almost 80% of small businesses in the last year. Budget 2026 did nothing for them. Two thirds of the businesses in the country say that it offered no relief. What is the inevitable outcome? Consumer prices will rise and more businesses will close. The Irish Road Haulage Association has been sounding this alarm bell for many months, but its warnings have fallen on deaf ears. That is why the Government was in such shock lately when Fastway Couriers collapsed. A total of 300 jobs and 1,000 contractors are out of work. Franchise drivers

have been left in total limbo. The fallout has been swift and severe. However bad the situation is for the full-time staff, the situation facing franchise drivers is even worse. Many of them are owed weeks of pay they will likely never be refunded. Franchise operators are out thousands upon thousands of euro. These are the SMEs in our community, the sole traders, the people working for themselves and the people who live down the street. There is real concern that this will be repeated across the industry unless something changes and something is done to address all of the rising costs, especially for motorists.

The IRHA has warned that the latest increase from TII and the Government will be the straw that breaks the camel's back, with widespread strike action on the cards. Who is this going to hurt the most at the end of the day? It will be the ordinary people and their expenses - the people who are struggling with the cost of living. It pushes up prices for basic necessities which are already sky high. Is the Government taking the cost-of-living crisis seriously at all? On top of this, we face a severe HGV driver shortage. A total of 4,000 drivers are needed over the next five years. It is almost ironic that the week after we deported a planeload of Georgians, the Government is rushing to do a deal to get more Georgian drivers back into the country. Waiting times of up to two years for a test and sky-high training costs are pushing people away from the profession. The Government must act now to fast-track recruitment and reduce costs. This Government has no plan, just statements and spin. Sinn Féin has a plan - we heard about it last night - to cut the tolls, reverse carbon tax hikes, end rip-off insurance and support SMEs. These steps would ease the pressure on hauliers, protect jobs and help families. It is time for action, not excuses.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister of State referred to the road freight forum. I could not be in front of the Minister of State without mentioning the western rail corridor and the important part it will play in addressing freight transport in the future. I look forward to an imminent announcement to ensure this is going to happen as quickly as possible. The Minister of State also referred in his statement to the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. The carbon tax has been an integral part of the Government's response to the need to address climate change but when there is no alternative, it just becomes a revenue-raising exercise. It is not a tax to change behaviour. That is the big issue that I have with the carbon tax and the extra cost it is putting on hauliers and others.

As Deputy Daly said, only this week we tabled very clear and targeted proposals that would have cut the cost of driving for ordinary motorists and for the haulage industry. We called on the Government to stop the toll hikes, which could have been done, to reverse the carbon tax increases on fuel, to end the financial penalties for paying motor tax in instalments and to stand up to the insurance industry in order that the benefits of the long-promised reforms are passed on to drivers. They were clear and simple asks, but the Government rejected every single one of those proposals. Because of that, the pressure on SMEs and on hauliers continues to mount, putting local jobs and businesses at serious risk. The latest toll increase, in the words of the IRHA, was the straw that broke the camel's back. An increase in carbon taxes on fuel eats into the narrow profit margins for haulage companies and makes routes increasingly unviable. The hauliers who bring food to our supermarkets and deliver packages and orders from struggling SMEs are forced to pay these costs multiple times a day in the case of toll charges because there is no alternative. It is like shooting fish in a barrel.

Like everything else, these spiralling costs inevitably work their way onto the shelves and out of the pockets of ordinary families. Once again, it is the people who can least afford it who are paying for Government inaction. We saw the consequences of this crisis with the collapse of Fastway Couriers last month. Hundreds of workers, contractors and franchisees are left in limbo, some owed weeks of pay and others facing deep debts from the vehicles that they finance themselves or from the huge franchise buy-in fees. All this has come just weeks before Christmas for families. I commend the work of my own colleagues in Laois, Senator Maria McCormack and Councillor Claire Murray, who have been supporting all of those affected locally in County Laois. Obviously it spreads to County Mayo and other counties. Fastway's receivership did not come without warning. The IRHA told the Government months ago that the industry was on its knees and companies would collapse without intervention in budget 2026, but the Government did nothing. Now it is the workers and the small operators who are paying the price. SMEs across the country are currently buckling under the rising wage costs, huge regulatory burdens and spiralling operational costs.

Budget 2026 increased the minimum wage, which was welcome and needed, but it failed to provide any substantial assistance for employers contending with high wage costs. That is why Sinn Féin's alternative budget proposed a temporary employer PRSI rebate to fill that gap. We are constantly receiving pleas from struggling small businesses from across all sectors to reduce the huge administrative burden placed upon them by Government regulations. We are not talking about lifting regulations; we are talking about the administrative burden that is put on these businesses. Valuable resources within small family-run businesses are being allocated for completing unnecessary levels of paperwork and bureaucracy. What the Government fails to understand is that these businesses do not have the large legal and compliance department behind them that multinational companies do. More often than not, it is the mum and dad in the family-run business sitting down outside of the hours or at the weekends trying to get all of that paperwork done. Instead of listening and supporting them by reducing the burden, we heard last week that the Government is adding additional red tape for hauliers. The proposed restrictions on heavy-load transport, potentially requiring permits to be applied for up to a year in advance, will add yet more ridiculous red tape to businesses that are already overwhelmed. Industry experts have flagged this and stated that it will cause major delays to essential infrastructure delivery and even risk electricity supply upgrades. What are we doing here? Where is the common sense? While the Minister of State and the Government continue to ignore industry pleas, Sinn Féin will stand up for SMEs, hauliers and ordinary workers. I urge those on the benches opposite to urgently adopt measures to cut haulage costs, support our struggling SMEs and safeguard local jobs before even more damage is done.

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not think the Minister of State or the Government get it at all. People outside this building wonder whether they live in a bubble and whether they have any understanding of what it is like for ordinary families. The Government initiated these statements on the issues and rising costs affecting the haulage industry when the Government is responsible for those same rising costs. What is ironic and a real slap in the face to everybody faced with rising motoring costs is that we proposed a motion in this House last week and put real solutions on the table, but the Government voted down each and every one of those solutions last night. Toll increases affect everybody from ordinary motorists to SMEs and hauliers. Tolls are going up. What does this Government do? It votes against measures that would reduce those tolls. Deputy Doherty moved a Bill through this House to ensure that

insurance premiums and prices would come down and the savings would be sent on to the customer. What does this Government do? It does not want to implement that same Bill and leaves it there. It is the same with the carbon tax hike on petrol and diesel. The Government cannot blame anybody but itself for that. It put that increase on the cost of petrol and diesel, which again affects ordinary families, hauliers and businesses.

The reason people see the Minister of State and the Government as out of touch is that every week, families have to look at all of these rising costs. When their insurance bill comes through the door, they see that it has gone up. When they use a toll, it has gone up. When they go into a supermarket and pay for their groceries, they see that prices have gone up. In almost every part of their lives from petrol and diesel to childcare costs and rents, families are paying more. Every time we bring forward a motion, this Government votes against all of those solutions. I am afraid the Minister of State simply does not get it. I know of the anger of families, particularly when many of the issues we are discussing today could have been addressed in the budget just gone by but the Government failed to do so. Hauliers are angry. As Deputy Daly said, there is a threat of strike action. They see these toll increases as almost the last straw, but they are also faced with all the other costs and cost increases.

I come from Waterford in the south east. We talk about what affects hauliers and motorists. They also need good and safe roads. Last year and this year, there was an opportunity for the Government to fund two really important road projects for Waterford and the south east. The first is the N25 Waterford to Cork road. It is a major road that connects the two major cities of Waterford and Cork. It needs to be upgraded but the funding has not been made available. It has stalled over the past number of years. Again, no funding for the Waterford to Limerick road has been made available for the past two years and no funding has been made available this year. The pathway for the bypass has been agreed but the funding has not been made available. We have really poor roads connecting two major cities - Cork and Limerick - to Waterford. Hauliers and motorists use those roads. I do not know whether the Minister of State has ever travelled the road from Waterford to Limerick. I do not know how many towns and villages one has to go through. It is an absolute nightmare for hauliers, truck drivers and motorists yet in the capital allocation for this year and last year, no funding was made available and these projects were not moved on.

That is what really angers people. We have a do-nothing Government that put statements on the clár for us to talk about issues but will not act on any of the issues. It is not building the roads that need to be built. It is not doing anything about the rising costs for hauliers, ordinary families or ordinary motorists. Worse, the Minister of State has the brass neck to come in and say nothing of any substance to anybody in his speech. He is responsible for some of the costs with regard to the carbon tax increase on petrol and diesel. It is about time for this Government to get its head out of the clouds, start living in the real world, meet real people and have some sense of understanding of ordinary motorists and families. It had an opportunity to support them last night when Sinn Féin proposed solutions but it did not do so. Instead, it turned its back on people again.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I welcome the fact that we are discussing haulage costs and the SME sector more broadly today. It is an issue that goes to the heart of our economic well-being and our regional development - more pertinently, our balanced regional development - as well as the survival of thousands of SMEs across our country. The cost of moving goods on Irish roads

is one of the greatest threats to the competitiveness and, many cases, survival of many of our small businesses, such as artisan food producers in the west, engineering firms in the midlands and family-run exporters in the south east. The Labour Party has long championed the role of SMEs in sustaining good jobs and vibrant local economies. Today, those businesses are being squeezed from all sides. The cost of transport has become a pressure point that exposes the other vulnerabilities in these businesses.

Haulage costs have risen sharply over recent years. Many of the same issues that are faced when it comes to the general cost of motoring, which we discussed here last week, are being felt in terms of haulage costs. Those issues include fuel price volatility and insurance premiums that remain stubbornly high. Other issues include increased compliance costs. We cannot discount the lingering logistical impact of Brexit. An SME owner who once could plan a year's costs with some certainty in advance now faces almost monthly guessing games in many cases. Hauliers, and by extension SMEs, are asked to absorb these rising costs while dealing with a chronic shortage of drivers. Our businesses rely on road haulage for almost all domestic freight movement, an issue I will come back to. Unlike larger corporations, SMEs cannot negotiate better rates or hedge their fuel costs on international markets. They cannot simply pass increases directly on to consumers either. They take the hit and very often, they are pushed dangerously close to the edge.

From my perspective, this is not just a temporary market disturbance. This is structural. It exposes weaknesses in Ireland's transport infrastructure, the lack of alternatives and the absence of a clear Government strategy for sustainable and affordable freight movement. We cannot ask SMEs to compete internationally while saddling them with some of the highest logistics costs in Europe. Nor can we pretend that the haulage sector and the infrastructure around it - the trucks on our motorways in the early hours of the morning and the local drivers who keep our shelves stocked and our supply chains continuous - are somehow an optional extra in our economy. They are essential but unfortunately, all too often, Government policy treats them as an afterthought.

We need to acknowledge that these rising costs do not fall evenly. This is an issue of concern in terms of balanced regional development. Businesses in rural Ireland, which are already further away from ports and major urban centres, are hit hardest. Every extra kilometre, every extra fuel hike and every insurance increase compounds the challenges they already face. When those businesses struggle, the communities around them suffer too with fewer jobs, fewer training opportunities and fewer reasons for young people to stay. If we are serious about balanced regional development, we must be serious about supporting the cost base of the businesses that anchor those regions. We should consider a national freight strategy. I know we have a road haulage strategy, which extends out to 2031, and a rail freight strategy, which extends out to 2040, but it would be helpful to marry the two. We need a plan that is more than a collection of disconnected initiatives.

Accelerating investment in alternatives will be key if we are to overcome the challenges faced by the haulage sector and, by extension, by SMEs that rely on road haulage. It is all the more reason we need an holistic overarching freight strategy. We need to see a scaling-up of electric and hydro HSV infrastructure so that SMEs are not stuck paying high diesel prices while the rest of Europe moves ahead. I acknowledge that hydrogen and battery electric trucks remain all too rare here and that 50% of our haulage fleet is over ten years old and diesel-powered.

That being the case, as our hauliers try to decarbonise and reduce our transport emissions these additional costs should not all be passed on to the businesses that rely on them. The Government should consider rebates and tax supports to incentivise the uptake of low-carbon but often higher-cost fuels like HVO and biodiesel blends.

3 o'clock

Government should also consider incentives to replace older, higher-emitting trucks with older, more efficient models. Cost-neutral measures such as how we manage our roads and even toll lanes to reduce idling time can also impact positively on the emissions coming from our road haulage sector. A renewed commitment to and focus on rail freight is really crucial though to providing alternatives and improving our infrastructure. There has to be a modal shift and that will require investment in our rail infrastructure. That also means better integration between ports, rail and road networks so we are not forcing SMEs into using the most expensive road of transport simply because it is the only one available to them.

Insurance premiums are also an issue. I will not labour the point because I made it last week when we were talking about motoring costs, but the Government and, indeed, the public have been hoodwinked by the insurance industry. The new personal injury guidelines were introduced in 2019 and between then and 2023 there was a drop, on average, of 40% in claim costs yet over roughly the same period liability premiums increased by 17%, according to the Central Bank. Meanwhile, insurance providers in Ireland are enjoying profits double the European average. It is scandalous. I echo my colleague Labour Party spokesperson on finance, Deputy Nash, as well as groups such as the Alliance for Insurance Reform, in calling for Government to bring about meaningful changes to the insurance sector. Genuine reform should lower premiums not just for the average motorist but for hauliers and the SME fleet as well.

Another area that requires serious change is the administrative burden on SMEs. If we had more streamlined compliance processes that reduced duplication, paperwork and costs while of course maintaining high standards, it would have a really big impact on the load placed on SMEs and reduce what is often a massive stressor for people who are running them. SMEs support safety, environmental responsibility and good working conditions but they cannot absorb endless administrative burdens created without consultation with them and that do not always give due regard to efficiency.

I emphasise any policy that might be produced for freight must also protect the workers who keep goods moving, including the drivers, mechanics, logistics staff and so on. All too often when we see rising business costs, the finger is first pointed at the cost of labour and this is used as an excuse to squeeze workers' pay and conditions. We in the Labour Party reject that approach outright. A sustainable logistics sector must include fair wages and decent and safe working hours and conditions. It must include investment in driver training and apprenticeships and, crucially, supports to attract more people, especially young people, into the profession. A thriving SME sector cannot be built on the backs of exploited labour.

I conclude by re-emphasising the rising cost of road haulage is not a niche concern but a national economic issue. Every household feels it when prices rise. Every business feels it in their margins. When SMEs struggle communities who rely on them for jobs feel it. We need to see what might be called a fair deal for SMEs, hauliers and workers in the sector, one that

recognises the essential role it plays in our economy and one that ensures small businesses are not crushed under the weight of transport costs they have little to no power to control. We can and must deliver a freight system that is affordable, sustainable and fair.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on haulage costs for SMEs. If you run a small business in this country, nothing reaches your customer without a truck somewhere along the line. Every pallet into a supermarket, every consignment into a chemist and every online order delivered to a home in Dún Laoghaire depends on a haulier who is watching diesel, tolls, insurance and wages every day. When their costs rise, everyone's costs rise.

We acknowledge the Government stepped in when the shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine sent fuel prices soaring. Two temporary haulage support schemes in 2022 and 2023 provided €15.6 million each year and reached roughly three quarters of licensed operators. That helped keep doors open and kept people in work at a vulnerable moment. We also have the diesel rebate scheme. Above €1.43 per litre, hauliers can receive up to 7.5 cent per litre back. However, only 45% of operators claim it. That tells me two things, the first of which is we need a stronger information push, especially for smaller operators without a back-office team, and the second of which is that if the scheme is not attractive or accessible enough for SMEs, we should be open to tweaking it.

Fuel is only one part of the picture though. Hauliers are being hit by a wide range of cost drivers, including insurance, the price of new trucks, labour shortages, the UK HGV road user levy and the cost of meeting new standards. Some of these are necessary, such as better training, higher safety standards and decarbonisation, but we owe it to SMEs to take cost out of the system wherever we can. One example shows how decisions up the line can land on small operators or small business customers, namely, the emergency generators stuck in Dublin Port for over a year. Last year I tabled parliamentary questions about these generators, which were parked in the port because they are too heavy to cross the M50 toll bridge. I raised it again this week seeking a report. These units were purchased to protect our security of electricity supply, yet tens of millions of euro worth of equipment sat idle, with storage costs, delay costs and uncertainty throughout the supply chain. These generators are not SME assets but big-ticket items owned by major utilities. However, when our permitting and infrastructure systems are so complex and fragmented they can strand such equipment for over a year, we should be honest these costs will end up on the bills of households and small businesses and on the haulage invoices SMEs are paying. That case underlines the need for more joined-up thinking between transport, energy and climate policy. We cannot have one part of the system encouraging new backup plant and grid investment and another part making it practically impossible, or prohibitively expensive, to move a transformer or generator from port to site.

