



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 15 Eanáir 2026

Thursday, 15 January 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Votes 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18 and 19.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Prices

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection to quantify the material impact of the withdrawal of energy credits and the decrease in the real value of the fuel allowance has had on the at risk of poverty after housing costs rate and on the material deprivation rate, specifically in households at highest risk of poverty; if he has given consideration to a cost of living package targeting energy poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2822/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In keeping with my form, the question is fairly straightforward. I am curious to know whether the Minister has quantified the material impact of the withdrawal of energy credits. In real terms, the value of the fuel allowance has decreased because of the increase in energy prices. That is simple maths; the Minister will know that. Has he quantified, for his own information, the actual impact and lived reality for people?

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): The Government is committed to protecting vulnerable households from the impact of energy costs through a combination of financial supports, energy efficiency, awareness initiatives and investment in programmes to improve the energy efficiency of the housing stock. The overall strategy to combat fuel poverty

and energy poverty is under the remit of the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. However, the supports provided by the Government are cross-departmental and, in this regard, my Department is represented on the energy poverty action group and the energy affordability task force.

In budget 2026, the Government committed €8.1 billion in additional spending, including over €1.15 billion in additional social welfare spending. As part of that budget, I was delighted, last October, to announce that from 1 January, the weekly rate of fuel allowance would increase by €5 per week to €38. That is a 15% increase, which will support over 460,000 households requiring Government support with energy costs. Importantly, from a child poverty perspective, I have also extended eligibility for fuel allowance to an additional 43,000 families in receipt of the working family payment. These increases are on top of a €10 per week increase in the core payment rates, which are 4.1% for most schemes.

Over 330,000 children will benefit from the largest ever increase in the child support payment of between 16% and 26% per week, which will be €8 per week for children under 12 and €16 per week for children aged 12 and over. Some 35,000 families will benefit from an extension of the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. In addition, almost 49,000 recipients and over 100,000 children will benefit from an increase to working family payment income thresholds of €60 per week.

Due to the measures taken by the Government in recent years, recent CSO data show a welcome reduction in enforced deprivation rates in 2025, including in relation to energy. We continue to monitor the cost-of-living situation carefully. However, given the additional supports provided by the Government as part of budget 2026, which are permanent, not temporary, supports, a cost-of-living package targeting energy poverty is not being considered at this particular time.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is very regrettable. As the Minister very well knows, Social Justice Ireland described the Government's most recent budget as a recipe for austerity. It was made clear to the Government at that stage, not just by me and Social Justice Ireland but by others, that the value of the fuel allowance needed to increase in line with the cost of energy. We know that we pay, for reasons that are entirely of the Government's making, some of the highest energy costs in the European Union. We do not have some of the highest energy supports, however, in the European Union.

There are 300,000 households in arrears at the moment. The policy of no disconnection during winter is very welcome but it does not take account of people on prepay meters who experience a "micro-disconnection". I asked whether the Minister had quantified the material impact of the fact that children are going to bed hungry and people with disabilities, as they told us yesterday in the audiovisual room, have to make the choice between being able to heat their homes and power their mobility devices or being able to eat. Those are the questions I want to ask. Has the actual impact been quantified?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are very focused on energy poverty. That is why the fuel allowance increase is 15%, which supports over 460,000 households that require most support with energy costs. This is the first year the fuel allowance has been expanded to working

families. Those on the working family payment will get a back payment in March of their fuel allowance backdated to 1 January. That will bring an additional 50,000 people in.

As I said, we have also looked at other areas that directly impact on families, particularly children. That is why the record increases in child support payment are important. They give permanent increases in income to families on the lowest of incomes. This is the first time the fuel allowance has gone beyond a welfare payment to people who are on the working family payment. That is where I want to go. I want to make permanent increases that are not year to year or dependent on budgetary situations and have them as part of it. We work with our colleagues in the Department of the environment on other fuel poverty initiatives, including retrofitting and guidance, so we can reduce permanently the cost of energy bills as opposed to making temporary changes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Any changes, temporary or otherwise, might be welcome, but the withdrawal of energy credits is causing real and genuine hardship for people. I see it in my clinics. I am sure the Minister does as well. He mentioned the energy affordability task force, but that is only a continuation of the other task force. It is a little bit "Father Ted" - is there anything to be said for another mass - that there is another task force or group. In truth, the number of people who are in energy poverty and in arrears with their energy bills is going up. It is going up simply because the supports that are there are not keeping pace.

We know that the energy credits made a real and material difference in people's lives and to the number of people who were in arrears. The withdrawal of those credits has pushed people into arrears. These are bills they will have to pay at some point. While those who are not on prepay meters might not be disconnected, they will still have to find the money to pay for those. It is very clear that the increased supports that were given are not adequate. They do not keep pace with inflation and they certainly do not keep pace with the rising cost of energy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The increase in the fuel allowance is 15%. That is a permanent increase; it will not be from year to year. We expanded fuel allowance to the 50,000 families who are on the working family payment. Again, that is a permanent increase and a fundamental change to the fuel allowance payment.

We are absolutely focused on energy poverty. We are working with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to address the issues that cause energy poverty. We will continue to do that, but we have also addressed a lot of the areas causing family and child poverty by looking at the child support payment and giving record increases, particularly for those over the age of 12. The fuel allowance for 2026 is a €486 million investment in families across the country. It is a total of €1,064 a year for those who are on the fuel allowance. A sum of €486 million from my Department is a very significant measure. As I said, this is the first time it has been expanded. I will certainly have an eye to the fuel allowance, as my response from the Department to energy poverty.

Social Welfare Payments

2. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to introduce, as promised, a weekly cost-of-disability payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3197/26]

Deputy Seamus Healy: People with disabilities and their families incur considerably more expense to survive on a weekly basis, due to their disability. While the Government promised a weekly cost-of-disability payment, it reneged on that promise or, at least, it has not introduced that payment. When will that payment be introduced? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Department of Social Protection provides a range of income support payments for disabled people. There are currently 231,000 recipients of disability income support payments, with an estimated expenditure of €3.24 billion in 2025.

The Government recognises the many additional costs that disabled people face in their daily lives; I agree with the Deputy on that issue. We are committed to improving outcomes by introducing permanent measures to help address those costs. That is why the programme for Government includes a range of commitments to support disabled people. These commitments have been further developed in the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. The strategy adopts a whole-of-government approach, with individual Departments and agencies responsible for planning and delivering the commitments that come under their remit across five pillars. The commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment sits within this framework as a matter on which my Department is taking the lead. Subject to the overall budgetary context, I am determined to include that payment as part of budget 2027.

Importantly, the strategy requires that delivery of the various commitments be informed by and include the active input of disabled people and their advocates. My Department is leading a strategic focus network on the cost of disability with other relevant Departments and agencies. The work of this network, which includes disabled people and their advocates, will inform the approach to be taken in addressing the cost of disability. Officials have already held bilateral meetings with a number of organisations to discuss the structure and content of the strategic focus network. The matter was also discussed at my Department's disability consultative forum on 2 December. A meeting with the Disabled Persons Organisations Network is being organised. It is currently scheduled to take place next Friday, 23 January. I will make further announcements about consultations in relation to the payment.

Deputy Seamus Healy: People with disabilities are entitled to live with dignity, security and equal opportunity. Unfortunately, reports show that disabled individuals are four times more likely to live in poverty. In fact, one in five disabled people who are unable to work live in consistent poverty. Two in five experience enforced deprivation and are unable to afford essentials like heating, new clothes or social contact. These individuals and their families have substantial additional costs over other individuals and families, for instance, therapy, mobility, communications, medical supplies, specialised transport and heating costs. Research shows there is widespread acceptance of this and that these additional costs range from €488 per week to €555 per week. Many disabled people have to regularly make the choice between charging

their wheelchair or heating their home. The Disability Federation of Ireland recommended a non-taxable weekly payment of €55 in its budget submission.

This is a very wealthy country and this is a group of people who are in a particularly difficult situation.

9 o'clock

I urge the Minister to introduce this payment. I understand he is considering that for 2027, but some people need it urgently.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree about the complexity of the costs facing people with disabilities. We are anxious to capture all those to make this a permanent cost, and one that reflects what they want in it. We will engage with all of the organisations, including the Disability Federation of Ireland, about that. In budget 2026 we have already taken measures, including a €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment, which brings the personal rates of payment to €254; a €20 per month increase in the rate of domiciliary care allowance, which brings that rate to €380 per month from this month; and the highest ever increases in child support payment, at €16 for children aged 12 and over, which brings the rate to €78, and €8 for children under 12, which brings that rate to €58. In budget 2026, we also allocated €3.8 billion to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for disability services. This is being invested in services to make sure the day-to-day experience of people is dealt with. I am determined to pursue a cost-of-disability payment and I look forward to engaging with the committee about what it should look like, who should get it and how it should be paid. There are different models and interpretations, and I want active and constructive discussion with every member of the committee and every party. We all want to do this, but it is how we do it. I want to make sure that we have the voices of people with disabilities and their advocates in the discussion.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This is an urgent situation. It cannot wait 12 or 18 months or whatever period the Department and Minister have in mind. It is urgent and needs to be dealt with now. This Government talks about targeted measures. This is surely the most targeted measure it could devise. It is a one that deals directly with the poverty being experienced by disabled people. If it is not the Minister's intention to introduce this payment immediately and urgently, surely he will consider announcing an immediate once-off payment for this group of people who are experiencing poverty. Many of them are in the 300,000 households in arrears with their electricity bills and the 170,000 people in arrears with their gas bills. They need assistance urgently. I ask that the Minister introduce a once-off payment of at least €400 immediately.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Hayes wishes to ask a supplementary question.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Supplementary questions may not be asked on a priority question.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I apologise.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: That is fine.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I am learning something new every day.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Every day is a school day. We appreciate the pressures that every family is under. That is why we introduced permanent increases in budget 2026, which took effect from 1 January. The €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment brings to €51 the increase in the weekly disability income support payment since budget 2021. There are the highest ever increases in child support payment and a €20 per month increase in domiciliary care allowance. We have also made changes that allow those being paid disability allowance who take up work to retain the fuel allowance payment for five years. We have made changes to the wage subsidy scheme to encourage employers to give more employment. I am focused on making real and permanent changes. The one-off payments are not financially sustainable. I want to ensure we have in the system a permanent payment that most importantly reflects the views of those with disabilities in terms of how it is designed and paid.

Pension Provisions

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on the roll-out of auto-enrolment; specifically for an update on his engagement with other Departments as regards the roll-out of auto-enrolment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2823/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This again is a straightforward question. I am interested in the numbers of people who have been signed up for auto-enrolment, and also any engagements the Department or Minister may have had with agencies. I submitted this question because I was contacted by senior managers in funded agencies who had a concern that their funding was not increased but their obligation had increased. One of them cheekily said I could ask that if they had to make a choice between services and pension, where the Minister would want them to make that cut.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, we introduced the automatic enrolment system from 1 January. The aim of introducing auto-enrolment is to address the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland and to provide workers with access to a quality-assured retirement savings scheme, thereby giving greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income. My Future Fund commenced on 1 January. More than 763,000 employees who were not actively contributing to a qualifying pension or PRSA through payroll were eligible. They have been automatically enrolled in My Future Fund. I will have an up-to-date figure for the Deputy shortly. As of my most recent check, on Monday, 92% of employers had registered. I will get the employee figure for the Deputy. It has been a very good response from employers and employees to date.

The collection of employer and employee contributions has now commenced and is operating in line with the design and build of the system. The contributions are being topped up by the State and transferred to investment management providers for investment. Portals are available to employers and will be available to employees in the coming fortnight to access

a range of services and to check on their accounts. This positive start is reflective of the massive effort made by my Department and other stakeholders, including payroll providers and employers, in advance of the launch of My Future Fund.

My Department has worked across a range of Government Departments and agencies through the Cabinet committee structure and bilateral engagements. The Deputy has raised this issue with me on many occasions and I, in turn, have raised it across Departments, including the Department of Finance in relation to taxation and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and with the Revenue Commissioners and Attorney General. Officials in my Department have raised with officials in every other Department the responsibilities of agencies under auto-enrolment. We cannot dictate the budget allocations for other Departments, but I assure the Deputy I have been consistent in raising the matter with ministerial colleagues. It has been raised at Secretary General level with regard to the responsibilities of auto-enrolment and we will continue to engage with Departments on the funding responsibilities.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister deftly avoided answering that question. If the choice for the chief executive is that he has to put money into the pension or cut back on services, what decision does the Minister want him to make? Between 70,000 and 80,000 people are currently not covered, but the 92% figure is certainly evidence that people have heard about auto-enrolment and are signing up. I still have a concern because I know this happened previously. I welcome that the Minister has had engagements across Departments, but I ask him to redouble his efforts to ensure that at accounting time at the end of year, there is not going to be an unfortunate cliff for people. There is genuine concern. To be clear, I do not often stand up for management in here but the senior people in funded organisations who came to me want their workers to be in a pension scheme. They also want to be able to provide the services, and a lot of them said they had difficulty with Departments. I welcome that the Minister is engaging. I ask him to have another round of engagements.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Obviously, I do not want any CEO to be in that position. We will continue to engage with the Departments. I have the up-to-date figures. As of 12 January, 94,062 employers were registered and 700,256 employees were registered. The total amount collected to date since 1 January is €14.47 million. The contact centre, which has been open since 1 December, has taken 4,620 calls and 3,748 online chats. Some 57% of those are from employers, 21% from participants and 15% from agents. The contact centre is continuing to engage, and I think that will continue. I will certainly be engaging with ministerial colleagues with regard to funded agencies. I will continue to pursue this issue and keep the Deputy up to speed on my work.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I record my concern with regard to Tata Consultancy Services.

I have put this on the record previously. I am not massively impressed with the Minister's defence of the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund - that if it is good enough for Norway, it should be good enough for us. We should paddle our own canoe on this and the Minister should do his own research. I do not think the State should be doing business with companies that have a significant presence in the occupied territories, and I do not think the Minister does either.

The Minister said he will continue his engagement and I welcome that. I undertake to forward to him any concerns brought to my attention because I, like him, want to make sure people are catered for in their retirement. I would prefer that money to be managed by the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, and invested in other ways, but the decision was taken and we need to deal with the reality. I will keep in touch with the Minister as people get in touch with me.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We want to continue that engagement. In relation to Tata Consultancy Services, TCS, I have done more research since the Deputy and I last engaged on this. TCS is not included on any UN or EU database of companies that are involved in specific activities related to Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. Specifically, the UN, pursuant to Resolutions 31/36 and 53/25, produces a list of enterprises involved in specific activities related to Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. TCS does not feature on this list, which, to my knowledge, was last updated in September 2025. I acknowledge that TCS Ireland, based in Letterkenny, employs more than 1,400 people and has been an extraordinarily strong partner in the roll-out of My Future Fund to date.