The same applies to decarbonisation. Ireland's Road Haulage Strategy 2022–2031, work on alternative fuels including HVO, hydrogen and biomethane, the zero-emission heavy duty vehicle, HDV, grant scheme and new HDV charging infrastructure are all essential if we are to meet our 2030 and 2050 climate targets. SMEs will judge us not on the number of strategies we publish but on whether the new options are affordable and usable in the real world.

I propose three practical steps. The first is to use the road freight forum to identify and fix pinch points that drive unnecessary cost, delays in abnormal-load permitting, unclear data on

bridge capacities and duplication of paperwork across agencies. A single reliable database can remove friction from every single job. The second step is to design climate measures in a way that helps rather than penalises smaller operators. We should make sure the diesel rebate scheme is fully taken up and ensure alternative fuel grants are sized so that small, family-run hauliers can access them, not just the big fleets. The third step is to keep a close eye on the labour side. Adjustments to the employment permit quotas and expansions of apprenticeships and traineeships are welcome but we must also ensure the profession's long hours and tough work are compatible with a decent family life. Retaining skilled drivers is one of the cheapest ways to keep costs lower.

Haulage is the bloodstream of the SME economy. If we want lower costs for small businesses and households, we need a system that moves goods efficiently, safely and cleanly and one that does not leave generators stranded in ports or SMEs picking up the tab for avoidable bureaucracy. I look forward to working with the Minister of State to ensure our policies are aligned, strategies are implemented and the cost of moving goods in Ireland remains as competitive as possible.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): Before I call on Deputy McGuinness, I welcome 25 students from Gaza who are with us in the Public Gallery. They are currently studying in UCD. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their day. They are guests of Senator Harmon.

Deputy John McGuinness: There is no other sector that can point so accurately to the Government in terms of taxes and obstacles placed in the way of its development than road haulage couriers and the logistics business generally. Let us look at what they are facing. Every year, they make their submissions. Generally speaking, they ask for improvements to the sector, for the load of regulation to be lightened and for red tape and costs to be cut. No government has really reached out to fulfil these requests. Naturally enough, the costs haulage and logistics companies face are passed directly on to the other SMEs that use these businesses or directly on to households that order from Amazon or some other company. We passed the pension plan. I have no issue with that but it adds a cost. The increase to the minimum wage adds a cost. I do not know how many taxes there are on diesel but I can say that it is now cheaper to buy diesel in the UK than here. We are strangling the development of that particular SME sector by increasing the cost of fuel, including diesel, every year. Extra holidays will be legislated for. That is another cost to carry. There are also warehouse rents, planning permission, general regulation to keep within the law, road tolls and so on. Surcharges on direct ferries represent another charge. Access to drivers is a huge issue.

In all of the time this has been debated and in all of the time reform has been asked for, it has never been delivered in a real and meaningful way. In their decisions, every government has undermined the possibility of delivering a real cost-effective solution to the logistical issues that companies and individuals face in their daily lives. As long as we continue to do that without consideration of the impact of taxes and regulation, we are going to continue to add costs for everybody who uses a courier or a haulage operator. The costs will just continue to rise.

I look at the briefing documents we received and I read the Irish Road Haulage Association position and the position of the European Union. None of it seems to take into consideration

the fact that people put huge effort into the SME sector and into haulage and logistics and get very little profit out of it. There is no encouragement there. Then, when a crisis is reached and drivers are wanted, it is nearly impossible to get them into the State. I have been asking for a greater effort to be made to train HGV drivers and to encourage people to come into the area and work in the sector. That does not happen, however. As I have said, you cannot get the visas. It is the same with mechanics. It is all associated with road haulage and the business of logistics. You cannot get them. When you apply to bring someone in, whether a qualified mechanic or a specialist in the area, you are left waiting forever.

The Government has not streamlined its systems. It has not reached out to this sector, which carries a huge burden of cost put on it by the State. Every time we do anything in here, it increases the level of red tape and bureaucracy. Nobody seems to attempt to grapple with the reality of the cost of putting a truck on the road or of replacing it with one with a greener type of engine. We do not even look at the standard of diesel in Ireland. We are useless at it. I ask that the Minister of State take note of Government initiatives that could be taken to reduce the direct costs on the sector, which are then passed on to the consumer.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Just to let the last speaker know, Sinn Féin is very aware of what is happening with the haulage industry. Last week, Sinn Féin brought forward a motion in the Dáil mandating the Government to tackle the cost of driving. The measures outlined, particularly those relating to tolls, insurance and carbon tax, would have provided relief to our haulage sector as well as to the ordinary motorist yet last night TDs from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and their backers in the Lowry Independents shamefully voted down that motion. According to the Irish Road Haulage Association, the recent collapse of the courier company Fastway is just the tip of the iceberg and skyrocketing costs could result in more of the same. Many simply cannot absorb continuously increasing costs within their own margins.

People appreciate that there is much that is outside of the Government's control but they do hold it responsible for how it responds to events and manages what is within its control. The most substantive action the Government plans to take is to increase the cost of petrol and diesel through carbon tax while hiking tolls. The best case scenario for the course of action the Government intends to take is that increased costs will be passed on to consumers.

We have also seen hauliers, particularly those in the Border region, facing challenges relating to dual regimes with regard to the tachygraphs that monitor their compliance with operating regulations. The hauliers I have spoken to in Cavan and Monaghan have cited increased costs relating to the upgrading of equipment and potential issues arising from the need to pull over to manually enter changes of jurisdiction. As I am sure the Minister of State will appreciate, this is impractical in communities where you cross the Border multiple times in a matter of minutes. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would engage on and examine these issues ahead of the final date of adoption next year.

We all appreciate the challenges facing the haulage sector. We need to see statements in the Dáil from the Minister and from the parties. Action needs to be taken now. We need action to sort everything out, action that is in line with the motion Sinn Féin proposed last week. At the very least, this would go some way towards alleviating the pressure on our hauliers. The least the Government could do is to not actively work to make the situation worse through nonsensical and counterproductive measures such as carbon tax and toll hikes.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I welcome these statements on this important sector. Recent years have been extremely challenging for the haulage and road freight sector. In my own area of south Sligo, there are three haulage companies operating: O'Dowd's Haulage in Gorteen, which employs 60 people and uses 20 trucks; Stephen Mullen's haulage company in Tubbercurry, which employs 55 and has 25 trucks; and Strandvaus in Collooney, which employs 97 people and operates 40 vehicles. When you listen to those companies, you hear the reality of the escalating costs of operations over the past five years. Since 2020, the cost of equipment has increased by 40%, taxes on fuel have risen by 89.56% and the cost of CVR testing has increased by 19%. Tolls have also risen by 13%. In addition, the minimum wage has increased by 39% with employer's PRSI increasing by 41%. Cumulatively, these compounded costs for companies have reached nearly €50,000. Such a financial burden threatens their very viability, transforming what should be a competitive marketplace into one of unsustainable expenses.

The situation is not isolated. It is a reflection of broader trends affecting many transport companies across Ireland. Many of these businesses are operating on razor-thin margins or, worse, at a loss. The Irish transport sector is the backbone of our national economy, ensuring the movement of goods, services and essential supplies across the length and breadth of the country. Without a functioning and healthy transport sector, we risk crippling our economic resilience and the livelihoods of the countless families who depend on these jobs.

I welcome the programme for Government commitment to support the decarbonisation of road freight and commercial coaches through the introduction of alternative fuels such as hydrotreated vegetable oil, hydrogen and biomethane. The taxation of HVOs used for commercial freight is a step in the right direction towards sustainable transport solutions. While these initiatives are welcome, we can and must do more to alleviate the tax burden on the transport industry, particularly in relation to fuel. The rising costs associated with these essential elements of our transport infrastructure are unsustainable. In 2022 and 2023, two temporary haulage support schemes were initiated by the Department of Transport, which provided much-needed financial relief to the sector. In those two years alone, €15.6 million was disbursed to a combined total of 5,900 operators. This represented approximately 81% and 74%, respectively, of the road haulage operators licensed in the State. While these figures are encouraging, many operators still face significant challenges. Fortunately, diesel prices have receded from the peaks witnessed in the latter half of 2022. The diesel rebate scheme in place since 2013 is available for licensed haulage operators with vehicles over 7.5 tonnes. With diesel prices over €1.43 per litre, including VAT, the maximum rebate of 7.5% per litre is available. However, the take-up of the scheme has room for improvement. In 2024, only 45% of licensed road haulage operators availed of it. There is something wrong there. I do not know whether the hauliers are not getting the information or why the take-up is so low. According to data from the Revenue Commissioners, there were 1,918 applicants for the scheme in 2024, a decline of 2% on the previous year. This indicates we must work harder to ensure operators are well informed and able to access the supports intended for them.

I reiterate the importance of our haulage and road freight sector. While the Government has taken some steps to mitigate the costs incurred by operators, more has to be done to support the sector in maintaining its competitiveness and to ensure a resilient logistics network that can effectively meet the demands of our ever-evolving market.

Roads have been mentioned this evening. It is crucial these main roads are improved. I am talking about the N17, N15 and N16. It is very important to Sligo and the whole region that these roads are upgraded to be suitable for the traffic that is on them.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: SMEs are the lifeblood of Ireland's economy. They account for 99.8% of all businesses and employ over two thirds of our workforce. They are primarily the family-owned firms, rural hauliers and local manufacturers that keep our communities alive. Today they are under unprecedented strain. One of the most pressing issues they face is the rising cost of haulage. Haulage is not a luxury; it is the backbone of our supply chains. Every product we consume, from food to pharma, depends on road transport. For SMEs, the cost of moving goods has spiralled beyond control. Fuel prices remain volatile, insurance premiums are climbing and maintenance costs are squeezing margins tighter than ever. For many small operators, these costs are not just a challenge but an existential threat. The Irish Road Haulage Association has warned soaring insurance costs are forcing some rural SMEs to shut their doors. Add to this the challenge of delayed payments and cash flow uncertainty, and it is a perfect storm for small businesses trying to keep their wheels turning. These are not abstract figures; these are real businesses, real jobs and real communities at risk.

Government has taken steps, such as the €18 million licensed haulage support scheme and the diesel rebate scheme, and these have helped to some degree, but they are temporary, limited in scope and often underutilised. For example, only 45% of eligible operators claimed the diesel rebate last year. We have to ask why. It is because this process is complex and small operators simply do not have the administrative capacity to navigate it.

This is not just about cost but about competitiveness. When haulage costs rise, Irish SMEs lose ground to larger firms and international competitors. We risk hollowing out our domestic economy and leaving rural Ireland behind but there are things we can do. We need long-term solutions, not just short-term patches. We could target financial supports for SMEs and haulage, not just during crises but as part of an ongoing policy. These businesses need predictability, not uncertainty. Investment in green and fuel-efficient technologies can reduce costs and help us meet our climate targets. Let us make sustainability a cost-saving measure, not a burden. Insurance reform could tackle spiralling premiums that are crippling rural hauliers. This is a structural issue that demands structural change. Better engagement with SMEs would ensure they could access schemes like invoice financing and microloans to manage cash flow. Supports must be practical, not bureaucratic.

If we allow haulage costs to continue to rise unchecked, we risk undermining the businesses that sustain our communities. SMEs are resilient but resilience has its limits. Let us act decisively to keep Ireland's supply chain strong and our small businesses competitive. This is not just an economic issue but a social one. Every time a small haulier closes its doors, a community loses jobs, a family loses income and rural Ireland loses another piece of its fabric. We cannot allow that to happen.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is good to be here to contribute to these statements on SMEs and, particularly, the road haulage sector. As has been said by many, the sector is the lifeblood of small industry and business across the country. Fleets of white vans deliver everything we know to shops around the country, from bread and milk right through. All those vans on the road mean jobs in every part of the country and they need support. All of them are under stress

and strain with the spiralling costs of insurance and fuel, which are not being dealt with effectively by Government. Then we see ever-increasing tolls on the toll roads which they have no option but to use. For the transport sector, those toll increases are even higher than for people using their cars.

We have serious problems getting staff to carry out these roles. More and more haulage companies are having trouble finding drivers and other staff. The training programmes outlined by the Minister are all well and good but do not deliver the levels of competent workers the sector needs or anything near it. Many of them have to try to get workers from abroad. I have dealt with many, even small hauliers, in my part of the country who bring people in from outside the European Union. A man last week told me he had brought somebody in from Zimbabwe as a driver. First they had to get the permit to get into the country. Then they had to deal with the licence exchange, and that can take weeks and weeks. Then they had to get a PPS number. The final thing they had to get was a visa to go to the Continent and the Schengen Area. There are huge delays in all these things.

The portal for applying for visas is clogged up, slow and not delivering for people. There is huge frustration among many people in this sector who want to employ people and have workers prepared to do the work but when they try to bring them into the system, they find there are walls built in front of them. It would not cost anything to streamline all that and make it happen quickly, effectively and efficiently for people.

Many workers do not want to stay in the sector because there are other employment opportunities. That creates its own difficulties. There are very long hours sometimes. There are many complications with regulations around moving in and out of different jurisdictions, particularly with the new tachograph instruments brought in recently. Government needs to support the industry to develop new efficiencies, particularly regarding carbon and moving away from diesel. Those are big costs that small businesses cannot afford unless they get support from Government. Government needs to step up to the plate when it comes to supporting small businesses across the country, particularly the haulage sector.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I have been following the statements this afternoon. Many colleagues have given a good idea of the shape and size of haulier firms throughout the country. We have 4,779 hauliers across the island of Ireland and 70% of them have no more than three trucks, yet they contribute €3.7 billion per annum to the economy. Unusually, these are not multinationals. These are small firms that operate in local communities. Indeed, they spend locally, they employ locally and they do good for the local economy.

Many of my colleagues here have highlighted the different rising costs. The Government has tried to face the challenges and support our SMEs as much as we possibly can, but I have also listened to the debates, particularly from the haulage firms over the last week, about how difficult it is now to transit across the M50. Indeed, for any commuter or any business, you are going to spend hours on the M50 on any day of the week. More recently, I heard that the number of accidents on the M50 has already exceeded the number of accidents in 2024. This is a problem. Anyone who has driven a truck or, indeed, anyone who has had a haulage company is well aware that time is money. They have to sit in traffic. They are wasting time. It is producing a cost, but more importantly, it is reducing the driver's time, which potentially

means they are not going to make their boat, and if they do not make their boat, they are not going to make their delivery. That is a further increased cost.

A significant point we all have to realise relates to how we get the food and goods on our shelves. We get them thanks to the haulage industry. About 90% of Irish goods are transited on our roads. Without the haulage industry, we will not get the goods from A to B, never mind to C. We need a producer to produce but we need the haulier to transit and help us get the goods back home, such as food into our fridges.

The rising costs, I agree, are fuel, insurance and compliance. We have staff shortages. We need training. We have tolls. My first ask is that we look at the M50 toll and give haulage companies the concession that they do not have to pay it. There are rising costs. The port tunnel charge is going to go up again. When I became a TD in December 2024, the charge was €10. It is now €12. There is always an announcement of a euro here or there at the beginning of the year but, strangely enough, it seems to increase secretly during the course of the year. We have to allow our hauliers some sort of incentive to keep those wheels turning.

I read recently that Department officials are considering permits when it comes to very heavy loads - anything, I believe, between 400 tonnes and 500 tonnes. The Department has also accepted that these kind of loads are increasing on our roads. I am struggling with this one because if we have hauliers that have increased costs and we have these types of loads, which potentially are adding to the bottom line of these companies, why on earth would we be considering a permit that would have to be applied for 12 months in advance? I know we all like to forward plan and think ahead, but I cannot conceivably see how having to request a permit 12 months in advance is going to be an efficient, nimble, cost-effective route for any haulier. It would disincentivise them and, quite frankly, I do not think it will happen. My second ask, therefore, is that we do not bring in this process of permits.

In summary, let the M50 be free for hauliers and take the idea of permits for them off the table.

An Ceann Comhairle: From the Independent Technical Group, I call on Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: Hauliers face repeated toll hikes, with the M50 and Dublin Port Tunnel driving up costs. Some operators pay up to €20,000 per month in tolls, forcing many out of business. The Irish Road Haulage Association has warned this threatens Ireland's supply chain, which relies on road haulage for 98% of goods. The current toll system wastes €27 million in fuel and emits 45,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually. The haulage industry is calling for toll exemptions and barrier-free tolling to cut costs and protect the economy.

I would like to know where all the money for all these tolls is going. Has it gone back into the roads? Certainly, we do not see them in west Cork, as well the Minister of State knows well. I will name a few of the roads in a minute. He travels on them the same as I do. Hauliers and the motorists are being hit the most all the time. This is another tax on their back.

Transport companies are facing serious issues with a new online portal for driver work permits. One company in west Cork could not even log in because its details had been uploaded incorrectly. They have described the system as completely flawed and not fit for purpose. It

even asks drivers from other countries to upload their own information - drivers who often have no idea how to navigate this process. Surely it should be enough for the company to input the details. I strongly urge the Minister of State to streamline the system and make it practical for the industry.

Earlier on Leaders' Questions, I spoke about to people with licence issues. Last week, and again this morning, as I said, I raised the issue of returning Irish emigrants who face unnecessary and unfair barriers when trying to exchange foreign driving licences for Irish ones. I am calling for immediate change, the removal of the ten-year limit and the facilitation of direct exchange with those who previously held an Irish licence and now hold a valid foreign licence long term. I am being told that this can be done with the stroke of a pen. The Tánaiste has stated he will look into it. I am asking the Minister of State to look into it again, not kick the can over to the Road Safety Authority, RSA, or the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, and have a look at the Dutch model. It is time we got on the side of people and the side of Ireland, rather than the side of red tape and bureaucracy.

When I had my contribution written up, I did not expect the Minister of State to be before me, but he knows as well as I do the condition of the roads in west Cork and the bypasses that have been promised in west Cork, with nothing happening in Innishannon, nothing happening on the southern or northern relief road and nothing happening on the Bantry road. The Minister of State might say it is happening on the Bantry Road. They are drawing up a report as if to say, "Kick the can down the road, throw a few hundred thousand euro into a report and they will all be happy." My brother, Councillor John Collins, attended the meeting and asked them when a bucket will put on the road. They do not know. It will probably be five or ten years, but it is a kick-the-can-down-the-road exercise to say they are doing something. Look at the Allihies mine shaft. There is a hole above in Allihies, a collapsed road, and nobody is doing anything about it. Look at the road in Lyre. Councillor Daniel Sexton brought it up in a motion last year. The road collapsed in the last seven or eight years and was never fixed. It is road after road. There are the Union Hall speed signs. At Owenahincha Cross turnoff, Councillor Sexton is again working so hard on new road alignments to Newmills. I could go on forever.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In November 2021, I brought a truck in here to Leinster House for the same reason we are talking on this today, for the road hauliers. At a time of crisis in this country, they travelled the roads to make sure that we had food and energy in this country.

I have a letter from Martin Ryan & Sons Transport, a big haulage company in Cappamore in County Limerick and I will give a small piece of it. It contains a summary of a table outlining the key cost increases imposed by Government policy in recent years. It states that they have calculated the direct impact on their business, drivers and vehicles based on the drivers' vehicles. The company has 173 employees and operates over 100 vehicles. The letter calls for a review of the tax on transport and states the compound costs have had a severe impact on cash flow and the ability to invest in newer, cleaner vehicles and that many transport companies are now working on a razor-thin budget.

To give the Minister of State the statistics on this, from 2021, when I brought the truck in here, to 2025, the overall increase in the cost of equipment has been 40%. Government taxes on fuel are 89.56% up since 2021. Commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing, CVRT, has seen a 19% increase. Tolls have seen a 13% increase. The minimum wage has seen a 39%

increase. Employers' PRSI has seen a 41%. These costs are on top of trying to keep afloat. We are wondering why the cost of living has gone up in this country. It is because of the tax implications as well.

This is where it comes to the Minister of State's responsibility, biodiversity. People are now spending €1,000 a week replacing mirrors on trucks in County Limerick because the Government will not allow the sides of the roads and the ditches to be cut for a safe path for vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: That is not true.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They are now driving down the middle of the road. There is plenty of room for biodiversity inside the ditches around the fields. It is the law that anyone in this country should be able to travel in it safely.

Today, we are looking at somebody in the Chair who has driven trucks and was part of the haulage industry. For God's sake, the Minister of State is partly responsible for the costs of truckers and his Government is the cause of inflation in this country through taxes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. People need to realise that about 165 million tonnes of goods are hauled around this country every year and 13.6 billion miles are done by hauliers. I have a truck licence and I drove trucks a lot of my life. Anyone who knows it will see the council go along and take two swipes of the road, but the third and fourth swipes are needed where there is a mirror of a bus, lorry or anything that is going along. Let no one tell me that a bird has a nest on the side of-----

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There are six months in the year when they can be cut back. What are you talking about?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----the road. The facts are that two more swipes are catching the mirrors of the buses going to school, plus the trucks. That is the reality of it. The quality of roads is a problem.

The reality for truck drivers at the moment is they buy a truck and pay €46,000 in VAT. They pay 23% VAT for every drop of diesel they have and 19 cent of every litre is carbon tax, which is another tax. If they need a trailer, there is a tax. There is VAT on tyres and another tax to get rid of tyres. I have covered carbon tax. Looking at the amount of tax, and they talk about "keep her lit" and "keep on trucking", I will tell you one thing: I do not know how the exhaust is even going with the amount of money that has to be paid on one lorry in tax.

There is another problem we have allowed in this country. People are coming in from eastern bloc countries and are cutting the daylight out of it. They have a different rate for their drivers, tyres, insurance and every part of the truck you have to do. They are cutting the daylight out of our hauliers here. If you try to get someone to even drive a lorry, it costs between €5,000 and €7,000 for them to get their test, do their certificate of professional competence, CPC, and go right through the whole lot. We are driving youngsters away from going near trucking.

On the environment, I acknowledge a rebate is there at the moment, but for HVO, which would cut emissions by 90%, although it is dearer fuel, there is no rebate. People talk about COP30, COP40 or whatever they want to talk about, but in actual fact they are not interested. If the Government wanted to do something, it would give a rebate on the likes of HVO.

We need to look at the way lorry drivers, hauliers and people who own lorries are being treated in this country. Also, auto-enrolment is coming in January, and while it is one of these things that has to be done for workers, it will cause a problem for small two- and three-person businesses. Let us be honest about it. I have talked to a number of people who say this will be a problem in the industry. I will ask one thing. How come, when we go to London or France with a truck, we are screwed in each place by the €10 or €20 that has to be paid ahead of that truck? Eastern bloc lorry drivers or lorry owners are coming across here, cutting the daylights out of it and they are not hit like our guys are hit when they go out of the country.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know the issues that exist at the minute in relation to the cost-of-living crisis. The Government's budget did not have any solutions for those who are suffering at this time, whether we are talking about the issues of insurance, rent or the cost of housing in general. There are also the insurance companies, and anybody who recently had to buy shopping will realise the cost of everything. That is the way it has been explained to me by many people.

If we are talking about roads, we know the addition of carbon taxes means we will have really significant fuel costs. The idea of carbon tax was to dissuade people. We all know a number of things have changed since, including post Covid and the cruel invasion of Ukraine by Russia. That changed the nature of it. We saw fuel prices go through the roof. Anyone who can possibly avoid driving does that now. I do not see any logic in keeping adding on the pain. As has been brought up by many previously, it also creates an anomaly in Border areas and creates an issue for those who are trying to sell fuel in the part of the world I come from. That is an issue that could be dealt with.

Those are not the only costs that have gone up in the last while. There is the cost of tolls. Sinn Féin has offered its solutions on that but these were thrown back in our face by the Government. The Government is not overly worried about those particular issues, but the fact is an awful lot of people out there are absolutely feeling the pain. If we are talking about cross-Border issues that are impacting on hauliers, my party colleague Cathy Bennett spoke about the issue of tachographs from the technical point of view. She lives in a place, like me, where you could cross the Border over and back a number of times. It does not make sense that someone would have to technically get out to switch an apparatus around and all the rest of it. There is also an requirement for HGV drivers to pay, generally before they have crossed the Border, a €10 levy. The issue with that is that if they are caught and have not done it, travelling from South to North, they can get a €300 on-the-spot fine. This is an issue the Minister needs to bring up with his counterparts in Britain. We have given voice to it but, like an awful lot of cross-Border issues, it has just remained. Again, there are a number of anomalies.

I remember the Tánaiste previously talked about the need for some sort of facility whereby these issues could be dealt with rather than having them just lie and continue on. We have seen the positives in relation to Queen's, DkIT and that partnership, but we need to make sure we make it easier for those who live on this island to be able to operate across it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am delighted to speak on these statements. I spoke on the haulage sector and its challenges recently at its conference in Galway. I am delighted to speak again in the Chamber to relay the difficulties and issues presented to me at that conference in September.

The haulage sector contributes €3.7 billion per annum to our economy. It creates thousands of jobs in rural Ireland where there are virtually no opportunities for people. It must be protected. When we look at things like the toll increases, it appears to be the case that the people who get up early in the morning and work the hardest are punished the greatest. That is what many working people, hauliers and many people who commute to Dublin are saying to me. In terms of the toll increases, many haulage companies are paying between €20,000 and €30,000 per month in toll fees, which is scandalous. Will the Government intervene with TII and send a clear message that people and companies cannot afford another toll increase? Why can that message not be sent from here loud and clear?

I am particularly concerned about the costs and financial burden being put on companies that contribute greatly to our economy. The cost of diesel has increased by over 10 cent per litre in the last two weeks. That will cripple many haulage companies and motorists. I propose that the Government look at putting a cap on diesel prices for the transport sector, which is a crucial cog in the wheel of our economy. We must support and protect jobs. As I said, we should be supporting the people who get up early and work very hard to contribute to our economy. They are the people who need support.

If we look at the tax burden, IRHA president Ger Hyland has stated many times that the haulage industry has been taxed out of existence; 32% of taxes being foisted upon one sector is a disgrace. That needs to be looked at. Instead of crippling it with taxes, charges, tolls and carbon tax, let us try to support and protect jobs into the future. I ask for the proposal for a cap on fuel prices to be considered for the haulage sector. I know the IRHA has asked for the tax burden to be reviewed and for the areas of fuel, tolls and compliance to be looked at and for the introduction of targeted supports or relief measures to help operators transition to more sustainable fleets without financial penalty. Thank God the fairy tale party, the Green Party, is no longer here because what it was doing to the sector was outrageous. If it wants it to become greener, then the Government should be supporting it. There should also have been a subsidy for HVO.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I will speak to the subtle costs borne by the brave, community-entrenched entrepreneurs of the SME sector. Local craftspeople, farmers, growers and shop owners have symbiotic relationships with local rural and urban communities. I acknowledge previous Government supports during Covid but the impact of restrictions then, which forced so many consumers to go online, can never be repeated. I raise that as a flag for future consideration. Regardless of global opportunities or turbulence the SMEs are the constants in our communities. They are employers and sponsors. They are keeping a look out for older members who may be living alone. When we join the dots and connect everything up, the hauliers connecting the producer with the consumer are the vital cogs in the wheel. I will not go back over what colleagues have said on statistics but we have to enable all of that.

The SMEs in Meath East are offering some suggestions for improvement and providing future opportunity as follows. For example, school books and stationery vouchers were put forward by Forever Amber bookshop in Ratoath. It would dovetail with the school books

scheme. The local enterprise offices could strengthen and increase supports to retailers and service sector SMEs. They continuously look for support and shop local campaigns should be year-round. In particular, local authorities and utility companies should co-ordinate road and footpath work and communicate in advance with the SMEs. The impact of unannounced road works, etc., is deleterious for business. There should be provision of adequate and free parking facilities. Finally, there is the irrecoverable impact of Mercosur on farmers. That is threatening food safety, our Irish food security and ultimately public health. The Minister of State has heard plenty on that but those are a few simple suggestions.

An Ceann Comhairle: It would be remiss of me, particularly given my former role - and this is not in any way to remove my impartiality - not to mention the debate on hedge cutting as referenced by both the Minister of State and Deputy Fitzmaurice. The six-month rule is there. There is also the provision for hedge cutting to be requested at the council level where there is a danger. I do not know of any instance where it is not granted. However, this week five young people have been killed - and I am not making any statement regarding the circumstances of those deaths – needless to say, on our roads. The bigger provision with regard to hedge cutting is that every council in the country is only paying for two swards. The height of the mirror on a standard HGV or bus carrying schoolchildren or passengers, which we are trying to encourage, is approximately double that. That is what needs to be considered within the time period of the six months where hedge cutting is allowed. If we are to be serious about tackling the issue of saving lives on our roads, we need to review that.

It is not an issue for Wexford County Council because it seems to be able to buck the trend and we have infrastructure where it goes above that. Primarily it comes down to money, and no amount of money will save lives unless we use it wisely. I thank everybody for their contributions.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: 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 Paul Murphy - To discuss the impact of the changes to BusConnects routes in Dublin South-West.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the proposed construction of a waste incinerator in Ringaskiddy, Cork Harbour, County Cork.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the difficulties facing Wicklow and Wexford commuters.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss access to a remediation and compensation scheme for homes built with defective block in Skerries.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss unsafe lead levels in Phibsboro's drinking water.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the financial crisis at Darver National School, County Louth.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss issues with reliability and punctuality of Cork city's bus service.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the urgent need for investment in Carrignavar wastewater treatment plant.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss plans for investment in water and wastewater infrastructure in Dunboyne, County Meath.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the escalating arson attacks on playgrounds and public facilities in north Dublin.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the closure of the NCSE Parents Notify portal for children requiring special class-special school placements.

Deputy Dessie Ellis - To discuss the Luas Finglas extension.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss the Luas extension to Poolbeg.

The matters raised by Deputies Jennifer Whitmore, Ruairí Ó Murchú, Naoise Ó Muirí, Dessie Ellis and Malcolm Byrne have been selected for discussion.

Haulage Costs for SMEs: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I am glad the Ceann Comhairle addressed that issue in her comments. People are quick to blame wildlife and birds. It is the old trope of what is more important. The Ceann Comhairle is absolutely right. There are six months in the year when works can be done. Landowners have a role to play as well. Even within those six months, where a stretch of road is deemed to be dangerous or causing issues, the remit is within the local authority. Funding is, of course, an issue. The other way we can improve safety on our roads is by investing in them, improving surfaces and realignment. Fair play to her for commenting. I am sure she is biting her lip because there are loads of other suggestions she would love to make about how we can look after and protect this important industry and sector.

In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, I know he listened carefully. I saw him making notes on a lot of the statements that were made. He is knowledgeable about this sector too. I am sure there are a lot of things he wants to do at pace but we know that within the confines of Government, it is not always easy to solve things quickly. I know he will agree with most of what was said but maybe not all. I know he was taking a lot of notes on that.

I reiterate that this Government recognises the need to support the haulage, logistics and supply chain sector, which is a key enabler for all other industries. It is important to address long-standing challenges such as driver shortages and to work with the sector on its transition to decarbonisation. The sector has faced multiple shocks in recent years and its response to the national and geopolitical crisis must be applauded. It has worked with policy makers to develop innovative and practical measures to keep our supply chains moving and viable into the future. We all agree that the road freight forum has provided an excellent platform for structured engagement between policymakers and key stakeholders. Policy should never be developed in a vacuum and the discussions at that forum and the willingness of the sector

representatives to be open, constructive and pragmatic has been helpful for the officials in the Department of Transport.

Officials in the Department want to continue this spirit of collaboration to assist the sector to achieve the goals set out in the road haulage strategy and the actions identified by the sector in the logistics and supply chain skills group action plan. By working together, we are confident that we can improve current processes, build a resilient and skilled workforce equipped to meet the future needs of the sector and achieve our collective goals on the path to decarbonisation. The logistics and supply chain skills group is not a new initiative. It was established in 2019 with the key objective of supporting the promotion of careers, skills development and sustainable employment in the logistics and supply chain sectors in Ireland. It is chaired by the Department of Transport and includes haulage and logistics sector industry representatives, education and training providers and all relevant Government Departments and agencies. The Minister commends the group on its hard work and for identifying and leading on the implementation of actions to address gaps and challenges in the sector.