As I said to Deputy O'Reilly at the committee, inevitably in a project of this complexity there will be glitches. We want to address those as quickly as possible and if Deputies or Senators encounter any, they should raise them with us and we will seek to address them. Auto-enrolment is a complete change and it will be reflected in a massive change in the country's pension and post-retirement savings landscape.

Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers.

Disability Issues

5. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Social Protection his Department's initiatives to assist persons with disabilities in accessing and sustaining employment, including any specific supports or schemes currently in place, plans for future measures to promote workforce participation, and the timeframe for implementation of these initiatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2946/26]

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: What initiatives and plans are in place to support people with disabilities to access and sustain employment? I wish to highlight what works in practice and what is at risk if we do not protect those pathways. This is a social protection issue. In my constituency, Scoil Eoin, a school for children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, has a post-leaving certificate employment rate of 95%. This compares to the national average employment rate of young adults with intellectual disabilities of 30%. What is happening in Scoil Eoin works. Unfortunately, the school's designation is under threat. This means it will not be allowed to focus on children with mild to moderate learning disabilities. I am concerned this change in designation will impact the Department of Social Protection's pipeline, the people attending its services, the future viability of employment services and the success of disability services.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Ardagh for the question. I will address the general issue first. My Department is committed to supporting disabled people into employment and

offers a range of employment supports to achieve this. My Department's Intreo service is a single point of contact for all employment supports in the State. Disabled people can make an appointment to meet with a designated disability employment personal adviser to discuss employment and training options, including schemes such as community employment, Tús and referral to the employability service.

Work and access is a scheme that offers seven supports that address barriers to the workplace for disabled people and make it more accessible. Funding is available for communication supports and workplace adaptations, as well as disability, equality and inclusion training. The wage subsidy scheme supports employers to hire disabled people in meaningful and sustained employment through a subsidy. Budget 2026 has provided for a further expansion in eligibility and an increase in the subsidy rates.

In December 2023, my Department established the WorkAbility programme. WorkAbility is co-financed with the EU employment, inclusion, skills and training programme. This programme aims to support 13,000 disabled people progress their training and employment ambitions through 57 local, regional and national projects over its five-year lifetime. Recipients of disability allowance and blind pension can take up employment and may continue to receive their income support. They can currently earn up to €165 per week and keep their payment in full, or earn up to €527.60 and keep a portion of their payment while keeping their secondary benefits.

Budget 2026 provided for people who move from disability allowance or blind pension into employment to be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for up to five years. In addition, people with dependent children who move off either of these payments and into employment will now be eligible for the back to work family dividend.

The programme for Government commits to expanding successful programmes like WorkAbility and work and access. This commitment is echoed in the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, for which my Department, alongside the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, leads the employment pillar. We will advance those commitments over the lifetime of the Government.

I will liaise with the Deputy in relation to Scoil Eoin. The figures cited seem very impressive and I am anxious that this continue. Schools generally do not come under the Department of Social Protection but I will engage with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: While I understand this is an education issue, when dealing with employment for people with disabilities we have to take a whole-of-government approach. I thank the Minister for his detailed and constructive reply and acknowledge the significant work led by his Department. The range of supports he outlined and the work and access, wage subsidy and WorkAbility schemes demonstrate his continued commitment to supporting people with disabilities in employment. I welcome in particular the measures he announced in budget 2026, especially the practical supports which allow people to take up work while retaining key secondary benefits. This kind of flexibility is what helps people sustain employment.

I will pivot back to Scoil Eoin because while it is in the education area, it relates to the pipeline of the Department of Social Protection. When these people stay in employment there is less reliance on the Department. A whole-of-government approach is, therefore, needed. I

ask that the Minister ask the Minister for education not to redesignate Scoil Eoin as a special school and to keep it as a school for mild to moderate disabilities. Parents and children like choice and this school works as regards people with intellectual disabilities staying in employment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will engage with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, in relation to Scoil Eoin and its designation. We want to continue to raise the profile of people with intellectual disabilities in employment throughout 2026. During the course of the year, we will have a specific range of training and work events for employers, offering opportunities for those with disabilities. I say again to all employers that they are missing out on serious talent and skills if they do not recruit people with disabilities. I commend all of the employers who avail of the wage subsidy scheme and encourage and offer opportunities to people with disabilities. We will continue to work with various groups on the wage subsidy scheme, employability services and the WorkAbility scheme, which are on-the-ground responses, working in specific areas with specific responses. I am happy to continue working with these schemes and to continue funding them to enhance their approach.

We continue to support the upskilling of staff in the Department on how we treat people with disabilities, in particular, through the just-a-minute, or JAM, initiative being rolled out across the Department.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I commend the Minister on his leadership on this. I also commend the Oireachtas work and learning programme, OWL, developed in partnership with WALK, an organisation based in Walkinstown in my constituency, which does outstanding work supporting people with intellectual disabilities to access meaningful employment. The programme shows how supported employment works in practice when organisations lead by example. As the Minister said, we already see many large employers, including in the retail sector, and small and medium-sized businesses quietly providing inclusive and supportive workplaces. There is real merit, as the Minister said, in acknowledging these employers, large and small, which support people with disabilities and also the benefit they get themselves when they hire people with disabilities. I thank the Minister for his response. I would be grateful if he could raise the issue of Scoil Eoin in Crumlin with the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will do that. In relation to the wage subsidy scheme, as of the end of November 2025, we had 1,550 employers and 2,615 employees availing of the scheme. On the work and access scheme, we had paid 221 grants to the end of November 2025. On WorkAbility, we have supported 4,585 people since 2024. I join the Deputy in paying tribute to the Oireachtas, in particular to former Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl, who led on the OWL initiative. It shows we can all offer that opportunity and avail of that skill and talent.

I think it has been a very successful programme. Under employability, through 2025 to the end of November, we had 3,076 referrals and 9,500 early engagements. For those in the early stages of disability payment there was a meeting with them to point out the available employment supports.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Disability Issues

6. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection to explore the possibility of reducing the minimum hours of the wage subsidy scheme from 15 hours to ten hours (details supplied). [1439/26]

Deputy Michael Murphy: Somewhat following on from the last question on the wage subsidy scheme, I want to acknowledge the reforms introduced by the Minister over the last number of years. I want to further explore the possibility of reducing the minimum hours from 15 to ten. Doing so this would help many service users in centres of excellence like MooreHaven in Tipperary town to achieve their dreams and it would make working in local communities a more realistic option.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, the wage subsidy scheme is a key disability employment support. It aims to encourage employers to offer substantial and sustainable employment to disabled people through a subsidy. In December 2025, 1,551 employers were availing of the wage subsidy scheme and 2,626 employees were supported through the

scheme. Budget 2026 provided for the scheme to be expanded to those who acquire a disability or who have a progressive or degenerative condition that worsens and to those who transfer from invalidity pension to partial capacity benefit.

In 2024, the Department published a review of the wage subsidy scheme. Based on the findings in the review, my Department reduced the minimum required hours for the scheme from 21 hours per week to 15 hours per week. This change sought to make the scheme more accessible and flexible for disabled people. However, it also sought to ensure that the wage subsidy scheme maintains its key aim to encourage employers to provide substantial and meaningful work to disabled people.

The scheme needs to operate within the new 15-hour minimum requirement for a period before we can assess the impact the change has had. As the Deputy knows, there is already a commitment in the programme for Government and the national human rights strategy for disabled people to further reviewing the minimum hours of the wage subsidy scheme. I will advance this commitment but I need time to judge and measure the impact of the new 15-hour minimum requirement. I am very happy to engage with the Deputy and to visit the project in Tipperary to see how it is working.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I welcome the Minister's reply. I thank and acknowledge everybody working within the scheme and, in particular, individuals in the Department of Social Protection around the country working on this and other activation schemes. It is such a fantastic scheme and it is not about money or policy. It is about being able to be seen to be capable of working, to be able to work with others. I am conscious of those individuals who just do not have the capacity to work 15 hours a week and may only have the capacity to work ten hours a week. There has been a lot of feedback from employers and service providers indicating that the current minimum threshold of 15 hours per week can be a barrier. While

the scheme is well designed, this requirement can limit its reach. As the Minister said, there is a commitment in the programme for Government. I look forward to working with the Minister to explore whether we can reduce the minimum requirement further.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We will certainly work across the House in relation to this area of furthering employment opportunities for those with disabilities. As we discussed earlier, WorkAbility is working on 57 local, regional and national projects right across the country. We have also work in access, which is one of the changes we announced alongside the changes to the wage subsidy scheme. This offers seven supports to improve access in the workplace for people with a disability. Funding is available for communication support, work equipment, workplace adaptation and training. I am currently reviewing the work and access scheme with a view to looking at the new assistive technology that is available for employers and those with disability in terms of maximising the opportunities that are available.

We have made changes again to the wage subsidy scheme. We have made changes to the balance of the wage subsidy scheme to encourage people. As I said previously, throughout 2026 we will be having a number of work and skills events that are themed for those with a disability. We had a very successful pilot last October with AsIAM. I intend to roll those out nationally during 2026.

Deputy Michael Murphy: It was remiss of me not to acknowledge the many employers across the country who participate in the scheme. Indeed, their willingness to provide opportunities has had such a positive impact. I am engaging with service providers, not just the MooreHaven centre, but others within my constituency, and they have indicated to me that the ten-hour threshold would be far more achievable, first of all, for many employers but more importantly, it would better suit the needs of many participants, having regard to their abilities and indeed their limited capacity to work. As I said, for many the 15 hours is simply a bridge too far. This is not due to a lack of willingness but just practical and health-related constraints. Reducing the minimum requirement from 15 hours to ten hours is a sensible and what I would call inclusive adjustment. As the Minister said, it fully aligns with the objectives of the programme for Government, but I accept what the Minister is saying. The 15 hours minimum requirement was only introduced in 2024 but we are now two years on, so I appeal to the Minister to maybe accelerate that consideration.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I would like to echo Deputy Murphy's call to reduce the time requirement for the wage subsidy scheme. The OECD published a report not too long ago saying that 10% of the working-age population had a disability and 25% of people with disabilities in 2019 were unemployed. It is the largest employability gap in the developed world and is higher than the United States or the United Kingdom. Dr. Mel Cousins from Trinity College said that income from employment would be the best way of tackling poverty for people with disabilities but, importantly, making sure that people do not lose employment would be the best way of tackling poverty for people with disabilities. One thing that is not mentioned too often in the wage subsidy scheme is that the number of employers that are availing of it has actually dropped over the last number of years. What will the Minister do to tackle the highest employment gap for people with disabilities in the developed world?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Just to come back to Deputy Murphy's point first, we will keep it under review. In 2024, the hours were reduced from 21 to 15, which is quite a substantial reduction. It is important that we also keep an eye on the main aim of the scheme which is to provide substantial and meaningful work and I think we need to keep that in mind as well.

In relation to Deputy Hayes's point, we very focused on addressing that gap. As I said, we have made changes to the wage subsidy scheme. We have provided quite a lot of information to employers. Throughout 2025 we relaunched the wage subsidy scheme and made changes to it and we have made further changes to it to address a particular point the Deputy raised, that is, that those who acquire a disability employment can be retained within their current employment and avail of the wage subsidy scheme. Previously, if somebody within a workforce acquired a disability, they were not supported through the wage subsidy scheme and would have had to give up that employment. We have made that change. We will be making further changes to the workplace activation scheme to support employers.

I am also committed to engaging with employer organisations in relation to showing the opportunities that are there. I am referring to the skills that are being missed, the talents that are not being availed of when employers do not look to people with disability for employment opportunities. I am looking at various social enterprise models that will reflect where Deputy Murphy is coming from in terms of how we can use that skill and talent. I am very committed to addressing that gap. Deputy Hayes's statement about the gap being the worst in the developed world is wrong.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: That is what the OECD said.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are close to the EU average, but it is nowhere near where I want them to be and I am determined to make a change there.

Social Welfare Payments

7. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps being taken to ensure that parents who are aged 66 years and above and caring for children with lifelong disabilities retain the rate at which they are paid their carer's allowance and concurrently receive the State pension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2827/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I would like to talk about carers, in particular, those who are over the age of 66 and in receipt of the State pension. I ask the Minister to outline the steps that are currently being taken to ensure that parents who have, for their lifetime, cared for their children and reached the age of 66 can retain the full rate of carer's allowance and concurrently receive the State pension.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The main income supports provided by the Department to carers are the carer's allowance, carer's benefit, domiciliary care allowance and the carer's support grant.

Spending on those payments in 2026 is expected to be over €2.2 billion.

In general, people who are eligible for two social welfare payments at the same time receive the higher payment for which they are eligible; they do not receive both payments simultaneously. For instance, a jobseeker who falls ill does not receive both a jobseeker payment and an illness payment. In recognition of the vital role of caring, however, an important exception already applies. Where a person is receiving a full-time social welfare payment, such as the State pension, and is providing full-time care for at least 35 hours per week, they may receive up to half the carer's allowance rate in addition to their primary payment. This arrangement applies across almost all weekly social welfare payments, including those with increases for a qualified adult. At the end of 2025, there were 49,234 carers benefiting from these arrangements. Of that figure, approximately 14,500 were receiving a State pension, either contributory or non-contributory. That means that a person in receipt of carer's allowance who qualifies for the full State pension on reaching the age of 66 and retains a half-rate carer's allowance will see their payment increase from €270 a week to a combined pension and carer payment of €453.30 per week.

The programme for Government commits to ensuring that parents who are aged 66 or over and who are caring for children with lifelong disabilities retain the rate at which they are paid their carer's allowance and concurrently receive the State pension. We are committed to progressively increasing weekly carer's payments. We will continue to increase various payments in this space.

A big focus is that the carer's allowance means test is abolished. The process for phasing out that means test is well under way. From July of this year, the weekly income disregard will increase from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of a couple.