The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, mentioned the logistics and supply chain skills week during his opening remarks. This is possibly the most visible outcome of the working group. Skills week was first held in 2023 and showcased over 30 online and in-person events across the country. Initially it was intended as a one-off event but due to the success of that first event it has now become an annual fixture looked forward to by everyone in the sector. The event has grown year on year and now includes the annual transition year event that the Minister of State mentioned. I strongly encourage all companies and organisations to participate in next year's events to help support their future employees gain the relevant skills needed in the sector. Other work being done via the group includes an assessment of future skills needs, examining the process of recruitment of drivers from outside the EU and European Economic Area with a view to simplifying the process and reducing the time it takes, looking after driver CPC training and recommending improvements, and improving awareness of the sector as an attractive career path for school leavers and those looking to change careers.

Decarbonisation of the haulage sector is a complex challenge but the results outlined in the FTAI's report suggest a growing momentum within the sector to move to a more sustainable business model. This is a positive indicator that Government supports for operators to transition to alternatively fuelled vehicles are having the desired impact.

4 o'clock

I thank those businesses that have availed of the supports to date. Without first movers, the path forward would be far more challenging for the sector.

Additionally, the heavy-duty vehicle electrification pathway working group has brought together industry representatives to share experience and best practice in progressing decarbonisation in the freight and logistics sector. The group has identified the availability of charging infrastructure as a critical enabler for this transition. The working group is finalising recommendations for workable solutions to these barriers. Separately, some funding has been made available for 2026 to advance considerations for a HDV charging hub.

While electrification is the preferred path to decarbonisation, I am sure all Members will agree that this will be a long journey, and we cannot afford to wait to reduce our emissions. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, mentioned the results of a study on the use of HVO in

his opening remarks. While those results were not as positive as we would have liked, it does not mean we can stop our considerations of how to encourage and maximise the use of alternative fuels. The Department of Transport has commissioned a study to conduct a hierarchy-of-use assessment of HVO in transport modes, including land transport, aviation and maritime, and non-transport sectors. The study will take account of sustainability, availability, alternative energy sources and incentives for supply in the different sectors. While the study will focus specifically on HVO, the concerns raised by the haulage sector in relation to alternative fuels will be fed into this study. I look forward to hearing the recommendations made.

Other initiatives the Department of Transport is undertaking to support the sector include the introduction of a new online road transport operator licensing system. The system was introduced on 10 November, providing user-friendly access for operators to apply for, renew and amend operator licences. The Department's road transport operator licensing division was in direct contact with each operator prior to going live with details on how to register for and use the new system.

While these examples demonstrate that a lot of progress has been made to address the challenges faced by road haulage operators, I think we can all agree that there is more work to be done. Officials from the Department of Transport and TII and members of the road freight forum have been discussing challenges raised in relation to tolls throughout the year. Some practical suggestions made by the road haulage sector have been tested on the N25 Waterford city bypass over the past few months. They include opening additional lanes to HGVs, providing additional contactless payment points at heights suitable for HGVs and relocating tag readers to allow earlier reading of tags and reduce the need for vehicles to stop at the barrier. While these are only small steps, they have been positively received by the haulage industry, which has noted the improvements made by the changes. TII is working with the operator of the M1 toll plaza and hopes to have similar measures in place at that site later this month or in December at the latest. Officials from the Department of Transport look forward to expanding on this discussion over the coming months to consider the longer term future of tolling in Ireland with continued input from TII and the haulage sector.

Increases in motor insurance premiums have been discussed multiple times recently. The Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Troy, provided a comprehensive statement on the matter on 12 November, including details of the measures introduced under the 2020 and 2025 action plans for insurance reform to address issues with the cost and supply of insurance.

The challenges faced by the road haulage sector are complex. We acknowledge the genuine concerns raised by the sector with many Members and with officials in the Department of Transport. We acknowledge many of the suggestions that have been made in the Chamber today as well. There are no simple solutions to the bigger questions of decarbonisation and the lack of skilled drivers. I am confident, however, that the structures established in recent years, the actions identified by industry itself and included in the logistics and supply chain skills group action plan, and the long-term framework provided by the road haulage strategy provide the necessary tools to tackle these issues head-on.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and officials in the Department of Transport are committed to continuing to work collaboratively with the sector over the coming years. I again thank all Deputies for their contributions.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Costs

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am glad of the opportunity to bring up this issue. It is a very worrying one. It was brought up earlier by Deputy Doherty. It relates to the ongoing school funding crisis in Darver National School. The easiest way to put this on the record is to read out an email a number of parents got the other day:

Dear parents,

I am writing to share an important update regarding the financial situation currently affecting our school.

Over the past several years, government grants have not increased sufficiently in line with rising costs. Despite making every effort to manage resources and reduce spending in ways that do not impact pupils, we have now reached a point where we can no longer cover the costs of certain essential hygiene items. We have worked hard to protect classrooms, teaching and learning from the impact of these financial pressures.

However, we have now reached a point where we are unable to continue covering the cost of certain basic consumable items used daily by pupils. As a result, beginning tomorrow, we kindly ask that each child bring:

- small personal hand towel
- a roll of toilet tissue

This is not a request we ever wished to make and it reflects the very real challenges that ongoing funding shortfalls have created for schools like ours. Please know that we would not be asking for your support unless it was absolutely necessary.

We hope this will be a temporary measure as we continue to advocate for improved financial support and explore all possible avenues to ease the financial burden on the school.

Thank you for your understanding, patient and continued support as we navigate these challenging circumstances.

Kind regards,

The Principal of Darver National School

We are talking about a small rural school in County Louth with 71 pupils and six teachers. We are also talking about an old building. It dates back to around 1940. Obviously, that creates its own maintenance issues. The heating system is outdated - this is a big issue - and does not provide sufficient heat and needs to be replaced. There has been an application for the summer works scheme, which could probably deal with a significant amount of the costs. Government

grants have consistently not covered the cost of this school for the past three years. That is my understanding. Obviously, bills have steadily increased during that period. Electricity costs increased by 200% last year. The school is with the OGP so it cannot get a cheaper deal than that. It has other facilities, such as a large outside area, which costs money to maintain with grass-cutting, and the school does not get any additional funding to do that. All the printing and photocopying costs are covered by parent contributions. The school had to replace the door intercom system. Again, that was paid for by parents' association fundraising. They are dealing with and engaging with the financial services support unit and all they have to, but it is a poor reflection when parents have to receive such a letter. I have no doubt that the principal did this as an absolute last resort. It is something we need to address as soon as possible.

I will also put on the record what a parent wrote to me. I have received multiple such emails. I do not think that would be any shock to anybody. The email states:

I am contacting you and your office in relation to an email sent by one of our local schools.

The parents are being advised that the school will no longer support the funding of basic hygiene products for pupils and, from tomorrow, we must send our children into school with a roll of toilet paper and a hand towel each.

As a parent, I am appalled that these are the conditions that children are being asked to deal with in a school day. For the government to not be able to provide funding for basic hygiene to pupils shows an absolute lack of duty of care.

Questions must be asked. What is happening to funding for smaller schools in our county and in the State?

An Ceann Comhairle: You will have to come back in, Deputy. I call the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this on behalf of the students and parents of Scoil Dairbhre. That is a very unusual circumstance. It is one that certainly I have not heard of. Obviously, I am not in the Department of education. Perhaps the Minister has heard of such a case, but it is extraordinary. I certainly would have said it is not the norm around Ireland for parents to be asked by the school to bring in toilet rolls and other essential supplies.

In this instance, officials from the Department have made contact with the school, and the school has been referred to the financial services support unit, FSSU, which is a dedicated support service for schools funded by the Department of Education and Youth. This is the usual practice where any school presents as being in difficulty. The FSSU will now work with the school directly to assist it in resolving the financial difficulty.

Schools in financial difficulty are encouraged to contact the Department of Education and Youth for advice and support. The Department is committed to offering all available and appropriate supports to schools, which may include an advance in capitation grant funding or other measures. Any school with financial concerns is then encouraged to engage directly with the FSSU and the school's patron in order to work to address the financial challenges at the school.

The Department is committed to providing funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education scheme by way of *per capita* grants. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater for day-to-day running costs and the ancillary grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff.

The Department has secured €39 million in budget 2026 towards increased capitation funding for primary, post-primary and special schools to provide additional financial support towards their running costs. This will see an increase in the standard capitation rates paid to schools of €50 per pupil for primary schools from €224 to €274 and of €20 per student for post-primary schools from €386 to €406. This will also allow for an increase of €20 in capitation rates for urban band 1 DEIS primary schools, increasing the mainstream pupil rate in these schools to €294. The increased capitation rates will also see special schools now receive the same rates of capitation for young people aged 12 and over, as their peers in mainstream post-primary schools.

The financial support service unit funded by the Department is an important source of advice and support to schools on financial matters, including budgeting and cash flow management. The contact details for the FSSU can be found on www.fssu.ie. There was an acknowledgment in this budget that many schools needed an increase in the capitation grant for day-to-day running. Many schools were reaching out and highlighting that it was a struggle. The instance the Deputy has referenced is highly unusual where parents have been asked to bring in those types of essential materials. I would have thought students' personal hygiene would have been a basic provision that schools would be making. I understand the FSSU in the Department has been in touch. The capitation rates have been increased in this budget and I hope that will relieve some of the pressure on many primary schools in particular. I again thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that we have a new Minister for education who is only just in position. I appreciate that the Minister of State is here to answer this but I will also be asking him to go back to the Department, as I will myself, to make the Minister aware of this so that we can just take it off the agenda. I agree this is not normal and it should not be normal in any way. In this case the next thing the school had to pay for were these hygiene items and money was not there. We have heard other principals say, "We are out of money. This school will close. We cannot keep the wolf from the door." The principal is in no way happy that she had to do this but she has done it and it was probably in an attempt not to go absolutely nuclear in relation to this.

We need to ensure that the engagement with the FSSU comes up with something that is actually sustainable. Beyond that, a major part of this is energy costs. The increase in capitation was acceptance that in recent years capitation did not wash its own face and did not cover the costs that were necessary. This school is not only dealing with increased electrical and energy costs but also with an old heating system, which is a legacy issue. If that one thing was dealt with, it would remove a huge portion of the cost. This is a really good school that people say very good things about. I have been contacted by the school and brought it up with the Taoiseach previously. The issue was about getting sanction for two ASD classes. We really need to ensure that issues like this do not happen, that there is a sufficient amount and that we deal with the issues at Darver National School now and ensure there is sustainable funding into the future. We need to do that across the board in our educational system.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is new in the role. I wish her the best of luck in that role and I am sure she will do a wonderful job. I will ensure she is aware of the situation in Darver National School. Many improvements have been made right across the country. In my constituency I have seen some great work done in older schools that may have been built in the 50s or 60s, which were deteriorating and becoming dilapidated. They have brand new extensions. Children are in most cases attending school in much more comfortable, warmer and dryer conditions compared with when I was in primary school. Significant improvements have been made in that regard.

I agree that the increase in capitation has been too long coming, but it is here now. I am sure that what is happening in the school the Deputy referenced may be a legacy of being underfunded from a capitation point of view and I hope this increase will help that. I know the school has been in touch with the FSSU. The Department has been in touch with the school. We need to get through this to ensure that we can avoid situations where parents are having to get their children to bring these essential hygiene products into school with them. I again thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I am sure it is a fantastic school as he has just highlighted. The important thing now is to ensure that its finances are in order so that it can provide the absolute basics.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to raise the issue of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, portal. The council has a new process in place to identify and ensure there is capacity for children who need special classes as part of their education. In moving to this new system, there has been a major gap in the process, which I am really worried about. Essentially parents were to upload the information and medical reports about their child's diagnosis into the Parent Notify portal on the NCSE website. Once that was assessed by the council, a letter of eligibility was given to the parents and the parents could use that to apply for a special class in the school. The NCSE closed that portal on 1 October. Many parents were not aware that this portal existed and what they needed to do to get the letter of eligibility. They did not have the final paperwork required because of how long it takes for assessments in this country. Unfortunately, the portal is now closed and those parents are absolutely unable to apply for a special class for their child.

I have repeatedly raised this with the Department and with the Minister. I keep being told not to worry and that the NCSE is going to manage this. The council is aware that for some children the parents did not have the information up in time and support will be given to them. However, that has not actually happened yet. The NCSE provided the following update:

Details of the process to be followed by parents and guardians who have not used Parents Notify to make contact with the NCSE when seeking a special class/school placement will be published on the NCSE website and social media accounts in the coming weeks.

That was seven weeks ago and there has been no update. I have been contacted by a number of parents in my constituency. This is a nationwide issue, and not just a Wicklow issue. It would appear that there's large-scale confusion over how those parents can be catered for. They are not hearing from their SENOs and there has not been any contact with the Department.

Unfortunately, the guidance the NCSE sent out to all the schools states that a child who does not get into the first enrolments will go onto the waiting list. A child on a waiting list in any area where there are capacity issues is not getting a place.

Parents are really worried about this. Two things need to happen. There has to be immediate communication from the NCSE to parents in this regard. The SENOs need guidance. There seems to be a lot of confusion among the SENOs as to what is happening and that communication absolutely must happen. The Department or the NCSE must reopen that portal so that those parents who have received additional information can submit it. This issue has to be addressed. It cannot be the case that children who have additional needs are not being catered for or accounted for. This is not even for education this year; this is for September 2026. There seems to be a major gap in that process. I hope the Minister of State has an update from the Department for me on this. It is a huge worry for parents.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy. What I have in the reply is more of a rationale for the change and for the earlier date in terms of trying to have everything in place so places can be allocated in a timely manner and be in position. In terms of reopening the portal, according to the response I have it sounds unlikely. To be fair, the Deputy's suggestion about immediate communication with the parents and guidance for the SENOs does not seem like a big ask, and it is something I will certainly go back to Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, with. This is an area he is passionate about and he really has grabbed the bull by the horns in a sector that needs more support and more resources. I will certainly bring that back, but what I am going to outline here is the rationale for the change.

For children and young people with more complex needs, a special class can be provided and for children and young people with the most complex needs a special school place can be provided. Over 2,700 new special education places were provided for the 2025-26 school year, meaning there are now 3,741 special classes nationwide. The Department of Education and Youth will build on this figure next year by providing at least 3,000 new places, placing provision in locations where it is best placed to meet existing and future demand. In addition, 16 new special schools have been established in recent years. Special school capacity has also been expanded across a number of special schools nationwide. These schools are supported by the Department and the NCSE.

The NCSE will have a clear picture of local demand for special class and special school places for the 2026-27 school year after staff review and assess all the information that has been provided through the parents' notification process, which was closed on 1 October, as the Deputy referenced. The new timeline was published widely and communicated with schools, special education advocacy groups and parent representative bodies. The NCSE also undertook a lot of work at local level to ensure that families were aware of the timeline and process. There was an undertaking in terms of public awareness, but with any of these new systems there are always gaps. It is inevitable and it always happens in the first year. The earlier notification deadline was introduced this year to support forward planning and to earlier equip the NCSE with local information as to what students would be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary specialist places or those seeking specialist placement and entering the education system for the first time. This information is critical when examining where provision needs to be placed to meet demand. This earlier date in October coincides with when schools begin enrolment processes so affords parents the opportunity to enrol in existing classes.