We will continue to advance these commitments over the lifetime of the Government, having regard to the overall policy and budgetary context.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I acknowledge the work being done but, as a former family carer myself, I know full well that our carers provide an enormous service not only to their loved ones and those they care for but also to the State itself. It is estimated that each year the State saves €20 billion that would have to be invested in our health services were it not for the work of family carers. These carers work long and difficult days in the most demanding of roles, and caring for a loved one in older age can often be deeply challenging. I am therefore of the strong opinion that the State has a responsibility to look at our carers in an exceptional way and to care for them and to support them in every single way we can. While I said I welcome the body of work that has been done to phase out the carer's means test the Minister mentioned over the course of the current Government's term, I strongly support the commitments made in the programme for Government to ensure that the State give every support possible to help our carers in their role. I therefore ask the Minister to take one further step and to ensure that everything possible is done to provide pensioners caring for their children with the full rate of carer's allowance.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We absolutely agree with the Deputy on the role of carers and the role of family carers. That is why we have made changes and made such commitments in terms of the means test. It is also why the exception in relation to the half-rate of carer's allowance is made. Those in receipt of the half-rate are the only cohort for whom that exception is made.

We have a programme for Government commitment to better support parents aged 66 or over who are caring for children with lifelong disabilities, and I will advance that commitment over the lifetime of the Government. As I said to the Deputy, at the end of December last there were 49,234 recipients of the half-rate of carer's allowance and, of those, just over 15,000 were receiving a State pension. We will continue to progress that commitment in relation to those aged 66 or over and we will continue to engage with the Deputy on that commitment.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: That is very heartening to hear, and I look forward to working together to ensure that the commitments in the programme for Government are advanced.

While I am here, I would like to raise the immense financial strains carers often find themselves under in spite of the services they provide. In a recent survey, 69% of carers reported having difficulty making ends meet and, of those, 29% have begun cutting back on essentials such as food and heating. Some 39% of all carers live in households with a combined total income of less than €30,000 per annum, so the financial challenges that come with being a carer, particularly in older age, must be addressed head-on. The Minister has mentioned the ambition that has been shown in supporting our carers through an increased domiciliary care allowance, which I acknowledge. He has outlined the increased welfare payments that started this month. I know that this Government intends to ensure, as he has also outlined, that our carers are fully and properly supported. I have so many such constituents who are pensioners. They do not understand why, despite having provided care and having been in receipt of the full rate of carer's allowance their entire life, when they reach pension age, when in fact the job sometimes gets more difficult, their full rate is reduced. They see it as a sign that the State does not acknowledge their work as carers. I again urge that the commitment in the programme for Government is advanced. I thank the Minister for his work.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There are supports. There are additional supports as well. It is important that everybody is aware of them in order that they do not miss them. We know that the carer's support grant increased to €2,000 last June. I refer to those who are getting carer's allowance at both the full rate and the half-rate and other full-time carers. The household benefits package is available to help to meet the costs of electricity, gas and the TV licence. It is available to carers under the age of 70 who are getting carer's allowance at the full rate or the half-rate. Carer's allowance has been a qualifying payment for fuel allowance since this time last year, since January 2025. We have additional supports available. As I said, we have a programme for Government commitment in this space. The Deputy has spoken to me about this before, and we will advance it during my time in the Department.

Cost of Living Issues

8. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has given consideration to additional cost-of-living measures, given the increased rates of poverty after housing costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2838/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As the Minister will know, and as a direct result of Government policy, the housing situation in this State is - what is the word we are using now? Is it "crisis"? "Emergency"? "Disaster"? Any of those would be used, but "expensive" and, in many

instances, "unaffordable" are the words people will most use. My question relates to additional cost-of-living measures. Has the Minister given any consideration to such measures, given the rate of housing costs in the State?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are fully aware, as a Government, of the challenges facing individuals and families. We have consistently ensured that core social welfare rates have increased at or above the rate of inflation. For example, as I said earlier, core rates increased by about 20% over the period between 2021 and 2025, which is more than the rate of inflation of 18.5% over the same period, and the increase of 4.1% on most payments announced in the October budget exceeds the increase in consumer prices reported by the CSO of 3.2% over the 12 months to November 2025. We supplemented these rate increases with further supports.

We have decided, however, to move away from the use of one-off payments, which are difficult to target. Instead we are prioritising permanent measures targeted to those who need them most.

This year we will invest €28.9 billion in social protection measures, which includes more than €1.15 billion in new measures comprising an above-inflation increase of €10 per week in core rates and significant targeted measures, including €320 million in increases dedicated to alleviating child poverty.

This investment enabled the largest child support payment increase in the history of the State. This payment increased by €16 per week to €78 for children aged 12 and over, which is a 26% increase, and a weekly increase of €8 to €58 for children under 12, which is a 16% increase. This brings the total annual value of the child support payment to more than €3,000 for each child under 12 and more than €4,000 for each child of 12 and over. Since 2019 the value of the child support payment has increased by about 110% for children over 12 and by 71% for children under 12.

The budget package also includes significant supports to help householders with the cost of heating and other energy bills, including, for the first time, families receiving the working family payment qualifying for the fuel allowance.

These are targeted rather than one-off measures. They will give increased certainty to recipients in need and to those on the lowest incomes across our State.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister mentioned the rate of inflation and did not mention the rate of housing inflation, the cost of housing. That was specifically mentioned in the question.

The cost of housing in this State is rising and has risen every single year, whether people are renting or are struggling to buy. After housing costs, 40% of renters live on an income below the poverty line. That is 43% for local authority tenants. It is almost 60% for those on HAP, RAS or rent supplement, who are living below the poverty line when we take it into account. The Minister is not getting the full picture if he is not taking into account the cost of housing. Perhaps in a normal economy where the Government had not crashed the housing market repeatedly into a wall, leaving out housing figures might give an accurate picture, but it does not, because when we take housing into consideration, we actually see the true rate of poverty and the fact that Social Justice Ireland, the ESRI and others pointed out that the increases in

the last budget did not do anything other than impose austerity on people and do not keep pace with the rising costs.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In relation to rent, the Department of Social Protection rent supplement as it exists today is seen as a short-term support paid to families and individuals as an initial payment where they first encounter difficulties in meeting rent costs. Longer-term support is given through the housing assistance payment. The rent limits applied on rent supplement are aligned with those on the housing assistance payment. Expenditure for rent supplement paid by the Department of Social Protection in 2025 is provisionally estimated at just over €52.2 million, which compares with the 2026 estimate of over €570 million for HAP and the rental accommodation scheme within the Vote of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. A review of rent limits is a matter on which my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is taking the lead. Officials from my Department are working on that review. Any changes to the rent supplement payments will then be aligned to the outcome of the housing assistance payment review.

Various arrangements and flexibilities are in place in relation to rent supplement payments, with higher rent supplement payments that are payable in certain circumstances. For instance, my Department, in conjunction with Threshold, has a special protocol in Dublin, Cork, Kildare, Galway, Meath and Wicklow. Threshold advises, advocates and intervenes on behalf of families or individuals in receipt of rent supplement who are in danger of losing tenancies. We also have a protocol with the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and with Cuan to assist people fleeing domestic violence.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Half of Dublin is on homeless HAP. I know what it is and the Minister does not need to explain it to me. The fact is that when we factor in housing costs, we see the true picture of poverty in the State. A quarter of children under 16 years of age, 26.7%, are growing up in poverty. Almost a quarter of workers, 22.3%, are living in poverty. These are very real figures. I ask the Minister to give consideration to additional cost-of-living-measures for people who are experiencing deprivation in the here and now. I am aware of homeless HAP. I talk to people every single day of the week. As I said, half of Dublin is probably on it at this stage, because all it is doing is fuelling those price increases for rent. I am sure that keeps some people happy, but the people I represent want to know whether the Minister is considering short-term measures, because they are in dire straits.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is why we have delivered. Deputy O'Reilly has raised child poverty in particular. I have mentioned and reiterate the record increases in the child support payment, which goes to those on the lowest incomes. There is €1.15 billion in new measures for 2026 in the Department. The child support payment, to reiterate, increased by €16 per week to €78 for children aged 12, which is a 26% increase in the child support payment, and increased by €8 to €58 for children under 12, which is a 16% increase. The total annual value of the child support payment is €3,000 for each child under 12 and over €4,000 for each child aged 12 and over. That goes to those specifically on the lowest incomes. As we discussed earlier, we have also increased the fuel allowance by €5 per week, which is a 15% increase. We will continue to work with the Department of housing in relation to supports offered through rent supplement for housing costs.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It would be quicker if the Minister just said, "No". Is he considering additional cost-of-living measures given that people are absolutely battered? I have read out the figures to him that show that a quarter of children are living in poverty and nearly a quarter of workers are living in poverty. If the Minister is not prepared to give the measures that will ensure that these people do not live in poverty then he should have just said, "No". I regret that the Minister does not have a better answer for me, to be brutally frank, because the cost of living in this State and the cost for people who are on low incomes, as we know, means they are very heavily exposed to any price increase, including any increase in the price of food, but the Government has refused to negotiate or rein in the large-scale supermarkets. Any increase in energy again is the same story. It is a case of saying to carry on lads and keep increasing the energy costs. All of the people who are on low incomes are very badly exposed to these. The very last one, and the one that is raised in this question, is housing. These people are right up against it. They need help and they need it now.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have given Deputy O'Reilly the answer. I have given her the increases that we have made in payments this year. There is a €28.9 billion investment in social welfare, €1.15 billion in new measures, and €320 million to reduce child poverty. As I said, there are record increases in the child support payment. These increases are well in excess of inflation, particularly for children over the age of 12. Once again, I reiterate that there is a €16 per week increase to €78, which is 26%, and a weekly increase of €8 for children under 12, which is a 16% increase. That brings the child support payment to €3,000 for children under 12 and over €4,000 for children over 12. We have also increased the fuel allowance. There is a 15% increase of €5 per week for those on fuel allowance and we have extended it for the first time to those on the working family payment and to those in employment. There is a significant change in the fuel allowance and that will provide a lump sum to those on the working family payment at the beginning of March. I reiterate that there is a €28.9 billion investment in social welfare, with €1.15 billion in new measures for 2026, and €320 million of that €1.15 billion is for child poverty. We are addressing poverty on a daily basis and that kicked in from 1 January.

Pension Provisions

9. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of employees in County Cork registered with My Future Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2683/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Auto-enrolment is a significant change for people who are in employment and preparing for pensions. It has been up and running since the beginning of the year, as the Minister will be aware, and the first pay packs are arriving in. It is very visible there. Can the Minister give an outline of the number of people who are registered at this point, and, in particular, the figures for Cork?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this issue. As he knows, we made a commitment to introduce an automatic enrolment retirement savings system. The aim of introducing automatic enrolment is to address the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland and, in particular, to provide workers with access to a quality assured retirement savings scheme, thereby giving greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income. My

Future Fund commenced on 1 January 2026. More than 763,000 employees who were not actively contributing to a qualifying pension or PRSA through payroll have now been automatically enrolled in My Future Fund. That includes 75,468 employees in County Cork.

The collection of employer and employee contributions is now under way. It is operating in line with the design and build of the system. The contributions are being topped up by the State and are being transferred to the investment managers for investment. The *myfuturefund.ie* portal is available to both employers and employees to access various services and will in time allow participants to view their account. This outcome is reflective of the huge effort made by officials in my Department and other stakeholders, including payroll providers and employers, in advance of the launch of My Future Fund. This is a significant and positive result which will ultimately provide employees with greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: With more than 760,000 people to be enrolled across the country, and I hear the figure of more than 75,000 people in County Cork, are they all registered and up and running on it or are gaps emerging in places where employers have not registered and people are not yet registered for various reasons?

If gaps are emerging, can the Minister outline where they are and if they are in particular sectors or concern large or small employers? Can the Minister please give an overview on this?

Deputy Dara Calleary: At this point, we have 94,062 employers registered, with 700,256 employees registered. There is a gap between 700,256 and 763,000 and we are working to address that by engaging in further information campaigns with employers. The call centre dealing with this has been open since 1 January. It has taken 4,620 calls and 3,748 online chats. Of those queries, 57% have been from employers, 21% from participants and 15% from agents. The numbers are continuing to climb every day. At this point, I think a 92% response from employers is very positive one month into the scheme. We are continuing to engage, and the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, will engage, to ensure we give everybody the opportunity to enrol in My Future Fund to give the security it will make available in a post-retirement situation. We are very focused on that and on seeing it through. The operating body for the My Future Fund, NAERSA, understands the priority the Department gives this matter.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: In relation to the gaps emerging, it would be interesting to know if these are in particular sectors or geographical, if there is a little bit more information on this, as well as how quickly, or otherwise, the gaps might be closing. The Minister might not have the information now, so it is okay if he is able to send it on afterwards.

I have been discussing this with people locally and a number of different issues have been emerging. For example, where people are not registered but will be at some stage in the future, there will be a catch-up time. This is because there would be an expectation that 1 January payments would be made. Would a lump sum be taken from a pay packet on the first one if a catch-up is being done?

A second issue has to do with a means test and if somebody's situation changes in the future. People are asking me whether, if they are applying for a county council grant to repair the roof or whatever it might be in ten or 15 years' time, the lump sum in question, perhaps from a pension fund, will be taken into account as part of a means test. These are the kinds of questions people have been asking and I would like to get clarity on them, please.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: To come back on those figures briefly, the Minister referred to just under 100,000 employers having signed up to the scheme and over 700,000 participants. This gives me a sense that the average number of employees per business that has signed up is about seven. I would like to get a sense of whether the Minister has an understanding of the spectrum of sizes of employers and the number of employees per employer that have signed up to the scheme. Is it disproportionately small businesses, for example, or retail and hospitality businesses? What has been the feedback from employers?

In particular, I am just conscious that the regulations that came in at the end of the year, just about a week before the launch of auto-enrolment, changed how employers dealt with the auto-enrolment question and how they were giving pension provision to employees. I would just like to hear from the Minister regarding the different small businesses or the spectrum of different employers that exists by number of employees.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In relation to the breakdown of employers and employees registered, we will certainly provide those figures when we get through this period of bedding in and NAERSA will be in a position to provide them. I do not think we can just divide the number of employees by employers in terms of saying it is seven. Multiple types of employment and employers are registered.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: An average.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will go back and get some detail for Deputy Moynihan regarding his specific queries as well. I also encourage every Deputy in regard to this matter. We have the My Future Fund portal up and running and quite a number of scenarios are outlined in it in relation to people's questions. I will revert to the Deputy in relation to his specific queries.