Many mainstream schools, particularly at post-primary level, commence admissions processes for the following school year on 1 October annually. The NCSE is also working on sanctioning the majority of new special classes for the 2026-27 school year by 31 December 2025. This is four months earlier than last year and will bring clarity and certainty for both parents and schools as to where classes will be located. It will also afford greater lead-in times for schools that require repurposing or major building works to get works complete and allow schools to recruit staff and undertake the training needed so that children are fully supported in these placements. Once the NCSE has fully collated and assessed the information received from the Parents Notify process, it will engage with schools across the country to open new special classes. The council will also have due regard to any vacant places in existing special classes in any area and any places that will become available through the normal movement of children leaving a primary or post-primary school. The council advises that the majority of children and young people coming to it through the Parents Notify process are already enrolled in school and are being supported by existing special education teachers and special needs assistants. With any date for applications for supports, it is important that those who come forward after that date are assured that they are not forgotten or excluded from the system. I would like to stress that NCSE staff will continue to support all children made known to them after 1 October.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I absolutely understand the need to forward plan and it is welcome. I have spoken to school principals who say that when this process is up and running properly, it will be a huge help to them, but as the Minister of State said, in the first year of this process, there are clear flaws and gaps in it and, unfortunately, children with additional needs or special needs are falling through those gaps and their parents are absolutely stressed to the eyeballs trying to figure out how they can get their children into a special class or get them the supports they need in education. I am finding the language used in the Minister's replies to parliamentary questions and, indeed, the language in this reply so frustrating. The NCSE say it is important for people who come forward after 1 October to be assured they are not forgotten or excluded from the system and that it will continue to support them. That has not happened. Parents who did not make the 1 October deadline have had no contact from the NCSE or SENOs. The NCSE portal stated guidance would be provided but seven weeks later, there is no update on that website. It is not fair on parents. Many children in my constituency of Wicklow have not been able to apply for a special class in the school in this enrolment period because they did not have that letter of eligibility and they are not going to get the support they need. This is a big problem that has been ignored for far too long. I ask that Deputy O'Sullivan brings that back to the Minister of State. I am seeking a meeting with the Minister of State to go through this with him. It is really important that he understands how this is impacting parents on the ground. This is not just a Wicklow issue. I was raising it on social media, and I had parents coming back to me from counties Kilkenny, Kildare and all over the country saying their children are in a similar situation. It is important that the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, understands the impact this is having.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: If the Deputy is seeking a meeting with the Minister of State, I will certainly mention that to him. We have seen this before with other changes in systems or structures; when something that is intended to make something more efficient and help with forward planning, people are left behind in the initial phases. That should not be the

case. It needs to be addressed if that is the case. Put simply, I will mention it to the Minister of State and make sure he knows the Deputy is seeking a meeting. At the very least, parents who for whatever reason did not see the notifications or the social media campaign that was undertaken to improve knowledge of this new system and did not get the messages or the communications - I have seen it happen before and school transport is an obvious example - should be communicated with and given some type of reassurance that they will be catered for and that efforts will be made. That is a very fair and straightforward ask. I will ensure that is communicated back to the Minister of State.

Public Transport

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I welcome the fact that the Luas Finglas extension railway order was granted by An Coimisiún Pleanála in October 2025. This marks a major milestone in the progress of a project long in the making and long overdue. The project involves extending the existing Broombridge Luas green line to Charlestown, which will add four new stops at St. Helena's, Finglas south, Finglas village, St. Margaret's Road and Charlestown Shopping Centre. All these areas, which the Luas extension is either going through or bordering on, are areas of high population. The extension will also cater for a 350 space car park-and-ride facility near the M50. The addition of this extra 4 km of Luas line will be of enormous benefit of the people and business community of Finglas who had good reason to believe that areas like Finglas were being neglected, marginalised and left behind when it came to such large-scale projects.

It is long past the time that Finglas had a project of such stature, which would vastly improve the quality of life for many residents of Finglas. The new BusConnects routes have given rise to concern among Finglas residents who have complained about the loss of direct bus connections, reduced bus frequencies and longer travel times. If the Luas extension was in place now, it might have mitigated many of these concerns. It will nevertheless improve connectivity and have enormous environmental benefits by taking approximately 440,000 private car journeys off the road along the route annually and extend the transport service to an additional 60,000 or more people. The project could also have been more ambitious and allowed the extension to cross the M50 to continue to the airport. We are past the first hurdle in attaining the railway order. There now follows the procurement process and, finally, the construction phase. We have seen time and again how major projects like this have begun with great fanfare and a proposed timeline for completion only to for the timeline to slip significantly and costs escalate. The current proposed timeline of 2031 for the completion of the construction of the extension is a problem. I am concerned that even this date is too far into the future and the project will slip further. The people of Finglas need this service and there should be no delay in progressing and completing it as soon as possible. Charlestown in Finglas has a growing population and people are already frustrated with regard to the public transport options or lack thereof.

The proposed date of construction is dependent on receiving the proper funding for the project. At present, the proposed cost of the project is €600 million. Apart from construction costs, there will be a significant cost in terms of land acquisition. A lot of money has already been spent before a sod has even been turned. I am concerned about the money being made available for the project and that it stays within budget.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the quality and design of the planned cycle paths which have been described as substandard and disjointed. There also needs to be a community gain to offset the clear impact the project will have on local communities. This is something that needs to be included in the delivery of the project.

The route of the Luas to Finglas extension was changed in order to go round pitches at Farnham Drive and those used by Erin's Isle GAA Club and Rivermount Football Club. These clubs have to be facilitated and an all-weather pitch must be constructed to cater for the needs of the clubs and community.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank Deputy Ellis for raising this issue. The extension of the Luas line to Finglas is something everyone can get behind. It is great to hear it has support right across the board. In fairness, the decision was made in October 2025, when the sanction was given for the project. It is a bit early to say that we are delaying anything. I genuinely feel that there is an urgency about delivering this.

Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life and achieving our decarbonisation goals. Achieving these goals has been set out in the programme for Government. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for transport planning in the greater Dublin area. The Luas Finglas project is one of four proposed Luas tram network extensions identified in the NTA transport strategy for the greater Dublin area 2022-2042, approved by the Minister for Transport and published in January 2023. The most advanced of the Luas schemes in this transport strategy is the Luas Finglas extension.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, submitted a planning application to An Coimisiún Pleanála in November 2024 for this project. Thankfully, An Coimisiún Pleanála granted the Luas Finglas railway order in October 2025. The project involves a 3.9 km extension to the Dublin Luas tram network from Broombridge to Finglas. The route will serve an estimated population of 56,000 by 2035, at four new tram stops for communities in the Finglas area: St. Helena's; Finglas Village; St Margaret's Road; and Charlestown. The Luas Finglas project will facilitate a number of medium to longer-term opportunities for transport orientated development, TOD, identified at sites in Broombridge, Dunsink, Jamestown and Charlestown, with an estimated capacity for over 10,000 new residential dwellings.

The project will also serve people beyond those communities through interchanges with the bus network and rail services at Broombridge train station, which is on the planned DART+ west line. In addition, the project provides for a 350 vehicle park and ride facility at St. Margaret's Road stop, close to the M50 and M2 interchange. In the transport strategy, Luas Finglas is identified as a medium-term proposal in the strategy, scheduled for delivery within the 2031-2036 timeframe.

The Government fully understand the merits of the project. As a result, it is one of a number of projects that have been highlighted by the Minister for Transport for possible acceleration as part of the review of the national development Ppan, NDP, which was completed by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in July this year. The review of the NDP has confirmed the Department of Transport's annual capital allocations from 2026 to 2030. The Department is currently reviewing key programmes and projects in the transport sector, including Luas, in the context of that capital funding

envelope and a decision on a programme of delivery within the available funding will be made shortly. A related sectoral plan for transport is expected to be published in the coming weeks and this will include a clear indication on plans for Luas Finglas, which I look forward to.

The Deputy can see the NDP identifies accelerating the extension of the Luas to Finglas. That is very much welcome. As I said, An Coimisiún Pleanála made a decision last month. It is a project we can start getting excited about. I understand the concerns because we have been here before with many transport projects which have been delayed for various reasons. If the community wants it and the political will is there, I do not see why it cannot be delivered at pace.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister of State. There is an urgency in moving ahead. There are major plans to develop the area. Finglas village will be redeveloped. Charlestown will be affected. A large number of apartments are being built across the area and the population is growing. I have dealt with metro north, in terms of the number of meetings I went to and the commitments that were made and broken, one after another - I must have attended 100 meetings over the years. I have attended a number of meetings in regard to the Luas. It bugged me when I saw a reference to potential completion by 2031. It does not sound like the project will be completed by 2031. I wish it was done earlier. I am afraid things will slip and the project will be dragged out.

The community gain is important. People have conceded a lot of space. The football pitches in Farnham will be affected, namely Erin's Isle and Rivermount. We need some community gain as a result. I spoke to the NTA about providing an all-weather pitch. If it is taking some pitches and part of the park it needs to reciprocate. That is important. The Government said this is a priority and it is in the NDP, which is fine, but it needs to move fast. We cannot sit back, which has happened before, while timeline after timeline disappears. I urge the Minister of State to push for the project because it is badly needed.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: In the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, we have a Minister who has highlighted the project as being one he considers as meriting acceleration. My reply states that it is one of the projects highlighted by the Minister for Transport for possible acceleration as part of the review of the NDP which was completed recently. It has clearly been identified as something that can be brought forward, possibly ahead of the usual timelines for the delivery of projects such as this.

As I said, something like a Luas extension is far less controversial and easier for communities to buy into than other forms of transport. We have seen issues with BusConnects. Metrolink has not been smooth sailing. The extension of a Luas has many benefits and is something everyone can get behind.

I take the point of the Deputy on various playing pitches and the opportunity to see benefits. In the grand scheme of the cost of a project like this, an all-weather pitch is probably a small price to pay. I am not sure how that would work out in the long term. It is something the Minister will have to consider. It is all good.

Deputy Byrne has tabled a Topical issue which seeks something similar to this. What the Deputy is looking for is probably far more realistic and can be delivered within a short period

of time. Many areas would love to have the type of timelines we are talking about. We talk about large projects and how quickly they can be delivered. I think we will all be alive to see this project delivered.

Antisocial Behaviour

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Darndale Park playground was vandalised in May and closed, needing repair, by Dublin City Council. Eco toilets were installed recently in St. Anne's Park and a week, later, on 26 October, they were set on fire. Kilmore playground was lobbied and campaigned for by the local community for years. The city council went through a big process to put the facility in, and rightly so. Last Sunday, there was an arson attack on the playground. I went there the day after the attack. The Minister of State can see how it looks now from the picture I have in my hand. The city council had to close it because it is not safe for use. That is a playground gone.

The next picture shows Howth community garden, off Tuckett's Lane at the back of Scoil Mhuire. Three days ago, an eating area was torched and vandalised and is now unusable for the community. A playground at Diamond Park in the north inner city, just off Gardiner Street, was vandalised in July and again on Hallowe'en night. There was a big fire in Sean Moore Park, near Poolbeg, in September. Bridgefoot Street Park in The Liberties was vandalised in October.

There is too much of this going on. Communities cannot wear this as a strategy. It has been raised at local level and I am raising it here because I want to know whether there is a pattern to it. There have been an awful lot of incidents across the city. The Lord Mayor, Ray McAdam, has raised this with An Garda Síochána. I raise the issue here today because I want to hear that the courts and the Department of justice are taking it seriously and dealing with it. There is a lot of this happening. If there is a pattern here, if this activity is organised, we need to get to the bottom of it, take it on and deal with it.

All communities should be able to have nice things. These communities have lobbied for these nice things. The Minister of State has a very good sense of the importance to communities, including in his own area, of playgrounds and green facilities. I raise this issue with him with a view to the Department of justice taking it seriously and working with the relevant authorities to get to the bottom of it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, desperately wanted to be here to take it because he feels so strongly about it. Unfortunately, at the last minute, he had to step away and I stepped into his place. I wanted to relay that message.

My heart goes out to the communities the Deputy mentioned. I have sat in this Chamber and in council chambers many times listening to people crying out for amenities such as public toilets and playgrounds. The amount of community effort that goes into delivering a playground in a community is extraordinary. Sometimes, fundraising is done within the community and, other times, community groups come together, working with the local authority and with LEADER funding, to deliver playgrounds. To see the pointless destruction

of these incredible community facilities is really disappointing. Fair play to the Deputy for raising it. I hope my reply will be useful in highlighting possible solutions.

Damage to community facilities is not only unacceptable; it is reprehensible. Every playground, park and public space represents considerable investment not only in financial terms but also in terms of time and effort from the community, the local authorities and their staff and the contractors who build these wonderful facilities. Setting playgrounds or parks alight is not harmless fun. It is a sign of disrespect to one's neighbours and one's community. It prevents the wider community, including children, from using amenities that are often the heart of the local area.

At the end of September 2025, the Garda workforce was at its highest in history, standing at over 18,000 people. This comprises 14,325 members, 3,483 staff and 293 reserves. As of the same date, 3,836 Garda members were assigned to the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, with 471 Garda staff also working across the region. Of these, 766 Garda members and 70 Garda staff are assigned to DMR north.

The greatest demand from the public to the Minister for justice is for more gardaí on our streets and in our villages and towns. People want to see more gardaí throughout their communities, as does the Minister and every Member of this House. Nearly 200 new gardaí attested last Friday. On Monday, more than 220 Garda recruits entered Templemore to commence their training. This is the largest intake of Garda trainees in over ten years. Gardaí work tirelessly to keep our city safe for residents and visitors alike. When incidents occur, they respond quickly, effectively and with a graduated response.

The Minister is conscious of the damaging impact on quality of life that crime can have in our communities. The Government is committed to tackling crime and building safer streets and stronger communities through a number of ongoing measures, including: the introduction of local community safety partnerships around the country to develop tailored community safety plans for every area; continued expansion of youth justice and youth diversion measures; new laws to criminalise the grooming of children into a life of crime; and the deployment of body-worn cameras by gardaí in Dublin city centre, Waterford and Limerick in 2024, with nationwide roll-out to follow. Other actions are contained in the programme for Government to reduce instances of antisocial behaviour and help people to be safe and feel safe in their local communities. These include a commitment to enact legislation to combat antisocial behaviour through enhanced use of antisocial behaviour warnings and antisocial behaviour orders. Work to progress these commitments has commenced.

That covers the general approach in terms of tackling antisocial behaviour. However, there seems to be a specific issue in the Dublin area. There is almost a type of copycat activity happening where it is becoming the done thing to target community facilities. The Deputy gave a large number of examples. It is saddening to see. I am sure the Minister will work with the Dublin local authorities and An Garda Síochána to ensure the issue is tackled in some way. I commend the fire crews who had to respond to these incidents very quickly.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I call for anybody who has any information on any of these incidents, particularly in my area of Dublin Bay North, to report them to Coolock Garda station. We must get to the bottom of this.

By way of more background on Darndale Park, I received an email from a teacher in Our Lady Immaculate school in Darndale. She states: "The playground located behind the school has been closed on over 600 children between the two schools and the Jigsaw crèche. [They] have missed out on the chance to play there since May." They continue to miss out on that chance. Darndale is a long-standing area and one with deprivation. It is beyond belief that people would do that to their own communities.

The eco toilets in St. Anne's Park were put in mainly for the use of underage girls' teams. There are no changing facilities on that edge of the park. It meant teams coming from afar to play on the pitches in St. Anne's Park would have toilets to use. Those toilets were wrecked.

In the case of Kilmore, all my council colleagues, and I was on the council until last year, campaigned for that playground for a long time. They badgered the city council into delivering a playground in Kilmore Park. Within weeks of it opening, the city council had to lock it because it had been damaged.

It is kind of depressing. I am a fairly reasonable and rational person but this stuff makes me angry. Communities deserve to have decent facilities. People deserve to be able to play and enjoy the outdoors in facilities like these. They are used by many different people and groups in so many different ways. The one thing they all share is that they use them for enjoyment. Now they have been wrecked. I appreciate the Minister of State's comments on the number of incidents. It looks like something else is going on here. I reinforce that point and ask again that, as he suggested, the Minister take it up in the Department to try to get to the bottom of it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The local community safety partnerships build on and replace the existing joint policing committees, bringing together gardaí, local representatives, community organisations and representatives of local authorities and other State bodies to draft a community safety plan tailored to community needs. No one knows better what is needed by a community than those who live in it. The Minister signed the regulations to establish the safety partnerships and they came into operation on Monday, 30 June. This paves the way for a total of 36 partnerships to be established across the country, with partnerships in each local authority administrative area. There will be one in each of the Dublin City Council administrative areas, with five in total. I am not sure on the ground if that has come to realisation yet. That could be an opportunity to try to crack down on this. The Deputy eloquently highlighted the importance of these amenities. I imagine the Dublin city councillors, parents and community activists involved in getting toilet facilities or playgrounds up and running must be disheartened and gutted to see this happen. It is easier said than done to stop it. I question the mindset of anybody who goes out with the intention of targeting an amenity like this. In the towns in my constituency, if a playground was closed for whatever reason, the community would feel such a loss especially families. We are getting bigger towns and bigger urban areas. They need these types of amenities. I will reflect and report back the Deputy's comments to the Minister for justice.

Road Network

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I appreciate the Minister of State coming to take this Topical Issue. I am not sure if in his earlier answer he was committing to bringing the Luas to the Wicklow-

Wexford constituency but if he can, I will welcome it. We will welcome any improvement to rail services. I deeply love where I come from. We have some of the best beaches in the country and wonderful community life in all our towns and rural areas but many people have to commute to work or college. Part of that is due to the continued failure of the IDA to arrange for visits to the Wicklow-Wexford constituency. A lot of people are commuting out of our communities. Primarily, they travel to Dublin. Based on CSO statistics, 2,170 people commute from Gorey from Gorey daily for work purposes, from Arklow, 2,723, from Courtown, 1,050 and from Rathdrum, 544. That is 6,500 people commuting primarily along the M11 to Dublin every day for work purposes. For those who have to commute an hour or more to get to either their place of work or study every day - significant numbers go to Dublin for study - as a proportion of the overall numbers moving, in Gorey, it is 19.2%, in Arklow, it is 17.6%, in Rathdrum, it is 23.8% and in Courtown-Riverchapel, it is 25.1%. We have a significant commuting population. What is the State's response to that?

There is an increasingly clogged M11. If I wanted to ensure I was here for 9 a.m. on most mornings, I would have to leave Gorey at 6 a.m. Having been a commuter even during the height of the Celtic tiger, it never had to be as early. If the weather is bad - the Ceann Comhairle knows this - or there is an incident along the M11, it is impossible. Part of this is due to varying speed limits along the M11. I am a great believer in public transport. There is a good service provided by Wexford Bus and most of the time by Bus Éireann Expressway, although I am concerned at reports it is considering the service. We do not have a realistic rail alternative. From Gorey, Arklow and Rathdrum, there are only six daily rail services. For towns equidistant from the capital such as Carlow, there are 11 services, from Drogheda or Dundalk, there are 16 and from Portlaoise there are 32. When I posed a question to Irish Rail, even though there are plans to extend to the DART to Wicklow, on what plans it had for the rail service south of Wicklow town, which would service Rathdrum, Arklow and Gorey, it only answered what it is doing in terms of the DART extension. When it comes to rolling stock, the last bits of rolling stock are provided to the Rosslare rail line. There is no realistic alternative. We have 6,500 or more people every day travelling for the most on the M11 and yet there seems to be no plan from the Government or the Department of Transport to alleviate the challenges they face.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I have known Deputy Byrne for a while and what a proponent he is of public transport and improving it, reducing congestion and emissions. It has always been something he has believed in. It is hard to dispute what he presented. Even if half of those 6,500 could be gotten into train carriages, the difference it would make on the M11 would be significant. I will outline some of the infrastructure and plans for expansion of rail services. In Wexford, the N11 or N25 Oilgate to Rosslare Harbour project, which has received an allocation of €4 million for 2025 is currently in the design and environmental evaluation phase. This would deliver safety improvements to the N11 and N25 corridors in addition to improving regional connectivity and ensuring that the increased volume of freight traffic using Rosslare Europort can be accommodated. Some €2 million has also been allocated for the Rosslare Europort access road - Rosslare port adds to the M11 traffic and issues. In Wicklow, €1.45 million has been allocated to the N11 bus priority interim scheme which would deliver improved safety and bus priority measures on a section of the N11 in the Bray-Kilmacanogue area. Work is continuing on the DART+ programme which will double the peak-hour capacity and triple the length of the existing DART network. As part of this programme, DART+ coastal south involves an improvement to DART services on the existing DART line south of Dublin

city with the current focus on enhancing services between Bray and Greystones. Stage 1 of the project will increase train frequency from two to three trains per hour from Bray to Greystones, while stage 2 will boost train frequency from six to 12 trains per hour between Dublin Connolly and Bray. Last month, Iarnród Éireann commenced a non-statutory public consultation on the emerging preferred option for stage 1 of DART+ coastal south which will run until December.

The NTA greater Dublin area transport strategy 2022-2042 adopted in 2023 included a recommendation to extend the DART service to Wicklow town. Extending the DART to Wicklow is also supported in the all-island strategic rail review published in July last year. I understand this extension can be facilitated through utilising the new battery-electric DART carriages which arrived in Ireland in late 2024 and are currently undergoing testing. The new battery-electric DART carriages will first be deployed on the busy northern commuter line from Dublin Connolly to Drogheda from 2027. As more carriages arrive, they can be deployed to extend DART services to and from Wicklow from around 2029 onwards. This should provide an improvement in capacity to the people of Wicklow.

In relation to overcrowding currently being experienced on the Rosslare line, Iarnród Éireann is operating all available fleet at the busiest times to meet record demand it is experiencing on all routes. As a result, there is currently no additional fleet available to further increase capacity on the Gorey-Wicklow to Dublin commuter services. There is potential to examine the deployment of new rail fleet as it becomes available, including fleet released as a result of the entry into service of the new DART+ fleet. Iarnród Éireann will keep options for future fleet deployment under review subject to NTA approval. It is not the answer the Deputy is looking for. It is easy for me to say this; I am not the Minister for Transport. I am here representing him today. It sounds like the addition of a few carriages, if that could be accommodated, would make a whole of difference to commuters from that area and also for those who continue to use the M11. It is certainly something I will go back to the Minister with and I know the Deputy has talked to him about it as well.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I appreciate that the Minister of State is only providing the answer on the part of the Department of Transport but it shows why I have very little confidence in that Department or the NTA on delivery. I am a huge supporter of completing the M11 from Oilgate to Rosslare. That will not assist in any way the 6,500 daily commuters who for the most part are moving north but let us move on with it as quickly as possible. There is no real significant improvement in what will happen on the N11-M11. I had to laugh because it is very similar to the answer I got from Irish Rail. The Minister of State is just confirming that as far as Irish Rail is concerned, south of Wicklow town, it does not really care.

5 o'clock

In the context of the reference to new rail carriages on the route to Drogheda, I despair about the level of interest that is there. I support talk about doubling the track from Dublin to Belfast and moving from two to four lines. In that context, I have a simple request. Can we double the Rosslare rail line from a single line to two? When it comes to challenges we will face in the future, Irish Rail is spending huge sums of money on dealing with coastal erosion. Why not invest that money in ensuring that we have a proper rail line, even if we have to move it further inland?

I am disappointed with the response. I appreciate that the Minister of State is answering on behalf of the Minister. I will seek an urgent meeting with the Minister on this matter because the clear message coming back to people in Wicklow and Wexford who commute by rail is that there is no plan whatsoever to try to alleviate the continuing problems.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I fully understand the Deputy's frustration in terms of the answer. I also appreciate the frustration of the people he represents in Wicklow-Wexford who have to make this journey in the context of the time of the morning they have to get up in order to make it to work on time. The reply did not give them the comfort that the Deputy would like to give them.

The Deputy referred to Carlow having a service 11 times per day. I do not know the engineering restrictions or the restrictions that apply in respect of the track from Rosslare. I also do not know what is constraining Iarnród Éireann from increasing the frequency of services on the Rosslare line to 11 per day. If that was a target or was something that could be worked on or teased out, it would provide a lot of relief in terms of capacity on the line. Perhaps there is some type of engineering or capacity issue that I am not aware of. It is something worth exploring further. I do not see why it can be done in respect of Carlow but not Rosslare. I will ensure that the Minister for Transport is made aware of the details of this matter. I know the Deputy will not be shy and will not retreat from trying to obtain a meeting with him. However, I will ensure that he knows how important a project this is for the Deputy.

Building Energy Rating (BER) Standards for Private Rented Accommodation Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am proud to introduce this Bill on behalf of People Before Profit. The purpose of the Bill is to make it mandatory for private rented accommodation to achieve a minimum B2 building energy rating, BER, standard by the end of 2030. A phase-in period is allowed in the legislation in order landlords can incrementally upgrade their properties if they wish to a minimum D2 BER by the end of 2026 and a minimum C1 BER by the end of 2028. Limited exceptions are provided for BER-exempt properties. The Bill includes important provisions that prohibit retrofitting from being used as a ground to terminate tenancies or to increase rents. These would both be banned under the Bill to ensure that no tenant would be evicted or have their rent increased as a result of retrofitting. It is crucial to draw a line in the sand on this now in order to prevent renovictions being used by landlords to drive up rents as has happened in some other countries.

I thank the Irish Green Building Council for initially suggesting this idea and Friends of the Earth, who have been supportive and active on this issue and organised an eye-catching event in support of the Bill outside Leinster House earlier on what is an appropriately cold day, showing what the reality is for many renters in our country. I also thank Diana in my office for doing a lot of the work on the Bill. Friends of the Earth will be emailing TDs to ask them to support this Bill.

The reason this Private Member's Bill is necessary is because the Government has failed to implement its commitment in Housing for All to the effect that "A minimum BER for private rental property will be introduced, where feasible, from 2025." This failure is not some oversight on the part of the Government; it is part of a deliberate policy of reneging on and abandoning previous commitments in relation to the climate and the cost of living. Evidence for this is the fact that no revised version of that promise appears in the new housing plan.

Retrofitting is often, and correctly, portrayed as an environmental measure, but its most immediate impact is to dramatically improve people's comfort, quality of life and health by making their homes warm and cosy. We are now into the first real cold snap of the winter. Hundreds of thousands of families across the country who are renting from private landlords are facing a bitter choice between paying a fortune to heat poorly insulated homes and cutting back on other essentials like food or suffering in the cold for months, wearing coats, hats and gloves indoors and going to bed early in order that they can get under the covers.

I looked back through my emails of what renters have sent me about this issue. I will give some examples of what ordinary people are going in winter in one of the richest countries in the world:

I am currently in rental property covered by homeless hap...I've got two small kids my first born is 2 and half and he suffers with asthma and bronchitis, my second born is 4 months and suffers with bronchitis too the property I'm living in is not suitable to be living in with two small kids there's mold all in the bathroom in the sitting room and in my little boys room it's also damp I've done everything you can think of to get rid of it and it keeps coming back there's very poor ventilation and the house is so cold even if I have the heating on my gas bill is costing me a fortune. I am constantly back and forth in the doctors spending a fortune on antibiotics for myself and my two boys I've been in contact with the landlord I've tried everything but no one seems to be listening or wanting to help I'm at a loss at this point...being in this property and seeing my boys so sick is really putting a strain on my mental health and knowing nothing is being done is really exhausting.

Another tenants writes:

I moved in two years ago, and the letting agents/landlord, have been ignoring all the issues since then. I have had a revolving door of contractors through, (probably at least once a month, sometimes four or five) but nothing ever actually gets done. I have paid for my own report to be done, and there's 33% moisture in the walls. I've been told that "the landlord has no money"; "the water gathering on the roof is normal"; "he has 30 properties that are in the same condition, we need to get to all of them first". I find it a bit concerning that this seems to be an issue across his whole portfolio! ... I cannot keep up with the bills, as there constantly needs to be fans and heating running. Something has got to give. I can't go on living like this. It's all too much. I am embarrassed of my living conditions, even though they are not my fault. I cannot have visitors over. I feel very isolated, and this is not a home, it's a shelter. This is in distinct contravention to my right to dignity.

A third renter states:

I'm currently renting from an inattentive landlord. There's a list of constant problems due to the dated property which I'm left fixing myself. My eldest suffers from asthma and is

constantly sick from the worsening mould all over especially bedrooms. My mental health and anxiety is at an all time high due to living conditions

A fourth renter writes that she has been “recently diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a lung disease that can be aggravated by damp and mouldy environments.”

That is just the tip of the iceberg of the misery caused by living in poorly insulated homes with no minimum BER standards. Ireland has one of the highest rates of excess winter deaths in the European Union because people cannot afford to properly heat their homes. We know that children living in cold homes are more than twice as likely to suffer from respiratory problems like asthma.

The private rented sector is much worse for this than owner-occupied homes because landlords do not have to live in the conditions they expect tenants to put up with. Four in five rented dwellings have a BER below B. Around 45,000 have very low energy efficiency ratings of E, F or G. Another 24% have D ratings. It is even worse for HAP properties, which have the lowest energy ratings of all. Half of them have BER ratings of D, E, F or G. According to the CSO, more than one in five renters has had to go without heating. This compares with 6% of people who live in owner-occupied housing. It is due to a combination of the sky-high cost of rent, the low energy efficiency of rented properties and the fact that tenants on average are much poorer than homeowners and are forced to pay much more to heat their homes.

In the year 2025, it is simply unacceptable that landlords are charging people extortionate rents to live in substandard conditions dangerous to their health. It is even more outrageous that the State is standing over that by subsidising these slumlords through HAP. It is also unacceptable that this human misery comes at such a high environmental cost. It does not just affect tenants; it is driving up carbon emissions and overheating the only planet we all have to live on. Retrofitting the private rented sector would benefit everyone.

The Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Darragh O'Brien, is over in Brazil at COP30 as we speak. Yesterday, he told RTÉ "We are heading above that to 2.3 or 2.5 degrees. That would be disastrous and maybe irreversible." He said, "Ireland and other countries have shown how we can start to transition out of fossil fuels. We are doing it. But to set the roadmap for a fair, equitable and just transition while phasing out fossil usage is critical if we're to try to bridge that gap." If he means that, how does renegeing on the Government's commitment to bring in a minimum BER standard for the private rented sector in 2025 fit into that roadmap? It does not. It is just rhetoric to cover over retreat from any commitment to our legally binding climate targets.

Every day that is wasted on this is a day longer of wastefully burning fossil fuels to heat draughty, poorly insulated homes. To avoid catastrophic global heating in our lifetime, we urgently need to phase out fossil fuels and switch to 100% renewable energy to power all of our energy needs, including heating, and we need to reduce our energy usage at the same time. Retrofitting is one of the few policy measures that ticks both of those boxes simultaneously. It is a no-brainer environmentally and a no-brainer from a just transition perspective. Renters collectively would save over €500 million a year on their energy bills if their homes were retrofitted to a B2 standard. According to the Government's new national energy affordability task force, retrofitting saves each individual household between €750 and €1,120 a year. The

only reason it is not happening is because tenants are the ones who would benefit and landlords are the ones who would have to pay.

An ESRI report earlier this year estimated it would cost between €7 billion and €8 billion to retrofit private rented properties to a B2 standard. This was portrayed as unaffordable for landlords by comparing small landlords' assets with retrofitting costs. It goes without saying that corporate landlords and big landlords with multiple properties and hundreds of thousands of euros a year rolling in in rents can easily afford to retrofit. What the ESRI report left out was any calculation of the grants and tax breaks already available to landlords for retrofitting. It was really an incredible exercise in propaganda that was seized on by landlord lobby groups to say they could never afford to retrofit, but if we look at the grants and tax breaks available, we find that the finance gap for landlords is far smaller than the headline figures. Landlords are entitled to the same retrofitting grants as owner-occupiers so they can get half the cost of a deep retrofit paid for by the State and 80% of the cost of attic and cavity wall insulation. On top of that, retrofitting expenses are tax deductible for landlords at the higher rate of tax up to a maximum of €10,000 each for two properties. According to the ESRI, the typical financing gap for small landlords of a €25,000 retrofit - their savings less the cost, excluding all the grants and tax breaks they are entitled to - is €14,000. Once we include all the grants and tax breaks, that gap is gone. If landlords do not want to use their savings to pay for retrofitting, low-cost loans are available and the interest on that is tax deductible too. Landlords also benefit financially from retrofitting because it permanently increases the value of their property. Yet despite all this, too many landlords just cannot be bothered to retrofit even though they have the resources to do it and even though it is in their long-term financial interest. That is because landlordism is a passive unearned income stream. Landlords own an asset and count the cash that rolls in from it. They are not used to having to do anything to earn that income, so organising a retrofit seems onerous to many of them even if it means that their tenants will have warm homes and save a bunch of money and even it is the right thing to do from the point of view of our climate. I have no doubt that goes for many of the landlord TDs sitting in this Dáil. It would be interesting to know how many of them have retrofitted their properties, including the big landlord TDs and Ministers like Robert Troy, Seán Canney and Michael Healy-Rae. They negotiated the programme for Government and left any minimum BER standard out of it.

Retrofitting is something a lot of landlords will not do unless they are forced. That is what we need to do. That is what this Bill does by legislating for a minimum B2 standard by 2030, the same date by which we are legally bound to reduce our overall greenhouse gas emissions by 51%.

If a landlord still does not want to retrofit after all the grants and the tax breaks, he or she can sell the property with the tenant *in situ* to someone who will. We think that should be the local authority, which can convert the property into public, social or affordable housing. This should go along with a mass programme of councils buying up HAP properties and retrofitting them. It would be transformative not only for the living standards of thousands of the lowest income families across the State but for reaching our legally binding climate targets. The State should properly fund councils to retrofit council housing stock rapidly, not at the snail's pace that is currently taking place. It cannot be done in this Bill because it would cost the State money and we are not allowed to introduce Bills that would do that.