Social Welfare Payments

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of the maximum rent supplement payment; and whether he will review these maximum limits. [2903/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The maximum limits on rent supplement have not been reviewed for years, as far as I know. They are ridiculously low compared to where rents have gone. For example, if a couple or a single parent on rent supplement has three children, you cannot rent a place in Dublin for more than €1,300. Now, there is no such thing as a rent of €1,300 for a family home of that size in Dublin. These limits are crazy and they have to be reviewed upwards. I will give more examples of situations in my supplementary contribution.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for the question. Rent supplement, as it currently exists, is a short-term support paid to families and individuals as an initial payment when they encounter difficulties in meeting rent costs, for example, on loss of employment when they apply for a jobseeker's payment. As we discussed earlier with Deputy O'Reilly, where longer term support is required, the person transitions onto the housing assistance payment, HAP. The rent limits applied on rent supplement are aligned with those on HAP.

Expenditure on rent supplement paid by the Department of Social Protection in 2025 is provisionally estimated at just over €52.2 million. This compares with a 2026 estimate of over €570 million for HAP and the rental accommodation scheme-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What is that figure again?

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is €52.2 million for rent supplement and €570 million for HAP. The issue of a review of the rent limits is a matter in which my colleague, the Minister for housing, is taking the lead. I understand the Minister has approved the commencement of a review of HAP rent limits. Officials from my Department will provide input to this review. Any changes to the rent supplement limits will then be aligned to the outcome of the housing assistance payment review.

It is important to note, however, that there is flexibility in the application of rent supplement limits, with higher rent supplement payments that are payable in certain circumstances. For example, my Department, in conjunction with Threshold, operates a special protocol in Dublin, Cork, Kildare, Galway, Meath and Wicklow, where supply issues are particularly acute. Threshold advises, advocates and intervenes on behalf of individuals or families in receipt of rent supplement who are in danger of losing their tenancies. My Department operates a protocol with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, which liaises on behalf of the local authorities. We also operate a special protocol with Cuan to assist people fleeing domestic violence. Additional needs payments are available to assist those with essential expenses, such as rent deposits, rent in advance and household bills they cannot pay from weekly incomes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes. I know there is some flexibility and discretion, so I accept that. The maximum limits as set down by the Department, though, have not been adjusted for years and they are completely out of line with where rents are actually at. I have had cases where it has been true that, eventually, after some difficulty, anxiety and concern for people, you sometimes get them sorted. I take the point that most people have moved onto HAP. These temporary, emergency, special or exceptional needs payments, where for one reason or another people are not on HAP, are very important to the people who get them. They should not, though, be the starting point in a context where the limits do not make any sense. They need to be reviewed. At the moment, they are almost meaningless. This is the case in Dublin, Kildare, the commuter areas and so on. These limits have to be reviewed upwards, even if it is a relatively small number, as the Minister has outlined. A figure of €52 million still means a lot of people are getting it, so these limits need to be reviewed upwards.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That figure is 5,706 for active recipients. I apologise because I meant to give the Deputy that figure, too. I work with the Department of Housing on reviewing the limits and ensuring that our rent supplements are aligned. I am conscious and aware that

they have not been reviewed in some time and I am absolutely determined to make sure we work with them.

If there are delays or blockages in cases, then I ask the Deputy to bring them to my attention and we will look at ensuring that those delays are not adding to people's stress in terms of homelessness or the distress at that particular point. I will certainly work with the Deputy in relation to particular cases on that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I appreciate that response from the Minister and I accept it. These payments come under exceptional needs, essentially. If I might take the opportunity in my second supplementary contribution to raise another issue under exceptional needs, albeit under the same sort of general heading, there is the moving-in payment for people when they are allocated a house. There is a problem with that. I will give an example.

10 o'clock

Katie and her family got an allocation due to a transfer from a terrible situation just before Christmas, but she cannot apply for the moving in allowance. She is delighted about her new place and just moved in yesterday, but all that was in the house was two mattresses and a fridge. That is where she, her kids and her partner had to sleep. You cannot apply for the moving in allowance until you get your keys, even though she was allocated the house before Christmas. That does not make sense. That is just one example. As soon as you can confirm you have a place to move into and you are eligible for the moving in allowance, you should be able to get it there and then and not have to wait until you are in with the keys, which means either you have to continue to stay in your old place and pay two rents, which happens to some people, or, for weeks, you and your kids are going around with no carpets, no fridge and no this, that or the other. By the way, the heating was not working when she moved in either.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am not going to comment on an individual case, but I will certainly revert to the Deputy.

In relation to exceptional needs generally, the matter has been raised by the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and Deputy O'Reilly in the committee. I plan on organising a session with the community welfare team to go through everything to get feedback. We will be doing that in the audiovisual room at some stage in February. The Deputy's example is the kind of anomaly I want hear about. Explanations might also be given as to why they are there and we can have a discussion around that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: When will that be?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We will be doing it in February. It is an issue that keeps coming back. We want to try to get feedback from every Deputy and Senator in relation to that. We will do that at some stage in February. I will let every Deputy know.

Social Welfare Payments

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection when he will introduce a permanent cost-of-disability payment as promised in the programme for Government. [2794/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The programme for Government promises an annual cost-of-disability support payment, suggesting that it will be incrementally increased. Instead of introducing that in the last budget, the Government introduced an incredible series of cruel cuts, totalling over €1,400 for disabled people. When is the Minister going to right this wrong? What level of payment is he going to introduce? When is he going to introduce this annual cost-of-disability payment?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Department of Social Protection provides a range of income support payments for disabled people. There are approximately 231,000 recipients of disability income support payments, amounting to an estimated expenditure of €3.24 billion in 2025. The Government recognises the significant additional costs that disabled people face in their daily lives and is committed to improving outcomes for disabled people by introducing permanent measures. That is why the programme for Government includes a range of commitments to support disabled people. Our programme for Government commitments will be advanced over the lifetime of the Government, having regard to the overall policy and budgetary context.

The programme for Government commits to introducing a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. My Department will lead a strategic focus network, with the involvement of other relevant Departments and agencies, as a commitment under the national human rights strategy for disabled people. The work of this network, which will include disabled people and their advocates, will inform the approach to be taken in delivering on the programme for Government commitment. My officials have been asked to expedite this work with a view to bringing a proposal to the Government in the first half of this year. Officials have already held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss the possible structure and content of the strategic focus network on the cost of disability. My officials met a number of organisations on 2 December at my Department's disability consultative forum, at which the cost-of-disability strategic focus network was the main agenda item. A meeting with the Disabled Persons Organisations Network is scheduled for Friday, 23 January.

The views of disabled people and all relevant research, such as the Indecon report and the more recent ESRI report, will be considered by my Department when progressing this work. To reiterate what I said earlier, we will also be having public consultation where we look forward to views from across the House in relation to what the permanent cost-of-disability payment should look like.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It says a lot about the priorities of the Government that it can have fast-tracking of VAT cuts for fast food giants and developers whereas, although it has this on-the-paper commitment to an annual cost-of-disability payment, the payment does not come in. Instead, the Government cuts disabled people's income substantially. We know and the Government acknowledges - it has commissioned the report itself - that it costs a lot of money to be disabled in this country. Adjusted for inflation, the Indecon report states it is between about €10,000 and €15,000 a year. It means an extra €500 a week. That is how much disabled people need to come close to a normal standard of living. The rate of enforced deprivation for

disabled people who are unable to work is massive at 39%. The rate of consistent poverty is one in five. We have the lowest rate in the entire European Union of disabled people who are in work. The Government had a €400 lump sum disability payment last year. That was a drop in the ocean. Far from increasing it as promised, however, the Government actually abolished it completely and then cut a whole series of other payments, putting people into even more dire poverty. That needs to be reversed immediately.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are currently providing 231,000 people across the country with a disability income support payment, with an expenditure of €3.24 billion in 2025. There are a number of significant measures in budget 2026. We have included a €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment, which would bring the personal rate of payment to €254 per week from this month. That is a €51 increase to weekly income support payments since budget 2021. There have been the highest ever increases in the child support payment, with an increase of €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over and of €8 to €58 for children under 12. There has been a €20 increase in the rate of domiciliary care allowance, bringing that rate to €380 per month from 1 January. We have also made changes to those moving from disability allowance to take up work so that they will be allowed to retain the fuel allowance payment. The budget 2026 allocation of €3.8 billion for the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for disability services in 2026 represents another significant investment.

We are prioritising the work on a permanent cost-of-disability payment. I look forward to views from across the House as to who should get that and what the rate should be. The work on that is already under way.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If the Minister wants to quote payments, we can quote payments. The Irish Wheelchair Association, Access for All Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland have done very good work in making people aware of the cruel cuts that the Government has introduced in the last budget. The disability support grant was €400 previously. It has been removed, meaning a loss of €400. The living alone allowance saw a loss of €200. The fuel allowance saw a loss of €160. The October double payment saw a loss of €254. The loss of the electricity credit was another loss of €250. This is a total net loss for disabled people of €1,404.

There was a powerful briefing in the audiovisual room yesterday, where we heard from all these organisations and from disabled people about the extreme crisis that they were in. One woman said her life was a balancing act between heating her home or feeding her children. Another disabled woman spoke about how she was no longer able to afford to put her child in a crèche. These are horrendous stories and the Government has made these people's lives worse. It could reverse that. We will come to the next question on an emergency payment while we are waiting for this annual cost-of-disability payment to come through.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We heard a whole pile of horror issues in the audiovisual room. In fairness, the Irish Wheelchair Association, Access for All Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland have done really good work in putting this idea out there and making sure that people are aware of the need for a cost-of-disability payment. The Minister obviously accepts that, given the fact that there is a review process under way. At the minute, though, we are listening to horror stories. I think it was summed up in some of the documentation provided,

including the comment that, some weeks, it is a toss-up between food or bills because there is nothing left. That is just the reality that people with disabilities are living with. We all accept there is an added cost. It is all well and good speaking about how we are not going to offer one-off payments, but they previously had been getting payments of up to €1,400. That has been stripped away from them. What we need to see, and what their request is, is a €400 emergency winter cost-of-disability payment and the possibility of energy credits specifically for those on disability payments. This is all imperfect. The piece of work that has been done should have been done earlier as regards reviewing what a cost-of-disability payment should look like and who should get it. That work needs to happen as soon as possible. The fact is there needs to be a payment now for people with disabilities who are under severe pressure.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank both Deputies. I am certainly aware of the pressures that people with disabilities are under. Nobody has an exclusive right in relation to that understanding. That is why we want a permanent payment, one that is shared and the design of which is agreed by those with disabilities and their advocates.

That is why we are engaging in this process already ahead of budget 2027. Within my Department, I have made it very clear that this is my priority for budget 2027. We have increased payments this year ahead of inflation. We have increased the payments across all our payment schemes. We have increased fuel allowance and disability allowance. We have made changes in relation to a number of other measures. We will continue and engage. There will be further engagements next week in relation to the cost-of-disability payment to a permanent cost-of-disability payment and that is not one from year-to-year, depending on budgetary context. This will be a permanent payment but it is one the design of which will be shared with people with disabilities and their advocates.

Social Welfare Benefits

12. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures being taken in his Department in 2026 to support people with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2886/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for her question. In budget 2026, we have provided for a substantial package of €28.9 billion of social protection measures with €1.15 billion of new social protection measures. This contained significant targeted measures to support people with disabilities, including a €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment bringing the personal rates of payment to €254 per week from January and the highest ever increases in the child support payment - an increase of €16 to €78 per week for children aged 12 or over and of €8 to €58 for children under 12 years old. There is a €5 increase in the fuel allowance, bringing it to €38 per week from 1 January. In addition, the budget 2026 allocation of €3.8 billion to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for disability services in 2026 represents a significant investment to ensure that those with disabilities receive the right support at the right time in the right place.

To make the welfare to work journey as smooth as possible in 2026, we provided additional supports for those moving from disability allowance or blind pension to take up work. They will be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for five years. Those getting disability

allowance or blind pension who have children will be eligible for the back to work family dividend when taking up employment and moving off those payments. There is an expansion of the wage subsidy scheme to those who acquire a disability while in employment and those who transfer from invalidity pension to partial capacity benefit. We are increasing the rates paid from April.

The programme for Government is committed to introducing a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. In addition, under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, my Department established a strategic focus network on the cost of disability. My officials met with a number of organisations on 2 December at my Department's disability consultative forum, at which the cost-of-disability strategic focus network was the main agenda item. A meeting with the Disabled Persons Organisation's network is being organised. It is scheduled to take place next Friday, 23 January. I have asked my officials to prioritise this work with a view to bringing a proposal to the Government in the first half of this year.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Other Members in the House have articulated the huge pressures people with disabilities and their families are under in relation to paying their bills and surviving. Like the Minister, I have heard from many disabled activists of their devastation. They are feeling very let down about the cost-of-disability payment. I understand all the arguments. Those arguments and the practical reasons there was not a cost-of-living payment or support for disabled people in this year's budget is understandable and logical but practically for people who have disabilities, it is a huge let down. It has a huge impact on their families and lives. I cannot stress enough how disappointed they are but "disappointment" is just a word. These are families who are on the breadline anyway with that grant. I wish to articulate how crucial the work, the review and the engagement with people with disabilities the Minister is doing at the minute is. It cannot happen fast enough.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. It is crucial and a priority for the Department. Within budget 2026, we included a €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment. That goes to €254. There was a €20 increase in the monthly rate of domiciliary care allowance increasing to €380 a month from 1 January. There were the highest ever increases in the child support payment - a €16 increase for children aged 12 or over, bringing it to €78, and an €8 increase for children under 12 years old, bringing it to €58. There was a €5 increase in the fuel allowance.

We are very focused. I will be doing detailed consultation with people with disabilities, their advocates and the public generally about a permanent cost-of-disability payment. This is not a payment that depends on the year-to-year budgetary situation. This will be a permanent payment to reflect the cost pressures - the very real pressures - people are under. I am determined to progress that in terms of budget 2027.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: We all will herald in the success of that cost-of-disability payment and want that payment to come through. The Minister articulated clearly the increases that have been put forward but there are so many people who are the working poor and who do not qualify for so many of those grants. Whether it is lower employment rates or lower income rates, or higher costs of living for people who need extra heat, who cannot travel work or for whom there is a lack of access to transport, there are extra charges on those people and their

households. There are so many working poor but there are far more working poor people with disabilities. I want to make sure the cost-of-disability payment takes into account the thousands of people with disabilities in this country who are working, continue to be poor and caught in that poverty trap of not getting access to benefits and the costs still being there for them.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all accept there is a need for a cost-of-disability payment. That goes without saying. We also need to ensure we facilitate as many people into employment as possible. The Minister has accepted there is underemployment within the State of those with disabilities. He quibbled some of the figures that are out there. If the Minister could come back on that, it would be useful. I have spoken many times with him before in relation to the wage subsidy scheme, WSS, and the drop in the number of those who are employed by it over the past number of years and the employers taking it up. It has been reviewed but I do not think a proper job has been done in relation to what needs to be delivered. The Minister has corresponded with me in relation to what has been brought to me from the likes of the Rehab Group, Mr PRICE and others who employ a number of those with disabilities. They believe the WSS is not up to scratch at the minute. We need to see greater employability and workability. We also need to see reasonable accommodation funding, as in work and access. It needs to be fit for purpose. At this point in time, it is not in relation to those who need assistive technologies or the employer or whoever has to go through the administrative burden. It is too much at the moment.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was not going to say anything but I felt moved to do so. It is interesting to hear a Government backbencher describe how people with disabilities were left devastated and feeling let down by the budget. Of course, the difference between myself and the Minister's backbench colleague is that she voted for budget and I did not. This is the very same budget that devastated and let people down. I have a simple question to the Minister. People with disabilities say the budget left them €1,400 worse off. Does the Minister accept that figure?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I have been speaking to a lot of disabled people over the past few weeks about their experiences and on this question of a cost-of-disability payment, permanent or otherwise. Some of the stories they told me were that they were using only one heating bar on their electric heater rather two because they could not afford the cost of electricity, that they were going in for central dialysis in a hospital because they could not afford the energy costs of doing it at home thus increases the risk of hospitalisation and that they could not charge their electronic wheelchair. A wheelchair user was going to several shops to try to figure out where she could get the best deal for food. There is real anger and frustration at this drop of €1,400 that has been stripped from people with disabilities. These costs are affecting everyone but this is the most vulnerable population in the State. They were vulnerable before the cost-of-living crisis. They will be vulnerable after the cost-of-living crisis.

Importantly, I reject this question of it being a one-off payment. If the Minister intends to introduce a cost-of-disability payment, a payment in lieu of it through the Supplementary Estimates process would absolutely be within his gift and within the gift of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There are a number of issues. I made it very clear that we are working on introducing a permanent cost-of-disability payment. I look forward to hearing people's proposals on this with a view towards budget 2027. In relation to the employability issues raised by Deputies McGreehan and Ó Murchú, we have made changes to the wage subsidy scheme. At the end of November, we had 1,550 employers and 2,615 employees participating. I have made administrative changes, in particular in terms of centralising the decision-making process in this so that it is quicker.

In terms of work and access, I am making changes in relation to adaptive technology so that we can support it. Deputy Ó Murchú has engaged with me on this a number of times and we are making changes to support employers who use assistive technology. It gives many more opportunities. We have changed the rates and we continue to review the rates and their impact. As I said earlier, we will do a number of themed disability employment events throughout 2026 to encourage employers to offer opportunities to those with a disability, not only here in Dublin but across the country.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): We move to Question No. 13. I can only allow one supplementary question because we are out of time.

Social Welfare Payments

13. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will introduce an emergency winter payment for disabled people to compensate them for the cuts imposed on them in the Budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2795/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: This follows on from a number of previous questions. I would say disabled people watching this at home are screaming at their television screens because they are being told by the Minister not to worry as a permanent payment is coming. What they are saying, and I quote Joan Carthy, is that people are suffering today and they cannot wait another day, never mind another four years. They desperately need an emergency €400 winter cost-of-disability payment now to make up just a fraction of the cuts the Minister has implemented. This is the ask and it is very simple.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What Deputy Murphy is not acknowledging is that we have responded with a €10 increase in the weekly rate of payment. We have responded with the highest ever increases in the child support payment. We have responded with a €20 per month increase in the domiciliary care allowance and a €5 increase in the fuel allowance, all of which are permanent and none of which will be changed from year to year. That is why we are doing the work on the permanent cost-of-disability payment, on which I look forward to hearing Deputy Murphy's thoughts and proposals and engaging with him. That is why we made changes to the wage subsidy scheme in recent months to encourage employers to give more employment opportunities to people with a disability. That is why, in budget 2026, a record amount of €3.8 billion was provided by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to disability services, to ensure people get the right supports at the right time and in the right place throughout the country, and to ensure that services are where they need to be for people with a disability. There was a response in budget 2026, and the continued interpretation that we have

not responded is unfair and untrue. We will respond with a permanent measure and I look forward to engaging with all of the groups on what this looks like.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I find it bizarre that the Minister is saying he has responded. He has not responded. There is an ask that has come as a consequence of his budget decisions, which cut a bit over €114 from disabled people. While it is true that the Minister has given a little bit of this back through the small increases, he has left people worse off to the tune of more than €1,000 per annum. Their ask is that they need, at the very least, an emergency winter payment now. The Minister is claiming he has responded to that with the original budget, which is where the cuts were made in the first place. Disabled people are responding to the budget. It is why they have come up with their ask. In response to the Minister's point about services, which is what we hear non-stop, disabled people would say that the majority of them are not in receipt of services. This is not addressing the additional costs they have as a consequence of being disabled. Before the latest round of costs, 13.6% of disabled people were unable to heat their homes properly. One in five are in arrears on their utility bills. It is a very simple ask for an emergency payment now. Disabled people cannot wait for this process. They cannot wait for the next budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are working on a process. We have introduced extra payments through budget 2026. We cannot just dismiss services and the extra investment in services in the way Deputy Murphy has done. That is also crucial and we continue to work on this process.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Transport

95. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the reasons for the delay to certain critical public transport infrastructure projects, despite having all the necessary planning permissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2819/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: There is huge demand for proper and reliable public transport. Homes are being built in my area without adequate parking. The idea is for the residents to use public transport but it is simply not there or it is not reliable. I am one of the commuters in my area who would love to get the bus and public transport in here every day but I cannot rely on it. Will the Minister give me the reasons for the delay in certain critical public transport infrastructure despite having all of the necessary planning permission in place?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank Deputy Ward. I assure him there are no delays. We published the review of the national development plan and we set out very clearly what projects we are going to deliver. I will go through some of the specifics. I thank Deputy Ward for the question and I thank him for acknowledging the number of homes being built in his constituency. His constituency colleague sometimes does not recognise it but it is good that he does.

Deputy Ward has asked a good and valid question. The commitment we have on public transport was evidenced by the national development plan in which we allocated €24.3 billion in Exchequer funding to transport, and this is just from this year to 2030. This means €1 in every €4 in the national development plan review is going into transport. This is an unprecedented level of investment in transport. It is an almost 87% increase when compared to the five-year period under the previous national development plan. It is also a fact that in any funding envelope, no matter how big, decisions are required on sequencing and prioritisation. These are the decisions that come with the responsibility of being in government but we will deliver and we want to deliver these projects.

There has been much commentary since the publication of the national development plan about certain projects, and I will use one or two as an example. There has been commentary that they have been allegedly delayed, and I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight. One project referred to in particular is the Luas to Finglas. Let me be very clear that under the last national development plan, and in the greater Dublin area transport strategy, delivery of this project was scheduled to start after 2030. The funding I have secured under the new national development plan will bring the delivery forward into this five-year period. That is one example. It is a major project. The extension of the Luas into that area will serve 56,000 additional homes.

Similarly, funding secured under the new national development plan will see construction start before 2030 on the DART+ programme, beginning with DART+ West, which is a crucial enabler for the rest of the programme and particularly DART+ South West, which has also been the subject of some commentary. I will come back with more details in my supplementary reply.

Deputy Mark Ward: There are another couple of issues that I would like to raise. Major transport projects are at risk of being delayed due to the huge demand already placed on the energy grid, and we have seen reports this week in the newspapers. The Government's support for building more data centres will put more pressure on the energy grid. As we stand, 25% of all electricity in Ireland is consumed by data centres and this could increase to a minimum of 31% under the Government's plan.

Putting data centres before the national interest is pure folly. Let us get all the other infrastructure in place first. The Minister mentioned the MetroLink expansion, the expansion of the DART, the Luas services and Luas to Finglas. There was also meant to be a Lucan Luas since 2000 and it has not been delivered yet. Dublin Bus, for example, has nine depots across Dublin and only two of these have the capacity to charge electric buses. A lack of electricity in the grid is going to seriously delay this much-needed transport. I would like to know how the Minister is going to address these, in particular some of the things he mentioned earlier, especially the extension of the DART and the Luas.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To complement the national development plan, NDP, which we have published and in which we have detailed the projects, we have also published the capital investment plan for our grid, known as PR 6 or price review 6. That is up to €18.9 billion of investment in our grid between now and 2030. That takes into account all the major projects we are delivering. It also takes into account the new 300,000 homes we need to deliver and the need to further expand energy generation and distribution to enable further investment in

things like data. About 185,000 jobs are supported in the tech sector and we need to continue to be at the cutting edge of new technologies like AI and others and data centres are critical to that. We will be able to manage that.

That grid investment is critical. For example, the North-South interconnector project needs to start. It needs to get going. It is the most critical part of energy infrastructure that we need on this island - on an all-Ireland basis. I intend to get that project started this year. It has to happen. Further engagement will be happening in the next couple of weeks on that. I ask politicians of various parties in some of those areas to get on board with this. This piece of infrastructure is critical to deliver the things that Deputy Ward wants and I want.

Deputy Mark Ward: Speaking of things we want in Dublin Mid-West, I would like to touch on DART+ South West. There was some commentary on that this week. That DART service will bring passengers through Clondalkin, Adamstown and Lucan. It was first granted permission in 2024. Construction was expected to take place this year but has been pushed out to 2030 at the earliest. This project would enable 20,000 passengers to travel each way every hour. That will be absolutely fabulous for the people of Dublin Mid-West if it is delivered.

We are in dire need of public transport as the Minister mentioned. I mentioned the 9,000 homes that are being built in the Clonburris strategic development zone, SDZ. This is a project the Minister's colleagues on South Dublin County Council did not support at the time. There was a further 4,000 homes in the Adamstown SDZ being built and this train line was part of that. I do not know if the Minister is in breach of the SDZ at this stage in relation to that.

In Dublin Mid-West we are not surprised to see these things delayed. The Lucan Luas was delayed in 2000. The date for this was 2015. This was pushed back and we still have no date for the start. On DART+, the service is going to bring passengers to Clondalkin, Lucan and Adamstown. Will the Minister reverse his decision and bring the necessary funding forward?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are. DART+ West and DART+ South West are interlinked and are both critical. I want to use this opportunity to set the record straight on this. Deputy Shane Moynihan, a constituency colleague of Deputy Mark Ward's, has been at the forefront in ensuring this project moves forward. DART+ South West must be advanced as it will provide the depot capacity for the new fleet on the south-west line as well. It also provides capacity in the city centre to allow for the DART+ South West services to proceed. On DART+ South West, we are commencing the compulsory purchase order, CPO, processes on that project this year. Aspects of the procurement framework put in place on DART+ West will also be used for DART+ South West. I can assure the Deputy there is no delay on it. That has to be done in advance of the main construction. CPOs and procurement will be done this year and I hope to accelerate that further through NDP funding, which will be made available from 2028 onwards.

I agree with Deputy Ward that it is a critical service. We are committed to doing both DART+ West and DART+ South West. They are interlinked and complement each other. There are aspects of both projects that need to be delivered, some of which in DART+ West need to be delivered first to enable DART+ South West, particularly the docklands station and clearing up the bottlenecks in Connolly Station. It is a project we are absolutely committed to and will do.

Road Safety

96. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of a survey commissioned by the RAC in the UK into the safety of LED headlights in modern vehicles, which found that four in five drivers were concerned about dazzling headlights; if he, his Department or the Road Safety Authority has considered the independent research study published by TRL in October 2025 titled 'Glare from road vehicle lighting on UK roads' that was commissioned by the UK government; if he or the RSA will now commission a similar study in Ireland to review the safety of LED headlights in modern vehicles and present the findings to the European Commission and the UNECE Working Party on Lighting and Light-Signalling; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3293/26]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am glad to hear the Minister's comments on DART+ South West. We will keep pressure on him there.

This question relates to road safety. The brightness and intensity of the new style LED car headlights is a cause of concern for a lot of people. Is the Minister aware of a survey commissioned by the RAC in the UK into the safety of LED headlights in modern vehicles? It found four in five drivers were concerned about dazzling headlights. Has the Minister, his Department or the RSA considered the independent research study published by TRL, Transport Research Laboratory, in October 2025 titled Glare from Road Vehicles?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Ahern for raising this question. Ministers of State, Deputies Canney and Buttimer, and I had good discussions on this with officials yesterday in preparation for questions here. This issue of the new LED lights and high intensity discharge, HID, headlights are known to provide greater brightness, improved colour rendering, increase efficiency and, in the case of LED in particular, longer performance life. That is fine and that is good. However, I am aware of the concerns and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I have discussed the concern expressed in some quarters in relation to glare particularly with LED and HID headlights. The Deputy might note that the use of these headlights in the EU is regulated by the European type-approval system. This system establishes the technical and safety standards required for a vehicle or component of a vehicle to be placed on the European market and to place a vehicle or a vehicle component on the market and used within any member state. Type-approval requires the vehicle or component to meet specific safety requirements. Accordingly, if a headlight has been approved and entered into service, it is considered safe to use within the EU. During roadworthiness testing, the lighting system in a vehicle is tested to ensure it is in full working order and, importantly, correctly aligned for the safe performance of the vehicle. Factors which can contribute headlamp glare include misaligned aim and various other things. I understand that the UNECE Working Party on Lighting and Light-Signalling is going to establish a task force to investigate this issue and I can assure Deputy Ahern that I, Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and my Department will be guided by that work.

On a personal level, I have experienced this as well. I do think this is a matter which needs to be looked at. It is a European competence in relation to the specifications. However, the survey clearly shows that four in five motorists have experienced this. All of us have at this

stage. It does merit further investigation. That working group will be important and we will be guided by its recommendations.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Many constituents, friends and family of mine who perhaps were travelling a little bit more on country roads over the Christmas period have come to me saying this is not a comfort issue and that it is a serious road safety issue. Depending on the direction or the angle of these lights coming at the driver, which is often from new higher cars and higher positions, they can temporarily blind the driver. Unfortunately, I am raising this in the context of a record of 190 people dying on our roads last year which is the highest since 2014. I raise this with a the view to try to probe any and all solutions to improve our road safety record. It is all well and good having the Minister and I discuss our anecdotal experience. I would push the Minister to carry out some research into this and not necessarily rely on the UK research but doing our own to try to push this issue forward to determine the cause and effect.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is right but we do have a way of doing this now. As I mentioned, the UNECE Working Party on Lighting and Light-Signalling is going to establish that task force. That had to be done looking at European standards as opposed to British standards. As I said, I have discussed this with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and he will be putting this on the agenda for work to be done at a European level because anecdotally and from my experience, I think it is an issue. I am not a lighting specialist. I do not set the standards either as they are set at an EU level but it does merits further investigation. The question the Deputy put down is not only very timely but is very apt too and is an important one.