It is no use continuing to target retrofitting grants at better-off homeowners like the Government has done to date. Most of the worst insulated, leakiest and coldest homes are either in the private rented sector or are social housing. That is where the focus of retrofitting should be between now and 2030. It is where the maximum benefit is for quality of life, for health, for the climate and for people's pockets. I eagerly await hearing what the Government is going to do in terms of this Bill. I hope it will not oppose it but we will see.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I agree with quite a lot of what the Deputy had to say. He said that retrofitting the private rental sector would be good for everyone. I agree with him on that. He spoke about 100% renewables being the target. I agree with that target. That is what we should be aiming for and striving towards. The conditions described by the constituent who wrote to him are not good enough and should not be supported. In terms of the provision of HAP, with regard to anyone in that situation, the landlord should not be supported in that regard when one considers what they were going through.

However, I do not believe this is the way to do it because of the other impacts it would have, particularly with regard to the rental sector and the provision of accommodation. This is particularly the case with the deadlines the Deputy has indicated within the legislation. I often hear the Opposition quoting the ESRI when that suits its argument but the Opposition cannot just disregard the ESRI and label it as propaganda when it does not suit its argument. I will go into more detail about what the ESRI report did.

In the programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*, the Government has set out its commitment to making Ireland's buildings more sustainable and energy efficient, reducing reliance on fossil fuels and lowering energy costs for households. More specifically, in the Government's new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*, published which was last week, there is a commitment to examining policy measures to incentivise increased energy efficiency in the private rental market. This action is aimed at improving the quality of housing stock available to rent and contributing to meeting our overall national climate targets in relation to emissions reduction. It aims to increase energy efficiency and help to alleviate fuel poverty, protect tenants' health and improve comfort levels in rental homes.

I note that the main objectives of this Bill as initiated are to require residential rental stock to have a minimum BER of D2 by December 2026, C1 by December 2028 and B2 by December 2030. The Government understands that the Bill is a genuine attempt to improve the position for people currently renting property in the private rental sector and appreciates the progressive intentions underpinning it. While the intent of the Bill is clear and the objective of improving the energy efficiency in residential rental properties is a worthy one, the Government is not in a position to support the Bill and has taken the decision to oppose it. Any proposed changes of this nature must be given very careful consideration and it is the Government's view that the Bill as drafted would have serious unintended consequences.

Despite its positive intentions, the Bill is highly likely to have a detrimental and disruptive effect on the supply and availability of a large number of rental properties. If implemented as proposed, it would render a significant number of currently rented dwellings unsuitable for letting in the private rental market. Earlier this year, the ESRI published its report, entitled

"Exploring investment requirements for energy efficiency upgrades in the private rental sector". The report is publicly available on the ESRI website. This study was commissioned by my Department so that we would have the independent information needed to further our understanding of the level of investment needed to upgrade energy efficiency levels in the private rental sector. The ESRI report found four in five rented dwellings currently have a BER below B. That would equate to over 260,000 properties out of a total of 330,000 dwellings in the private rental sector, using the 2022 figures. The report estimates over 45,000 rented dwellings have low energy efficiency ratings with BERs of E, F or G. Under this Bill they would all be unsuitable for renting from 31 December 2026 with the introduction of the minimum D2 requirement, unless appropriate retrofit works were undertaken by landlords. A further 155,000 rental units would be unsuitable for renting with the introduction of a minimum C1 requirement by December 2028. An additional 66,000 units would be impacted by a minimum B2 rating by December 2030. In all, some 266,000 private rental units would need to have their energy rating improved by December 2030. The report estimates the aggregate cost of upgrading the housing stock of residential rental properties to a B1 or B2 would be in the region of €7 billion to €8 billion in 2023 prices. It found the average cost of retrofitting would be €30,200 based on 2023 prices. The report also found nearly one in two landlords would have insufficient own funds to cover the €25,000 investment and some are likely to have difficulties obtaining the finance. While the report highlights issues in respect of the ability of some landlords to invest in energy retrofits of their residential properties, it states willingness to invest may be an ongoing challenge and minimum BERs may lead to a reappraisal of the attractiveness of investment, and divestment by some owners.

The consequences for the private rental market of this Bill could therefore be very significant, with the potential for thousands of existing landlords to exit the rental market. This would reduce the supply available for tenants in a market that is already seriously constrained. The exit of properties housing social housing tenants in receipt of HAP would likely result in significant increases in presentations to homeless services and increased demands for homeless emergency accommodation. It would also reduce the supply of properties for prospective HAP tenants, which would also likely lead to increased homeless presentations.

It is important to point out here there are a range of Government supports in place to improve energy efficiency of accommodation in the private rental sector. In budget 2026 we announced record funding of €558 million for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland residential and community energy upgrade schemes. This is an increase of €89 million on 2025's budget allocation to support delivery of the national retrofit plan. As part of Ireland's national retrofit plan, the Government launched a new package of supports targeting homes that were built and occupied pre-2011. These supports, which have been made available to non-corporate landlords and approved housing bodies to improve the efficiency of their rental properties, include: the national home energy upgrade scheme, which provides generous grant support for private landlords with higher supports available for AHBs; the better energy homes scheme, which provides support to landlords for step-by-step retrofits; the facility whereby private landlords can also receive support to upgrade their properties under the community energy grant scheme; and 80% grants available to landlords for attic and cavity wall insulation, which are low-cost measures that can be installed quickly and cost-effectively. A tax incentive is also now in place to encourage small-scale landlords to undertake retrofitting works while the tenant remains in situ, under section 32 of the Finance Act 2022. This measure provides for a tax

deduction of up to €10,000 per property, against case V rental income for certain retrofitting expenses incurred by the landlord on rented residential properties, for a maximum of two rental properties. Budget 2026 extended the tax incentive for a further three years to end 2028. The home energy upgrade loan scheme launched in 2024 enables homeowners, including non-corporate landlords, to borrow between €5,000 and €75,000 at significantly lower interest rates to complete a home energy upgrade. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, together with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, continually keeps grant schemes under review, including terms and conditions, eligibility criteria and rates, and takes account of relevant factors such as demand, research, innovation and evolving technology.

I also take the opportunity to assure the House the Government is committed to ensuring a stock of high-quality accommodation is available for those who live in the private rented sector. The standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019. They specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light, fire safety and the safety of gas, oil and electrical supplies. Responsibility for the enforcement of the regulations in the private rental sector rests with local authorities. My Department's policy of setting private rental inspection targets for each local authority and providing ring-fenced Exchequer funding to help them reach those targets is working and has resulted in significant increases in inspection and compliance levels across the private rental sector. This reflects a concerted and focused effort by my Department, working in close partnership with local government. Inspections have increased from an average of 20,000 a year in the period 2005 to 2017 to over 49,000 in 2022. There were over 63,500 inspections in 2023 and an all-time high of over 80,000 inspections last year. Preliminary data for the first six months of 2025 shows an increase of over 5% on the same period last year. There has also been an increase in the Exchequer funding being made available to support this work. My Department will provide €10.5 million to local authorities this year to help them meet their private rental inspection targets.

I will conclude by once again thanking Deputies Coppinger and Murphy for initiating this Bill and the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this discussion. Given the potential unintended consequences of this Bill and its potential serious impact on the private rental sector the Government has taken the decision it cannot support it at this time.

To expand a bit, the figures also highlight that there are too many properties in the private rental sector that are at too low a BER. The reason the Government is opposing the Bill is we feel the timelines, which have been outlined for achieving the higher ratings, would result in the loss of a significant amount of private rental accommodation from the market - and the ESRI report backs that - at a time when so much time is in this House is dedicated to debating the lack of housing provision and accommodation throughout Ireland, which has led to some of the figures we talked about a while ago.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Deputies Murphy and Coppinger for introducing the Bill and allowing us the opportunity to discuss this very important matter. Sinn Féin is always happy to support any Bill the intention of which is to strengthen the rights and improve the living conditions of people in the private rental sector. While no Bill, especially no Opposition Bill, is perfect or going to solve the problem by itself, allowing Bills such as these to progress to at least Committee Stage allows for further consideration of the matters and proper discussion. My difficulty with the Government's opposing this Bill is nothing the Minister of State has said

and nothing in the new housing plan, bar a very vague commitment, sets out what the Government is going to do not only to address the energy inefficiency and energy poverty experienced by people in the private rental sector much more so than in other forms of tenure. There is not even a recognition that further action needs to be taken.

At the centre of all this is that we have a set of minimum standards. When Eoghan Murphy was the Minister we were told, as Deputy Murphy will remember, we were going to move to a situation where 25% of all private rental properties would be inspected annually, so that on a cycle of four years minimum standards could be enforced. In fact, I tabled a Private Members' motion back in 2018 which the then Government did not oppose that not only prescribed 25% inspections annually but also sought to ensure a form of certification of compliance with minimum standards was provided. That was something we were told funding would be delivered and targets set for but it never materialised. There is merit in having a considered discussion in committee as to whether or not those minimum standards should be improved, especially in relation to energy efficiency. My view is they should. That could be the specific targets or the timelines set out in Deputy Murphy's Bill. These are matters our committee could rightfully consider. We could listen to the views of tenants, people involved in retrofitting and energy efficiency, tenants' and landlords' organisations, etc. However, because the Government is denying this we will not be able to have this discussion in this format at committee, although we will find other ways to do so.

It is really quite startling because on Tuesday EnergyCloud Ireland came before the committee. The Minister of State is well aware of EnergyCloud and he and his party colleagues are supporting it. In one of the questions I asked, I made the case that while EnergyCloud is currently focusing on social housing tenancies, there are far greater levels of poverty in the private rental sector, the tenant purchase sector and the modest-income private homeownership sector than there are in the social housing sector, which the witnesses confirmed. I said that while it has a pilot under way in Cork at present, this is an issue that would have to be addressed.

There is one area where I am not completely in agreement with Deputy Murphy. I think we need to look very carefully at mechanisms to assist landlords who are currently unable to cover the costs of retrofitting and improving the energy efficiency of homes to do so for the benefit of tenants. That is an area that needs greater work. The ESRI report engages with this question to some extent. There is the whole issue of the split incentive. Why would a landlord invest in upgrading the stock when the primary benefit is to the tenant? It is an issue we have to come back to because, in the main, we have a very large volume of private rental stock that is old or older. The Minister of State is right that the number of inspections has increased but inspections are predominantly led by demand or by age. My own local authority, which has one of the highest levels of inspections in the State, predominantly inspects older properties or inspects properties at the request of the tenant rather than systematically inspecting all properties.

While I know it does not come under this Bill, it must be said that some of the worst rental stock in the State from the point of view of energy efficiency and energy poverty is not in the private rental sector. Flat complexes built in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, particularly those in inner urban Dublin but also in Cork city, such as the Oliver Bond flats, Countess Markiewicz House or Pearse House, are in an even worse state. I say this because it is pertinent to the Minister of State's Department. For many years, Dublin City Council did not invest sufficiently in upgrading and maintaining that stock but it is currently doing the right thing. It has very

advanced plans to increase the energy efficiency of that stock and to implement basic minimum standards. However, the Department and the Government are holding them back. Initially, they insisted that any capital works funded for the upgrading of those inner-city flat complexes had to increase density. The Government and the Department have now moved on and are now saying they cannot reduce density. In many of these locations, that is not possible. It is right and proper that Deputy Murphy's Bill focuses on the private rental sector but it would be remiss of any of us to have this conversation without acknowledging that the State, which should be the best landlord in the public and private sectors, is the worst in many instances. The very good efforts of the communities in those flats, the local elected representatives and Dublin City Council are not being adequately supported by the Department. That needs to be addressed.

I will make a couple of additional points. This is not a criticism of the Minister of State but he referenced the ESRI report and the 330,000 rental dwellings recorded in the census. The most recent figure for RTB registrations is 240,000. That 330,000 relates to dwellings and not tenancies but that means the total number of registered tenancies should be greater than 330,000 rather than 240,000. That highlights the ongoing and very significant level of non-registration, which is a criminal offence. That is relevant to this discussion.

Over many years, the Government has often argued against Opposition Bills by reference to unintended consequences and the ultimate impact on renters of a loss of stock, as the Minister of State has mentioned. Part of the difficulty with that is that it is always the tenants who ultimately have to pay the price. In this instance, they will pay the price through energy inefficient homes, even higher heating bills and health consequences. I am not appealing to the Minister of State to change his mind, because he has been given his instructions and will vote accordingly, but we need more than a vague commitment to examine this matter in a relatively vague and unimpressive housing plan. Far too many people will be sleeping in very expensive and very cold homes tonight. What I am therefore asking Deputy O'Sullivan to do with whatever limited powers he has as a Minister of State is to go back to his Department and his line Minister, who is also his party colleague, and say that he supports Deputy Murphy's argument - I did not disbelieve him when he said so at the start of his speech - for retrofitting and for improving the living conditions of the people living in some of the poorest quality homes in the State. I ask him to continually make the case in his parliamentary party and in his Department for urgent action on that vague commitment in the programme for Government. If he does not believe the approach of any of us in the Opposition are correct, will he set out what additional measures, extra investment or extra incentives, if that is the desire of Government, there will be to ensure that the 750,000 people who live in the private rental sector according to the census are living in homes that meet minimum standards and that those minimum standards are adequate, particularly given the very high rents that renters are either paying themselves or that are being covered through a combination of RAS, HAP or rent supplement and tenants' own top-ups?

As I have said, this Bill is not perfect. No Bill that any of us on this side of the House propose is. We do not have the benefit of civil servants or the ability to table Bills that place a charge on the State. The purpose of these Bills is to provoke debate and drive greater consideration of matters on Committee Stage. It is unfortunate the committee will be denied that opportunity but I am sure we will find other ways to raise, discuss and consider this very important matter in the time ahead.

Deputy Rory Hearn: I thank Deputy Murphy and People Before Profit for bringing forward this Bill. When we look at housing conditions in the private rental sector, we see that there is an absolute tsunami of situations where people are living in substandard accommodation. I have met people living in the private rental sector who are living with mould and damp. As the Minister of State will know, this is significant because dampness and mould, but particularly mould, have huge health implications, particularly for people who have underlying health issues, young children, babies and older people.

This is important now because there are more people than ever living in the private rental sector. We have never had as many people in this country living in the private rental sector. This results from Government policy over the last 30 to 40 years, which shifted from providing public housing to sourcing housing from the private rental sector through various State subsidies. The Governments of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s - we are talking about three decades - particularly those led by Fianna Fáil but Fine Gael was also in there at different points, made this shift to getting social housing from the private rental sector without making any moves to ensure that housing was up to standard. We shifted to providing social housing, much of which is for very vulnerable people including families and children, through a sector that has had serious problems with substandard accommodation for many decades and which still does.

There is a huge inequality between those living in substandard accommodation who cannot even invest in their own homes because they do not have the finances to do so and those who do. It is very difficult for those in the private rental sector or social housing to listen to all of these advertisements about grants, to see the investment and money going into solar panels and retrofitting homes, and to be encouraged to invest in solar and green measures in order to reap benefits while they are in the private sector and unable to invest in their homes because it is up to the landlord or in social housing, where it is up to the local authority. It has to be deeply frustrating, as I know it is, for those people who are living in substandard accommodation to be told the Government is making a shift to a green society, a just transition, while they are very much left behind.

I want to talk about the idea that housing is a human right, which is accepted internationally. Indeed, the Irish State accepts it although it does not apply it. The housing plan did not reference housing being a human right once, which is deeply disappointing. Central to housing being a human right is the quality of accommodation and that it be of a standard that ensures people live a healthy life. Much of our social housing and private rental housing, and indeed homeownership, is substandard. There is a large social class element here, involving working-class areas and disadvantaged communities. People who cannot afford to do up their home are living in the worst conditions and then live with worse health impacts. This costs the State down the line in extra health costs.

I will talk about two people from Ballymun I met in my clinic this week, both of whom are in social housing. They are examples of the impact of substandard accommodation on people. One mother with three children has severe damp and mould in the house. These are not old houses. These are houses built in the past 20 or 30 years. She and her three children have been on steroids for the past two weeks because of bronchitis-related illnesses. Her youngest boy attends the respiratory clinic in Crumlin and Temple Street hospitals and is regularly put on rounds of steroids and antibiotics. She has letters, and I have seen them, from Temple Street

in which the consultants state her child - her baby - is sick because of the housing conditions they are living in. She showed me the photographs from her home of the dampness and mould on the pillowcases and bed. There are only two bedrooms. They are in a situation of overcrowding. She has to sleep on the couch because one of the rooms is not safe to live in. She talked about the mould's impact on her mental health. She feels every day the house is making her and her children sicker and sicker.