The Deputy mentioned road safety. Road safety for us is an absolutely critical priority. Last year was a terrible year for road fatalities and road injuries. All of us want to improve that. Every life lost on our roads is an absolute tragedy for families and communities across the country. We all must work together to do whatever we can to reverse that trend we have seen in the past couple of years of increasing road fatalities. Any measures, such as this one, which I am not saying is the reason for any of those fatalities, merits further investigation and work to be done in a structured way.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: It would be interesting to get the statistics on collisions and fatalities in order to understand what the contributing factors are. I appreciate this is a European competency but I want to ensure we are feeding into the European agenda and, to the extent we have any data, providing it in support of any changes needed.

Acknowledging the European competency, there are some things from an enforcement perspective we could focus on as part of the NCT. I understand the illegal retrofit of certain LED lights is an issue. Maybe that is something we could clamp down on to ensure it does not happen and bring it more to the attention of the RSA and the Garda when it comes to enforcing the existing standards in our cars.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will make a suggestion. It would be helpful to all of us working on this if the transport committee looked at it. Through the UNECE working group, it will be, and is, on the agenda. I do not have any data at this stage to support claims the changes in standards have led to road accidents, though I am not saying that has not happened either. The

transport committee's input would be useful. It could get lighting experts, Department officials and the RSA in to discuss this.

The next question, which the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will take, relates to road safety. We all need to work together on that. We have responsibility and are acutely aware of that. We take it really seriously. Every party and individual has an input into doing everything possible to improve road safety. Core to that in many instances is driver behaviour. We have to address that. The State can only do so much. We need further resourcing - as the Minister of State will go through in more detail - and further measures in relation to speeding, which we are doing. We have to get extremely serious about this issue over the course of this year. I look forward to working with colleagues on it.

Road Safety

97. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to reduce road deaths and improve road safety on Irish roads; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2818/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: I agree with the Minister that last year was an absolutely terrible year for road deaths in our country. The number of road deaths has been steadily increasing. What steps is the Minister of State taking to reduce road deaths and improve road safety?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputy. I extend my condolences and those of the Government to those who lost a loved one on our roads in 2025. With 190 lives lost, it was the worst year on our roads since 2014 and a sobering call to action for all of us to do more to make our roads safer.

Reducing deaths and serious injuries is an all-of-society challenge. It is a priority for me, as Minister of State, and for this Government. This priority is made clear by our investment. Budget 2026 provides a record €1.7 billion for investment in our roads, helping to deliver safer roads infrastructure. In addition, €360 million has been allocated for investment in active travel, helping to make walking and cycling safer modes of travel. The Road Safety Authority has again been directed to ring-fence a budget of €18 million for investment in public awareness, communications and education campaigns.

Last July, I published the phase 2 action plan of the road safety strategy. It includes 12 primary and 77 supporting actions aimed at delivering transformative change. Concrete recent actions include the introduction of a safer default speed limit of 60 km/h on rural roads, which affects 80% of our national road network. That was brought in last February. In October, local authorities were instructed to review speed limits in their urban areas and, where appropriate, introduce a 30 km/h limit. They have been directed to complete this work and implement the new limits by 31 March 2027.

Long-standing issues are being addressed, such as individuals repeatedly renewing a learner permit without sitting a driver test. Regulations are now in place to end this practice, with the changes coming into effect in November.

Legislative changes are progressing. The Government has approved the general scheme of the national vehicle and driver file Bill, which is targeted for enactment in the first half of this year. Among other measures, the Bill will restore direct collision data-sharing with local authorities. My officials are developing the next road traffic Bill to fulfil key programme for Government commitments, including in relation to graduated speeding penalties and camera-based enforcement of mobile phone and seatbelt offences.

Deputy Mark Ward: I join the Minister of State in extending thoughts and deepest sympathies to the 190 families whose loved ones lost their lives on Irish roads last year and the three people who have died so far this year. These are not just statistics and numbers; they are real families who had real lives and it has a big impact on entire communities. There is a crisis level of fatalities and collisions at the moment. I commend the Garda roads policing unit on its work on detection and enforcement but it needs proper resourcing. It is as simple as that.

There are issues with driver behaviour and drivers making conscious bad decisions about what they do and how they get behind the wheel. Drug driving is becoming a real problem. The substances and drugs people take before they get behind the wheel are ever changing. As drugs and people's behaviour are always changing, does the Minister of State have any plans to amend the Road Traffic Act to include other substances for roadside testing?

Deputy Seán Canney: The Deputy makes a very important point. The four major causes of collisions on our roads are speeding; driving under the influence of alcohol or drug substances; not wearing a seatbelt; and distraction through the use of a mobile phone or all the technology in a car, which is more like an office than a vehicle to get from A to B. There are many issues we have to deal with but the Road Traffic Act is looking at all of these to consolidate what we can into more relevant legislation to deal with the challenges we have.

I commend the Garda. We do not have enough gardaí doing roads policing but the numbers are increasing. I thank the Deputy for his acknowledgement of the work they do. It is very effective and they will continue to do that. I have had discussions with the Garda Commissioner and deputy commissioner on this. As numbers increase in the force, we will see more visibility on the ground as well.

Deputy Mark Ward: I will return to drug driving. A number of people have contacted me about people driving cars while inhaling nitrous oxide through balloons. This behaviour is idiotic and dangerous. The people doing that need to cop on. Nitrous oxide is commonly known as laughing gas. It cuts oxygen to the brain and is an extremely dangerous substance generally; behind the wheel, it is absolutely lethal. I was on a debate on "Prime Time" with a colleague of the Minister of State recently and we heard of the death of a young man by a hit-and-run driver. The driver was suspected of being under the influence of nitrous oxide. There have been a number of deaths across Europe associated with driving under the influence of nitrous oxide.

I wrote to the Minister of State last week and got the answer this week. I asked him to amend the Road Traffic Act to include nitrous oxide on the list of intoxicants for roadside testing. His response was he has no plans to do this. Will he reconsider this position?

Deputy Seán Canney: Absolutely. It is being considered. I did not see that reply going out. We have a huge amount of work to do to update our legislation on road safety. However, going back to the point the Deputy made, personal behaviour is vital. We will provide the legislation and enforcement. At the end of the day, if somebody makes a conscious decision to sit in a car and do the wrong thing, it is very difficult to deal with that. The public must know there are consequences - not just a collision happening, the outcome of which could be death. Last year, there were 190 cases of that. We never talk about the people injured to a life-changing extent and who continue to live with that.

I thank the Deputy for his question. This is not a political issue. It is an issue we need to continue to address together in this House and to be forceful with.

Bus Services

98. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the start date of the Glendalough-Bray Local Link; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1710/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am looking for an update on the Glendalough to Bray Local Link service. This is a hugely important route. In May 2025, the NTA said it was a priority and the funding had been allocated.

The contract has been awarded to a bus company and a driver is ready to go. The bus company is ready to go with this but we still have no detail on the actual start date. If the Minister of State could provide an update on that, I would be very appreciative.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising issues of local transport in County Wicklow. As Minister of State at the Department of Transport with special responsibility for rural transport, I clearly reaffirm Government's commitment to strong and ongoing enhancement of our Local Link services right across rural Ireland, particularly in County Wicklow.

Under the Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future, we are delivering on our promise to strengthen rural connectivity, ensuring villages, towns and cities are better linked, more accessible and more resilient. Crucially, this commitment is being backed by real and sustained investment. Funding for the rural transport programme has increased from €16 million in 2022 to over €25 million last year. This step change is already transforming services on the ground, particularly in County Wicklow. As a direct result, passenger numbers on Local Link's regular bus services have surged from 1.8 million to 4.7 million in just two years.

Through the National Transport Authority and the 15 transport co-ordination units, the Local Link network now delivers a comprehensive mix of scheduled rural routes and flexible door-to-door services designed around the real everyday needs of local communities and real people. The impact is evident across a number of counties, particularly in Wicklow. In that two-year period, we saw a 46% increase in funding and a 61% rise in passenger numbers. A strong example of this progress is the launch of the new Carnew to Baltinglass service last year, which includes evening services, improves access to key destinations and significantly enhances regional connectivity.

Looking ahead, the Department's allocation for this year is firmly focused on advancing existing programmes and honouring commitments already made, including our commitment to the route the Deputy has referenced. We continue to work closely with the National Transport Authority as it finalises its 2026 service plan, ensuring that our commitments are met but also that decisions are strategic, evidence-based and responsive to the needs of communities nationwide. As I have said, we are awaiting a response from the NTA on the service plan for this year. When we get that, we will publish it. We will have the answer to the Deputy's question and a definitive start date when we get that service plan from the NTA.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I was hoping that, when I came in today, the Minister of State would give me a start date for this service. It was meant to start in September of last year. As I have said, the NTA told me in May that this was a priority route and that funding had been allocated. Everyone is ready to go with this. Along with other public representatives, I have been trying to get information about this route and to find out exactly when it is going to start. There are many communities - the people in Glendalough, Laragh, Roundwood and Kilmacanogue - waiting for this bus route so that they can have direct access to shops, doctors and schools in Bray and to the DART. The fact that we have now been waiting for nearly a year for a tangible response as to a start date for this is incredible. I really was hoping the Minister of State could give me a start date because we are not getting the information from the NTA.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I know Deputy Whitmore and Deputy Timmins have raised this before. We are engaging with the NTA. We are awaiting the service plan. As the Deputy will know, we do not announce routes in part. It is part of the whole national service plan. The Department has made a commitment. The NTA has advised us that the procurement process for Transport for Ireland route 199, Glendalough to Bray, is complete. We are awaiting the service plan. From our end, the Department has fully committed to the development of the route. The Deputy is right; it is about looking after the travelling public and commuters. We have seen that in a whole range of services in her own county. We have seen investment and increased passenger numbers. People are voting with their feet in using these services. It is about connectivity, a deliberate response from Government and a Government policy to have more people use public transport. Local Link services and the connectivity they provide have been a success story for the Department of Transport. We are working with the NTA on its service plan. When that is complete, we will announce the routes as a block. We are committed to the development of the service. We will have the date in due course.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: When will that service plan be complete? We need to give people some idea. This is obviously about connectivity and it is really important that these services are put in place but we are really starting to see a lack of trust in the Government's ability to provide public transport. The NTA said nearly a year ago that the funding was available, that the route had been awarded and that it was a priority but we still do not have a start date. This is not only impacting people's lives because they cannot get a bus, but it is also undermining people's trust in the bus service, in the NTA and in the Government's ability to deliver. This is not a large infrastructure project. It is not the metro. We are talking about a Local Link bus from Glendalough to Bray. It really should not be that hard. It certainly should

not take that long to put in place. I ask the Minister of State to talk to the NTA because it is not a good look for the Government that the NTA is not giving it those dates.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The real facts are that the plan is imminent. To put this in context, the budget was in December. The Department gave the NTA its allocation. To be fair to it, it is working through the process. This is the first week of January. The Deputy used the word "trust". Look at the Government's commitment in terms of its investment in rural transport. Some €84 million has been invested and there has been a 36% increase in the budget for this area this year. As a Government, we are committed to rural transport and want to see enhanced connectivity for people. The Local Link service has seen a 43% increase since 2025. Some €658.4 million has been invested. The Deputy speaks about trust. Trust the Government to invest in Local Link services and rural transport. We are doing that. I understand the frustration and annoyance of people. As a Government, we are working to enhance and improve the offering to people. That is what we have been doing for the past five years. It is a success story. The results can be seen in the increase in the number of people using these services and the demand for them. We will work with the NTA to ensure these services are provided. As I said a second ago, the work is complete. The NTA is going through the budgetary process, which is deliberate. The NTA is before the Committee of Public Accounts today. The service plan is imminent and we will publish it in due course.

Bus Services

99. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport the reason the commencement date for the roll out of the N8 orbital bus route linking Blanchardstown with Dublin Airport has been delayed further to 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3199/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Blanchardstown is about 14 km away from Dublin Airport and yet we have not had a direct bus route linking the two since 2010. We have heard a number of commitments that this route, the N8 under BusConnects, would be delivered. However, we are now told that the route has been pushed back until 2027. Is it because of a lack of funding that the N8 orbital route from Blanchardstown to Dublin Airport is not being delivered in 2026, as had been committed to?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for his question. He will be aware that BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in our bus network and system that will provide much better services across our cities, covering Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway. It is the largest investment in our bus system in the history of the State and is managed by the NTA. The city programmes cover the construction of new bus corridors, new network services, bus electrification and the development of enhanced ticketing in an integrated manner to help maximise the benefits to the public, the customers.

The network redesign as part of BusConnects Dublin will improve the existing bus network by providing high frequency spines and new local, orbital and radial routes. Orbital routes are a really important part of the new design as they offer an efficient way for passengers to travel without needing to pass through the city centre. New bus services in Dublin are already being

delivered as part of BusConnects. Since 2021, we have rolled out the first seven phases of the network redesign in Dublin. This has included the northern orbital routes connecting Blanchardstown to the Point Village in 2022 and the western orbital routes connecting Blanchardstown to Tallaght in 2023.

This new N8 route is really important. The Deputy raised it just before Christmas. It will connect Blanchardstown with Dublin Airport. It is still planned to have the service in place late this year, in 2026. We have just mentioned the NTA's service plan. We have to get that back. The Deputy will be aware of how this works. We will announce all the routes in the round. That has to be stepped through. We also need the human resources to do it. Blanchardstown and the Dublin 15 area is a major growth area. The Deputy and I represent different parts of Fingal. We will continue to improve the public transport offering there. We are seeing people's response to this in the record number of public transport journeys. The Dublin Bus figures for 2025 show a further increase.

11 o'clock

With Transdev and the Luas, we have an increase of a million journeys there alone. Overall, BusConnects will transform bus services in our cities. The N8 is a very important route and we intend to get that in later this year.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will give the Minister a bit of a history of the delays with the N8. I wrote to the NTA in August of 2024 and was told the N8 would be launched in 2025. In April 2025, when I enquired with the NTA about where it was at, I was told it would start in quarter 2 of 2026. In September of last year the Minister said in this Chamber that it could potentially be introduced "within the next year. To be clear, next year, that is, by the end of 2026". That is what the Minister said in September. I wrote to the NTA over Christmas and got a reply on 5 January this year which says that it currently anticipates implementation of phase 9 and specifically the N8 to be in 2027, subject to funding and operational readiness. The Minister has said 2026; that is not what the NTA is telling me. It has obviously assessed a longer timeframe. It is not fair to the commuters who want to get to the airport, or the workers in Dublin 15 who work there. The constant chopping and changing of this deadline is not fair either.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: My answer today is consistent with the answer I gave the Deputy in September. I plan to get the N8 up and running in 2026. We have done other things with BusConnects as well. We have started the first two quality bus corridors. Liffey Valley corridor is under construction now. I have signed the contracts. There is major investment in that scheme, about €200 million. We have signed the contracts now for Ballymun-Finglas as well and that will start construction this year. Not only are the services going in but the infrastructure is going in, coupled with and complemented by active travel schemes along those routes. I want to get the service in place in 2026. As the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, outlined in response to a previous question, we need the NTA service plan. I expect that imminently. Three Ministers will go through that plan, taking into account the expert view with regard to the National Transport Authority. We will then assess that plan. We made a very significant step forward with regard to increases in the PSO of about 46% in this budget. That means not being dependent on constant supplementary budgets, which was the case over the previous five years.

Myself and the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, want to ensure that is not the way we move forward. I reiterate that the answer is 2026.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Minister's answers are consistent but unfortunately they are not consistent with what the NTA told me last week. The Minister is saying the NTA service plan for the year is coming to him. That is great. Is the Minister going to go through that? Can he commit to us here that he is going to say to the NTA that 2027 is not acceptable and that he wants the N8 delivered in 2026? It is clearly flagging what is coming in on its service plan to the Minister. It is going to say 2027, a further delay for Dublin 15 commuters. Is the Minister able to commit that he will say to the NTA that is not acceptable and the N8 orbital link has to be delivered in 2026?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Those in the NTA are very good colleagues. We have a new chief executive in place now. They are very competent at what they do. I want this service in place 2026 and I will be saying that to them. I have said that to them. I do not control every letter that goes out from the NTA. It does a very good job and it has more resources now than it has ever had. Thankfully, because of the hard work of our people and the good economic management of the last Government and this one, we have moneys to invest and continue to invest in public transport. Our bus network is just one element of it. What needs to be understood, and is understood in the NTA, and I and the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, will be reinforcing it, is that Dublin 15 and the Fingal area is a major growth area in our country. That is not just because I represent part of it. We can look at south Dublin as well. There are areas that have seen significant growth where we need to further improve the public transport offering.

To answer the Deputy directly, will I be saying to the NTA that I want this service in place in 2026? Yes. I am saying it here on the floor of the House. My answer is consistent with what I said to the Deputy in September. I thank him for raising the matter. I know the importance of getting this route up and running. It will be very successful and heavily used, I have no doubt about it.

Dublin Airport Authority

100. **Deputy Gillian Toole** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a health research report of April 2025, the health costs report on aircraft noise from Dublin Airport, compiled by a person (details supplied), submitted by Fingal and Meath residents, is being ignored and corrective action avoided, in view of the recent report by the European Environment Agency of 9 January 2026 in the *European Heart Journal*; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3290/26]

Deputy Gillian Toole: My question relates to the health costs report on aircraft noise from Dublin Airport, which was submitted in April 2025, and estimated costs per annum of €800 million. They are significant health costs. How and why is that being ignored in light of the European Environment Agency report in the *European Heart Journal* of 9 January this year?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I fully acknowledge the impact of aircraft noise. I live beside the airport myself and have lived there my whole life. I represent a community and a constituency that sees the benefits of the airport but also communities that are impacted by it. It is really important that residents' and communities' views are taken into account and that the airport operates a good neighbour policy. I have met with the Deputy and with residents' groups on that and continue to engage with them.

It is my understanding that the health costs report on aircraft noise from Dublin Airport that the Deputy is referring to was prepared by PMCA Economic Consulting on behalf of the St Margaret's and The Ward residents' group, and that the report attempts to quantify the health impacts of aircraft noise and the opinions therein. The second report and recently published journal article referenced by the Deputy have not been submitted to my Department. I would like to thank the Deputy for bringing them to my attention. I have asked my officials to consider the contents of the documents and communicate them to the relevant competent authority, the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority, ANCA.

The Deputy will be aware the ANCA monitors the aircraft noise climate around Dublin Airport and publishes noise contours that show the geographical impact of aircraft noise on communities around the airport. These contours represent aircraft noise that is averaged over a full year for different periods of the day in a standardised European format. The noise level of individual aircraft events is also available publicly from an extensive network of DAA noise monitors around the airport. Every year, ANCA carries out an assessment of the effectiveness of the noise management measures at the airport and publishes a report on its findings. This is in addition to publishing annual reports by the airport authority on the compliance by airport users with the noise management measures. If regular review or an assessment of the potential impact of development at the airport indicates that new or amended measures are required to manage aircraft noise at the airport, ANCA will facilitate a period of public consultation on draft proposals to address any noise problem or potential noise problem.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I acknowledge the opportunities to meet the Minister. The findings of this European report are stark, estimating 16 premature deaths per 100,000. The information in that report of April 2025 is vitally important. As a matter of correction, in April 2024, ANCA sought noise data information from DAA. It was declined, citing judicial review proceedings, which is wholly inaccurate. That information is vitally important relative to the April report and the more recent report.

As the Minister and I both know, there actually is a solution which was put forward by the north runway technical group, namely adherence to the 2007 An Bord Pleanála planning permission for flights departing off the north runway to fly five nautical miles straight out. The reality is that the flights departing from the north runway are turning after 400 m. Simple adherence to the planning permission and the current legislation would solve this problem for 30,000 of the Minister's and my constituents.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I should say that ANCA is currently carrying out an assessment of the noise situation at Dublin Airport and the potential noise impact of planning applications that seek permission for infrastructure and increases to the permitted passenger capacity at the airport. The airport is a critical piece of national infrastructure, we know that. It underpins tens of thousands of jobs. I have always supported airport growth, but that being done in a

sustainable manner. The airport has to operate a good neighbour policy and it has not always done so. I have written to DAA on a number of occasions, including just before Christmas, asking it to further expand noise mitigation measures and looking at further insulation schemes.

The Deputy has a very specific matter in her area, as there are communities being overflowed now that were not expecting to be overflowed. I have been on the public record as saying that airlines and the airport should operate under the granted planning permissions. They are subject of further retention applications now. We want the airport to develop and grow. I will be removing the cap on Dublin Airport. That is important. It must be done in a sustainable way. Communities need to be listened to. On the new report, I have not got it yet but I will make sure it goes to ANCA through the good offices of the Deputy.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Go raibh maith agat arís for the reply. This is a matter of absolute importance. There is no denying the economic benefit and employment opportunities for an island nation in connecting people, goods and places. The good neighbour policy and the mission statement of the DAA board is being completely ignored when there is a viable solution. The capacity for flight path resolution is probably not within AirNav, but Bratislava is well capable and is amply employed by other jurisdictions in constructing flight paths. Again, it probably should not even have to go to Bratislava, if the conditions of the 2007 planning permission are met. I can even show the Minister graphically here, and he probably has the information already, what is happening versus what was planned. There is a so-called environmental corridor, which is a term that was created by the DAA, but it was never approved. There are multiple issues here but we have solutions that were offered almost a year ago. I appreciate the Minister's input.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: All of us, including the Government, want the airport to continue to grow in a sustainable way. I want the false inhibitors to that growth, such as the airport cap brought in in 2007-08, to be removed. I will bring forward legislation to Cabinet very shortly. We want to get that through the Dáil as quickly as we can. That does not override concerns of residents. I grew up beside the airport and I see its benefits. People understand there will be a level of noise that people do get used to, but for those in close proximity, particularly to the western part, the opening of the new parallel runway has been a major change for them and other communities.

I have asked for noise insulation to be further expanded, which it will be. As one example, we spent €23 million last year on buying homes and insulating homes and schools to date. A total of 227 homes were eligible of which 204 have been completed. That is not a bad outturn. The expedited noise insulation grant increased by 50% to €30,000, which will now be available to over 1,000 homes. I continue to engage with the DAA directly on that. We will bring in mitigation measures for those who are impacted. There will be some properties close to the airport for which the voluntary purchase scheme needs to be improved. I have asked for that too.

I will continue to work with the Deputy. I thank her for her constructive approach on this important matter.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Road Network

101. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the funding allocated for local road restoration to Cavan and Monaghan County Councils in 2025; and the funding allocation to both councils in 2026. [1246/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have been in elected politics a long time and I have to say that the state of local roads generally has never been as bad in all of my time. It is evident not enough funding is being provided to local authorities. Will the Minister indicate how much funding was allocated to local authorities in my area, Cavan and Monaghan county councils, last year? What is the proposed allocation for 2026?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know this matter is of great interest to the people of Cavan and Monaghan. I met with councillors from there before Christmas. At the outset, I should state that the improvement and maintenance of the regional and local road network is the statutory responsibility of the local authority, in accordance with the Roads Act. Works on these roads are funded from the council's own resources and are supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is a matter for each local authority. Indeed, Cavan and Monaghan do a very good job. Although they have been constrained by resources, they have got the resources every year they are required.

As regards the basis for allocating grants, within the budget available to the Department, grant funding is allocated on the basis of grant programmes and not on the basis of the category of road. The allocation of funding across specific roads, or across categories, is something we get submissions from local authorities about, which we assess. The main regional and local road grant programmes are targeted at specific policy objectives, including pavement sealing to protect the road surface from water damage, road strengthening based on pavement condition rating to lengthen the life of the roads - good work has been done in Monaghan, in particular, on that using new technologies - and a discretionary grant that allows for a range of activities, including pothole repairs, edge strengthening and renewal of signs, etc. These three grant programmes account for most of the grant funding and are allocated based primarily on the length of the road network in a particular local authority area.

Apart from a requirement that 15% of the road strengthening grant is spent on regional roads, the allocation of funding to different categories of road is entirely a matter for decision by each local authority. Having said that, in 2025, Cavan received an allocation of €19.193 million, which was an increase of nearly €1.8 million on its 2024 allocation, and Monaghan received an allocation of €18 million, which was an increase of just short of €1.8 million on the previous year's allocation.

I am awaiting the draft allocations for roads. I expect to have that in the next week. I will then go through that, taking into account working with officials, to allocate that and get it out quicker than we did last year. There was a slight delay because of the election and road allocations did not go out until around March. We intend to get them out in January of this year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I agree with the Minister on two fronts. Local authority staff in Cavan and Monaghan are doing a huge amount of work and are getting efficient use out of the funding that is allocated in terms of the road programme. The second area is that councillors across all political parties and all local Oireachtas Members agree that the funding in place is nowhere near sufficient in order to deal with the issues.

There are a number of different problems. The road network deteriorated as a result of cutbacks following the financial crash and costs have increased substantially. The increases we have seen, even in recent years, come nowhere close to addressing that. In Monaghan, for example, in real terms, the extra allocation was about €1 million last year *vis-à-vis* the two years in terms of actual funding provided. Well over €400,000 of that - it was actually closer to €500,000 in Monaghan - had to be spent on speed limit signs because of the new speed limits. The situation is that more roads are in need of urgent repair than ever before.

The Minister said he cannot give the actual figures. Will there be a substantial increase in the 2026 allocations?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Every local authority is looking for additional funding. Last year, we provided significant additional funding, which the Deputy acknowledged. We intend to provide a further increase in funding this year. I am not being evasive; I cannot give him that figure. I need time with colleagues to be able to go through the draft allocations, which I will look at. We take into account the submissions and feedback we receive from local authorities. I have met with most, though not all, local authorities in relation to the roads programme. I could not meet all of them in the short space of time that I had. Both Cavan and Monaghan do an excellent job. I know both local authorities well and the staff therein. Monaghan, in particular, has been to the forefront of using new technologies for road repair. It has got additional funding for that and is one of the counties that has piloted that programme. I commend its chief executive, Robert Burns, and its director of services on the work they have done there.

This will be in the next few weeks. I intend to get this out, if I can, in January. I will obviously share that with Deputies. We will get the allocations out to the local authorities so they can continue the good work they are doing. This will not all be fixed in one year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: No, but here is the difficulty. I have visited roads, including one that is close to the town of Ballybay and one close to Castleblayney, in recent weeks. The roads are in a terrible condition. From dealing with the local authority, the best it can do in the short term is patching work, which in many ways is economically crazy but it has to be done. The best-case scenario under the current trajectory is that it could take five or even six years before those roads will be properly restored.

Here is the frustration of people in those areas: they have seen their cost of insurance increase; they are paying their road tax; they have seen the cost of petrol and diesel being increased by the Government on an annual basis; and, for those who have to travel to Dublin or elsewhere, their toll charges have increased. They are asking themselves what they are getting for all of this, if they cannot even drive to their local school without risking bursting the suspension on their car.

I know the Minister cannot give the precise figures. Will there be a substantial increase in road funding so we can ensure that the programme for road maintenance and restoration will be accelerated in the coming months and years?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We cannot just look at this in isolation. There is the NDP and the projects we are advancing for new roads and new national roads across the country. In Cavan-Monaghan, there is the trans-European transport network, TEN-T, road network, which is critically important in the north west. There have been unprecedented levels of investment. There will be a further increase. The Deputy's definition of "substantial" and mine might be different, but I do not have a figure yet. I do not have the draft report. When I do, it will be considered. We will do that.

We will work with our local authorities across the country, which do a good job in this regard. The funding increases last year were significant. It has been good to see the local authorities being able to deploy those resources. More work needs to be done. Deputy Carthy would also acknowledge that this situation will not be fixed in one year. We have got to be able, on a phased basis and in a structured way, to continue increasing that funding. We are coming through, but are still in, a high-inflation environment where more money has been allocated but, in some instances, it has really just covered that inflationary amount. That has to be managed well, and it will be. In the coming weeks, we will be announcing the allocations.

Bus Services

102. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport the new bus routes that will be provided under his Department's 2026 current expenditure allocation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2584/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: What new bus routes will be provided under the Department's 2026 current expenditure allocation?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Improving accessibility, reliability and affordability of public transport while ensuring the system remains well funded and responsive to passenger needs is a core priority under the programme for Government. While my Department sets the overall policy direction and funding framework for the delivery of public transport services, the NTA has the statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services nationally. In this context, we secured an unprecedented allocation of €940 million for the PSO services in budget 2026. I mentioned this in my previous answer to the Deputy. That was a 43% uplift in one year alone. It has raised that base. As I mentioned earlier, we did not want to continue the practice of the previous five years of going back for continued supplementary budgets because you cannot plan properly. We need to get the PSO onto a sustainable footing. We have taken a real step forward in that regard. As the Deputy is aware, supplementary funding has become a recurring requirement and we wanted to move away from that. Accordingly, the 2026 allocation prioritised advancement of ongoing programmes and commitments in line with operational readiness and resource availability. This includes recently announced changes to the route alignments under phase 7 of BusConnects and the upcoming roll-out of new town services in, for example, Mullingar, County Westmeath, in quarter 1 of 2026.