Another mother has children with complex needs related to autism and disabilities. She deals with the impacts of stress and trying to deal with, support and find services for disability while living in substandard conditions. Poor housing impacts their health. We see this compounding of inequalities and disadvantage. Some wonder why we see explosions of people's anger and frustration. Can the Minister of State imagine what it must be like to live in those conditions? It is similar in the private rental sector.

The issue of substandard accommodation, mould and dampness in this country is a crisis we are not giving sufficient attention to. It is something serious we have ignored. We have ignored it because they are renters. They are either private renters or social housing renters and they have been treated as second-class citizens. It is not okay that we allow this to continue. We need major change and major investment. The State has to do it. There is no getting around this. We have to reconfigure how the private rental sector is organised, seen and treated. These are homes; they are not just places where people stay temporarily. That is the very significant societal change that has happened in the past 30 years. The private rental sector used to be a place where people went for a few years, particularly students and young professionals, and moved on. The sector now provides people's homes for life. There is nowhere else to go.

This lunchtime I was out meeting a family who are being evicted from the private rental sector in my constituency. They have lived in their home for 12 years and have adult children in the house. The mother said she does not know where she will go. They are being evicted because the landlord is looking at March and saying he or she wants them out before March so when the changes come in, higher rents can be charged. Even though it will be an illegal eviction, how do we stop it? That is the point. This was and is their home.

This requires a significant change in the culture of how we treat housing and how landlords understand their role. They are not investment assets; they are people's homes. The State has an obligation to ensure, particularly when sourcing social housing from the private rental sector, that people are living in decent conditions. It will require significant investment and change in how we treat and understand housing and the role landlords play, both private and social. We have to do this because it is costing the State massive amounts in our health services and education. Children who are sick are out of school. There is a compounding of disadvantage and inequality. Substandard housing conditions have this knock-on effect. We need a step change in how we treat and approach substandard accommodation.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Climate change and our economy's addiction to fossil fuels represent one of the biggest cost-of-living threats to householders, families, small businesses and farms in Ireland and this Bill is a practical effort to address part of that issue. I thank Deputy Murphy for bringing it forward.

I will set out the scale of the issue we are facing. Across Ireland, up to 250,000 privately rented homes still fall well below a healthy and comfortable B energy rating. This means

thousands of people - families, workers, older people, students - are living in homes that are cold, damp, mouldy and expensive to heat. They are paying for it twice. They pay in rents that are too high and in energy bills that are artificially inflated by the lack of insulation in those homes. This is not just a housing issue but a public health, climate and social justice issue. We know what cold and draughty homes do to the people who live in them and to society at large. They deepen energy poverty, worsen respiratory illnesses, drive up carbon emissions and drain families' incomes. More than half of private rentals are D-rated or worse. One in five, 20%, of people living in rental properties are in properties rated F or G, homes that bleed heat and breed mould. No one should have to choose between paying their rent or their energy bill. No child should grow up in a bedroom where mould is creeping down the wall.

Energy inefficiency is a form of inequality. The Government's refusal to act has left tenants subsidising their landlords and paying extortionate heating bills for homes that are impossible to heat. This is a perfect example of a split incentive at work. Tenants paying the bills, landlords avoiding the upgrades and Government looking the other way.

During oral questions in this Chamber a few weeks ago, I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, to address the delay in progressing the minimum BER for rental properties and to give me a date when the roadmap would be achieved. He could not and now we understand why. Last week the Government published the shiny new housing plan and the commitment to introduce a minimum BER for rental properties has been entirely abandoned. Another climate measure that would help hard-pressed renters and another Government U-turn like so many this year. Instead, we get this incredibly vague statement undertaking to "examine policy measures to incentivise increased energy efficiency in the private rental market." As an objective, it could not be more non-committal if it tried. It is depressing to see such a clear commitment entirely jettisoned. It is particularly depressing when considering landlords are already quite well incentivised to retrofit their rental properties. They can avail of all the grants the rest of us have at our disposal, they can get low-cost loans and they can even deduct retrofit costs from their rental properties.

As Deputy Murphy said when he introduced the Bill, they have not taken the carrot so now there is a need for some element of a stick. The roadmap the previous Government committed to may have vanished but the problem has not. The ESRI's research confirms the scale of the challenge: 240,000 to 260,000 rental properties will need an upgrade. The overall price tag is big, at €7 billion to €8 billion. Even if you looked at those most urgent ones, those homes with a BER category of E1 or below, retrofitting them will cost between €1.7 billion and €2.3 billion. That is a big challenge. A challenge of that scale demands leadership, clarity and a systematic plan. Instead, we have delay, drift and a vague commitment to examine policy measures, but we also have this Bill which is proposing something that France and the UK have already implemented successfully.

The Bill is not radical. It is reasonable, practical, overdue and, I would argue, absolutely essential. It tackles the root of energy poverty in the rental sector, it gives Ireland the same basic protection that renters already have, as I said, in France and in the UK, and it finally begins to make warm healthy homes a right rather than a privilege.

I am supporting this Bill because renters cannot wait for this Government to put their interests first. Climate targets will not wait for landlords to be adequately incentivised to do this off their own steam. The health issues caused or exacerbated by damp and mould are not going to

wait for Government to take this seriously as an issue. Energy poverty will never be addressed so long as renters remain the most at risk of it yet the least empowered to do anything about it. With record high rents in this State, the absolute minimum renters should expect is a home that is warm, healthy and affordable to heat.

Delaying BER standards for rental properties is not only reckless, it is a false economy. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council have made it clear. If we miss our emissions targets in the building sector, the cost to the taxpayers will be in billions. Kicking the can down the road will not make this cheaper, it will make life more difficult for renters. We have to recognise what the real-life consequence of this delay is. It means a parent putting their child to bed in a damp room, a worker watching the heat escape through their walls and a pensioner rationing warmth in the depths of winter. These are not abstract situations. These are people's lives. Shelving progressive climate measures yet again is not a pragmatic step, it is a regressive step. It is costly and deeply unjust.

We need a plan that lifts renters out of energy poverty, helps small landlords upgrade their properties, cuts emissions and protects basic public health, and uses climate funding for climate action. That is why, when we were in government, the Green Party created the climate and nature fund to tackle major challenges, including the retrofitting of private rental properties, and yet the Government raided this fund that was designed to tackle major systemic challenges such as the retrofitting of rental properties.

Friends of the Earth has called this Bill timely, necessary, and absolutely doable. With the Government having watered down its own ambition to tackle the issue of energy poverty in rental properties, this Bill is even more important. I would argue that this Bill gives the Government a way to deliver on commitments it has repeatedly made but which have now been abandoned. It gives it a chance to redeem itself for the delay and the indecision. If the Government does not take the opportunity offered by Deputy Murphy's Bill, the failure will be the Government's alone.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I look to address some of the comments made.

In relation to the housing plan, there is a commitment within the housing plan in terms of energy efficiency. The Opposition can paint it up and describe it whichever way it wants in terms of it being watered down, but it is there. It is an absolute goal of ours because we agree that people should not be living in cold damp conditions, in private or in public housing.

Housing inspections have increased significantly. There has been a massive ramping up. We have budgeted for increased funding to local authorities to increase that capacity for inspections even further.

Local authorities, I think we can all agree, are getting far better in terms of retrofitting. The work that has been done, certainly in my time in politics and over the last ten years, has been extraordinary. Some are better than others but, for the whole, local authority housing has been made far more energy efficient. The new builds are something incredible.

We can all agree that cold damp houses are unacceptable, that the number of houses with low BER ratings, at 250,000, is unacceptable, and that it is something we need to address rapidly. What we do not agree on is the way to do it. The hard and fast timelines being suggested by

this Bill would have unintended consequences and the Deputies cannot dismiss unintended consequences as something that the Government says when a Bill does not suit it. There would be, and it would be the renters who would feel the pinch. If you significantly reduce accommodation stock and private rental stock, it is the renters who will pay the price by significantly increased rents. That is something that I am not just saying. That is something that the ESRI report has alluded to in terms of the cost.

The research is there. The research has identified very significant costs associated with the works while also identifying potential concerns about the financial capacity of property owners to undertake this investment. From this, there is a concern that the imposition of minimum BER ratings on private landlords may lead to a reappraisal of the attractiveness of investment and a divestment by some owners.

The unintended consequences of the Bill, as initiated, are therefore serious, rendering a large number of currently rented dwellings unsuitable for letting in the private rental market. Given the investment that would be required to bring properties up to minimum energy efficiency standards, it has the potential to drive significant numbers of private landlords from the rental market. In a market that is already constrained, this would reduce the supply of accommodation available for tenants, including HAP tenants, leading to increases in presentations to homeless services and increased demands for homeless emergency accommodation. This would have a financial cost for the Exchequer but also come at a significant social cost.

It is vital that an appropriate balance is struck between improving the energy efficiency of homes in the private rental market and maintaining and increasing supply. The simple fact of the matter is that we need private residential rental accommodation and we need private landlords. We must seek to improve the energy efficiency of rental stock without driving private landlords from the market.

The ESRI report will inform next steps in this area and the Government has committed in its new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*, to examining policy measures to incentivise increased energy efficiency in the private rental market. In the meantime, a range of Government supports are already in place, including for private landlords to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. The Government has decided that the funding available for such measures in 2026 will increase to record levels.

I would also mention efforts at EU level in relation to the energy performance of buildings. A recast EU energy performance of buildings directive came into force in May 2024, which is to be transposed into national law by 29 May 2026. This recast directive is broader in scope than previous iterations, with a key aim being the renovation of the entire building stock and the energy performance of existing buildings. The new measures aim to increase the rate of renovation, particularly for the worst-performing buildings in each member state. Significant work is being undertaken across Government and by the SEAI to determine the impacts of the requirements of the directive, including those related to BER ratings and the progressive renovation of the residential building stock.

While it is recognised that the Bill, as initiated, is well intentioned, it is pre-emptive of these developments at EU level. It also does not take account of the possible negative consequences on the private rental market itself. As outlined, the Government cannot support the Bill at this time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputies Ó Broin, Hearne and O'Gorman for their support and speeches. I am obviously very disappointed, not shocked, given the oral responses we have had over the last couple of weeks, by the Government's response. The Minister of State says that he agrees with the aim that renters should not be living in cold, damp, mouldy accommodation but he does not agree that this is the way to do it.

Let us look at the reality of the Government's policy position and how it has moved. The Government has gone from a position in Housing for All where the Government, not us or the Irish Green Building Council, said its position was that a minimum BER for private rental property would be introduced, where feasible, from 2025. We are almost at the end of 2025. Fast forward to the launch of the new housing plan, it was repeated on multiple occasions by the Minister that the Government would examine policy measures to incentivise increased energy efficiency in the private rental market. It is meaningless to state it will examine policy measures to incentivise. The Government is talking about throwing in a few more carrots when the problem is we need to regulate. We need to enforce minimum standards.

Whatever about the Minister of State personally, presumably he does not like the fact that one in three people living in rented accommodation are in forced deprivation.

6 o'clock

Presumably, he does like the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are going to bed cold tonight, in poor standards of accommodation, in both the State and private rented sectors. Presumably, he does not like any of that, but I do not think the Government cares. This is a landlord's Government. We read the housing plan and see the agenda that is being pushed over the past year to accelerate increases in rents and make rents go higher and faster. We hear all the talk of closing the viability gap but profits of €50,000 a year are already being made for every property that is developed. There are VAT cuts that hand over €300 million to, in this case, developers. This is a Government that represents those who profit from the housing crisis, the big developers and the big landlords, and not those who suffer from it. In this case, renters, who are disproportionately poorer and on lower incomes than people who own their own homes, who are disproportionately colder and who disproportionately have health issues, are being sacrificed and the climate is being sacrificed. I know the Minister of State personally cares about the climate, but going back to look at what Darragh O'Brien said, it is clear that the Government has abandoned any real commitment.

I have had two engagements in the last couple of weeks with Micheál Martin, post his speech at COP, to say this is a great idea and he might consider doing some of this telling the truth stuff, and following the science and leading and all of that, but the Government is not interested in it at all. It is one thing to say it in Brazil, but not when he comes home. These are no-brain ideas. These are simple ideas that improve people's lives. Ideas that do not make people's lives harder, but improve their lives radically and reduce emissions, are now off the table because they would involve some costs for landlords. Again, the Minister of State and the ESRI are overstating the costs because of the grants and so on that are available. The impact on the environment is very serious here. Buildings are directly responsible for 40% of energy usage. Operational emissions from the residential sector account for 10% of annual greenhouse gas emissions.

The Government refuses to do anything in terms of agriculture, big tech and data centres, and is doing very little on public transport. Here is something it could do to improve people's lives in a significant way, make people feel warmer and bring down their energy bills, but it refuses to do this as well. Again and again it is the vested interests at the top that the Government refuses to deal with. The substantial argument the Minister of State makes is that of unintended consequences in that rents will go up and we will make people homeless. He said in his opening speech we would have to increase capacity in the homeless sector. That would only happen if the Government took political choices. Every time we talk about anything to do with the private rental sector, the Government acts as if we should not do anything to impact landlords, who are making record profits because rents have tripled in the past ten years. That money has gone from the pockets of renters, taxpayers and the State into the pockets of landlords. It is clear they are doing very well, but we cannot do anything that will impact them because they might exit the market. The impression is given that these people will take the private rented accommodation that they own, pack it up brick by brick, put it in their backpack and fly away. They cannot take their properties away. These are immovable assets. They cannot reduce our housing stock if the State says it will buy it. If landlords want to get out of the private rented sector - fine, the State will buy it and increase the housing stock. Landlords get to get out, which is fine, the tenant gets security of tenure with the State and the State increases its housing stock. That is a win-win-win we should be doing. It is purely a policy choice to say that if we set minimum BER standards, that will have a negative impact on the rental market. It will not if the State steps in and says it will have a properly funded tenant in situ scheme and will buy these properties if landlords want to exit as a consequence.

On the more detailed issues that have been raised, the only detailed point made is the question of timing and whether this is too much, too fast or whatever. That is precisely the kind of thing we could discuss at committee. We first launched this a year ago and time is ticking on. If that were the Government's real objection, that is a discussion we would be open to. It could be discussed at committee and there could be amendments to make it slightly slower, but hiding behind the Opposition on those grounds is the reality that the Government is opposed to any minimum BER standards whatsoever. The general direction of travel is for the Government to lower standards in the rental sector and not to increase them. It is saying we will have smaller, poorer accommodation for renters. Again, it is renters and low-income people who are asked to pay the price for the viability gap and for incentivising more landlords. All of that is just code for allowing them to make more profit.

I will return to the basic point, which Rory Hearne made well, about this having real costs for individuals and for our society. The health costs are immense. A lot of people are living in very mouldy accommodation. We had a huge issue in Tallaght with a housing development that was an AHB. When you went in, there was mould everywhere. It is horrendous that people have to live in such circumstances. Lots of people have a room in their apartment they have basically abandoned because the mould has won in that area and they have had to retreat out of it. The health impact of that stuff is enormous and the Government is basically saying it will not do anything about it. It will consider offering a few more carrots to landlords, but if landlords choose not to take up those carrots it will not do anything about it. A huge number of people are living in energy poverty. That is going to get worse because the cost-of-living crisis has not gone away. The bills have not come down but continue to rise. Hundreds of thousands of people are in arrears on their gas and electricity bills. Instead of taking an easy

win and doing something for all these people in the private rented sector, and then doing the same with the State's housing stock, the Government is refusing to do it because it would be some sort of imposition on landlords.

The basic point is you can throw all the carrots you like at landlords, but there is definitely a whole group of landlords who just want the money to roll in. They do not want to do anything or actually have to do any work. That is a fundamental problem. We have to either compel those landlords to do work to ensure their tenants get to live in a basic standard of decent-quality accommodation or, if they are not willing to do it, there is no problem, but they then do not belong in this business and the State will buy the property off them and provide appropriate accommodation. Members should expect to get lots of emails over the coming days to encourage people to vote in favour of this Bill.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.09 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 25 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.09 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 25 November 2025.