I will continue, with colleagues, to engage with the NTA as it finalises its 2026 service plan, ensuring that planning and strategic decisions are informed by operational and resource considerations. Once we receive the draft plan, the Ministers of State and I will assess that. I expect there will be new services in 2026. We have to consolidate the new services brought in during the past couple of years. We have to manage the resources properly, which we will. I do not have the service plan yet, but I expect to get it imminently. We will take the feedback we get from all colleagues, Government and Opposition, with regard to services that are needed. People are using public transport at a level they never have before, which is great, and we want to continue to support that.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Minister has set out the size and, in his own words, the unprecedented current expenditure allocation for 2026. I am concerned it only gives him enough to maintain existing levels of services. That seems to be backed up by what his officials said. The minutes of the management board meeting were quoted in the paper: "The allocation, while substantial, will not allow for new services to be delivered" in 2026. For example, on the BusConnects programme for Galway city, the NTA said in 2023 that Galway's new bus network was scheduled for 2025 to 2026. However, when I contacted the NTA in November last year, it said that the new bus network in Galway city was currently scheduled to commence implementation in 2027 to 2028, subject to operational readiness and confirmation of funding. To be clear, the NTA is saying this is not an infrastructural issue, but a funding issue. Funding is key to the decision about whether Galway gets its new BusConnects system. I am concerned that gap in funding for new services identified by the Minister's officials is the blockage for BusConnects in Galway.

Deputy Emer Currie: I also saw that article and will take the opportunity to say we need the investment in the new services, like the N8 bus link from Dublin 15. However, we definitely need investment in existing services as well due to a growing population, growing demand and growth in housing. The Minister and I spoke about the fact that investment in existing services in Dublin West had reduced to €97 in 2022 and there was zero budget for 2023 in enhancing existing services. That led to serious reliability issues across the 37, 38, 39 and 40 buses. They are the backbone of our constituency. We need to invest in both new services and enhancing existing services. It was foolhardy to prioritise new services over existing services, leaving communities like mine behind from 2022 to 2024. It would also be foolhardy to now go in the opposite direction. I know from speaking to the Minister that it is a priority for him to invest in both and get it right for all the population of Dublin.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: We will take Dublin as an example. I am using Dublin because two Dublin Deputies have asked this question. We had 164 million passenger journeys on Dublin Bus alone last year. Those are record-breaking numbers. That has been supported by new services being rolled out and improvements to existing services, even acknowledging that there have been human resource challenges. We still have issues in some areas with reliability of services. The ghost bus phenomenon needs to be addressed because the customer needs to be central to everything our bus and rail operators do all the way across the country. It has to be about serving the paying customer because people are responding to the investment. We will not be able to do every new route that everyone wants in one particular year. We have to step that out and move it through.

Deputy Currie mentioned the N8 and has asked me direct questions on that before, as have Deputy O'Gorman, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and others. I intend to get that route in place in 2026. I am clear about that.

We have to work with partners in the NTA and we have a budget to manage. We do not have infinite resources either. Let us be clear about that, too. Getting the PSO onto a sustainable footing was critical. I was not going to do what was done over the past five years, which was to depend on large supplementary budgets coming in at the end of every year to support service expansion. That is not the way to do business. That is why my two Ministers of State and I insisted that we get a significant increase into the base in the PSO. That gives us a real platform to move forward into 2027 to 2028 and beyond.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: For my part, I will always fight for new bus services and public transport routes around the country. I brought in a question earlier specifically about the N8, a new service we have desperately needed for years and that has been pushed back. I am glad that the Minister is going to intervene, and we look forward to seeing that delivered this year.

I think about the growth of housing around our city and brand new estates in areas like Tyrrelstown, Hollywoodrath and Kilmartin Grove. These are entirely new estates in places that were fields two or three years ago. Those areas need new services. It is not always enough to say we have boosted the existing services, because there are brand new areas that have been created. Particularly in those parts of my constituency, and the Minister and I were at the opening of many of those homes, I know that many people cannot get into town because the bus routes are inadequate. That is why we have to fight for new services as well as improved capacity on existing services.

Deputy Paula Butterly: When I want to take a bus or train from Belfast to Dublin, Dundalk or Drogheda, the routes have improved. By rail or bus, they are absolutely excellent and even on the hour. However, if I want to go from east to west, from Clogherhead to Dunleer or Ardee and on to Trim or Kells, there are no buses and no public services to enable people to get to work or to get to medical appointments. I have written again and again to the NTA with no reply. If there is any reply, it is saying they have no plans to develop any services east to west within County Louth, or even connecting County Louth to County Meath. I find this extraordinary when we are trying to encourage people to use more public transport. There is the cost to car owners and to people who have to take time off work to bring loved ones to medical appointments. Surely this is something that can be considered.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: By the range and depth of the questions and contributions here, we see all of the different demands on the Department of Transport. That is good. We have advocates right the way across the House, but we have a Government that needs to deliver. We need to continue a phased and sustainable improvement in services. My predecessor in transport, the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, did a good job and we worked with him in that regard.

We needed to get that funding on a sustainable footing and I was not going to continue what was done previously. It meant having to go back every single year and look for short-term moneys to plug the gap. We need to be able to plan in a sustainable way. That is how the

Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, answered Deputy Whitmore earlier when she asked for a bus service to be announced. It has to be done in a planned way. We have to look at the network in its totality, all the way across the country. Deputy Dolan raised specific issues in his own constituency that we will work through.

I am concerned that the Deputy said he wrote to the NTA and got no response. That is not acceptable. I ask him to bring those to us. Every Deputy deserves a response and for their input to be respected. We will make a further improvement this year in 2026. Am I going to be able to keep everybody happy with all the services they want in 2026? No, I am not. However, we are going to see a further step change in that regard, an increase and improvement. We particularly have to serve our newer communities. We cannot look at this in isolation to the NDP capital investments. We are talking about the bus network. The first two BusConnects corridors have started and there has been major investment in rail, road and our bus network as well. We have lots of good things. This period of time could be transformational.

There were 343 million public transport journeys in 2024. That was throughout the full year. That will have substantially increased further in 2025. People are responding to the investment the Government is making. This is good for our climate and quality of life. We need to continue to improve it, and we will by working with people.

Bus Services

103. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will consider introducing additional Local Link routes and frequencies to better connect rural communities in Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2666/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: Many communities and individuals across Mayo continue to face significant challenges in accessing essential services like employment opportunities and social activities, as well as doctor's appointments, due to limited public transport options. Will the Department consider introducing additional Local Link routes and, more importantly, additional increased frequency to better connect communities in Mayo?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Keogh for raising the issue. As Minister of State in the Department of Transport with special responsibility for rural transport, with my colleagues, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, we are, as I told Deputy Whitmore, investing considerably in services throughout the country under the NTA's flagship Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, supported by funding allocated by the Department of Transport. I thank the Deputy for being a constant advocate in her own county of Mayo for rural transport and connectivity. We have seen funding increase by 56% between 2023 and 2024, with passenger numbers increasing by 72%. A great example of this continued investment can be seen in the launch of routes 460a and 460b in September of last year. These new routes offer connectivity to regional bus services in Castlebar station, Mayo University Hospital and to the villages located between Castlebar and Achill Island. I am pleased to share with Deputy Keogh that, last July, Ireland's first ever smart demand responsive transport service was launched in Achill. This pilot marks a major milestone in rural mobility innovation and is a flagship initiative designed to revolutionise how rural communities connect and access public transport, and the service includes a flexible door-to-door app-based transport

model, tailored to local needs, offering greater connections, convenience, accessibility and frequency. Since its launch last July, the pilot has seen encouraging passenger numbers, with a notable increase in repeat users highlighting the importance of the service as a transport link for residents in areas with limited transport options.

In October 2025, the operating hours of the TFI Anseo in Achill were extended and it now operates from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. to better meet the needs of the local community, providing more travel options for greater convenience and accessibility.

In conclusion, my Department supports continued investment in rural transport in line with the commitment in the programme for Government to continue delivering on the fundamental and foundational public transport service produced under our flagship Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will conclude on this. There is €31 million ring-fenced for rural transport, a 38% increase on funding from last year.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I was at the launch of TFI Anseo and I welcome it, along with all of the increases in spending. When we look at the map of Local Link in Mayo, it looks like we are really connected, but I am thinking of a lady in Fahy outside Westport who is in her 60s. Her mind is super active and she is a fantastic woman, but she has arthritis and cannot drive. She has one option to go to Westport on a Friday morning at 12.10 p.m., but she has three hours and 20 minutes in town before she has to be back on the bus for 3.30 p.m. It sounds as though that is great and she can go to town once a week and do her shopping and meet her friends but she has to plan that in advance. With TFI Anseo doing so well, it would be great to see that expanded into Erris and Westport so that people do not necessarily have to plan ahead. I also think of Pullathomas where one when can go as far as Curraunboy on a Monday or Wednesday at 10.30 a.m. and get a bus to Ballina at 10.44 a.m., but cannot get back. A lot has been done but more needs to be done.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The map paints a very good picture and I accept there are challenges. There are the provisions we have to bring and we want to see a further enhancement of the service. As I said earlier to Deputy Whitmore and I will say again now, we await the NTA service plan. As the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said to Deputy Carthy in terms of road funding, we will listen to all requests. We have a finite budget, as the Deputy will appreciate, but with the NTA, we will work to ensure we continue to invest in our rural transport. In the Deputy's own county of Mayo, we saw an increase in investment of 56% between 2023 and 2024 to more than €2 million, with passenger numbers increasing by 72%. As Minister of State, I will work with the Deputy to ensure we look at that map and see how we can fill the gaps in provision for the people the Deputy mentioned. I am fully committed, along with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to ensuring that map has connectivity all the way around.

Deputy Keira Keogh: We need to box clever when we are looking at it. For example, Knockrooskey is an area that does not have footpaths or lighting, so we cannot put an extra bus

stop in yet for the Bus Éireann route that moves through it. A Local Link would be really welcome there where the nearest bus stop is Coill an Bhaile and it is too dangerous to walk to. I think of Louisburgh, where the bus service finishes around 6.30 p.m. and the residents are cut off from the nearest swimming pool where kids want to attend lessons, the theatre or cinema.

I welcome the increased investment and numbers but we can think smart about it. We should expand the likes of TFI Anseo more so that we are being flexible and adaptive to the needs of our constituents and boxing clever with the resources we have. That would go a long way.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is right that it is about boxing clever and TFI Anseo is a success. I fundamentally agree with her. She mentioned Knockrooskey. It is about that joined-up approach in terms of the local authority with footpaths, the NTA and Bus Éireann. What I would like us to do further as a Department is better linkage in terms of more accessibility and highlighting what the Deputy referenced in terms of the child who wants to do swimming lessons being able to get on a bus, the footpath, the lighting, and having a bus stop on the road. That comes down to an holistic approach by the NTA, the Department, local authorities, local communities and the local bus service providers to make sure that we are more accessible and resilient.

People are voting with their feet. We as a Government and a Department are strongly committed to enhancing our Local Link services, as I know the Deputy is. She has been a champion for that for the 12 months I have got to know her and I hope we can work together to deliver further for the people of Mayo.

Rail Network

104. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Transport if plans are in place to progress the double-tracking of the rail line between Athenry and Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1763/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Athenry as a town is growing at a rapid rate. The town has been without a bus for a year and our trains are completely wedged. I welcome the investment in Ceannt Station in Galway, bringing it from a two-platform to a five-platform station. I welcome the investment in the passing loop at Oranmore to increase frequencies. However, I have to ask whether there is any plan to double-track the line from Galway city to Athenry.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for the question and I wish to confirm straight off that my Department is working with the National Transport Authority and Iarnród Éireann to progress a number of rail projects in Galway, including double-tracking the line between Athenry and Galway. In order to progress this project, Iarnród Éireann has appointed a multidisciplinary engineering consultancy, and the Galway line capacity study commenced last summer, so the work is in hand at the moment.

The development of an emerging preferred option is expected to be identified later this year. Separately, and related, as the Deputy said, works commenced at Oranmore Station last October. This project will provide an additional platform and a passing loop. This will increase

capacity on the Galway to Athenry line. The project is scheduled to be completed next year and will be of immediate benefit to the route.

Work is also progressing on Ceannt Station. These works, which are scheduled to be completed later this year, will increase the number of platforms from two to five, which will support the growth of train service frequencies envisioned under the all-island strategic rail review. In order to start making the vision set out in the rail review a reality, the NDP sectoral investment plan for transport, which my Department published in November, provides funding to advance a number of early interventions by 2030, including new passing loops and platforms to boost rail connectivity and resilience.

Included in these early interventions are new platforms at Clara and Woodlawn on the Galway line which will support journey times. The sectoral plan also provides funding to commence the construction of the reinstatement of the western rail corridor between Claremorris and Athenry. I look forward to seeing these projects being delivered in the years ahead. This morning I met the chief executive of Iarnród Éireann to get a progress report on the works that are going on right across the country in terms of the all-island rail review. I am happy to say that progress is being made and that last year we had 55 million journeys on rail. We are now talking about rail in a fashionable way as opposed to how we were talking about for the past 20 years, which was talking about closing it down. We are now in expansion and growth mode, and that is what we will be doing.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really appreciate the update and the fact that it is being looked at and that a team has been appointed to design a preferred option. However, I have to re-emphasise that Athenry is a town with a population of over 5,000 and currently has 200 homes under construction across four different sites. Things are going great for the town. Jobs are coming but that access to Galway city is vital but right now a town with over 5,000 people has no bus service. Our trains are completely wedged in the morning. I know that the trains and carriages are on their way but they cannot come quickly enough. The people are crying out for them and they want to see this happen. The double tracking is critical because that would enable a direct commuter link from Athenry to Galway city. The passing loop at Woodlawn as per the sectoral plan is vital as well because that would drastically reduce intercity times. All of this is progress but the Minister of State has to understand how serious it is right now in Athenry. There has been no bus service for over a year and trains are completely wedged.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Butterly, did you wish to come in on this?

Deputy Paula Butterly: Yes. County Louth, where there are 140,000 people-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Ah Jesus, what has that got to do with Athenry?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is allowed to speak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is allowed to ask the question.

Deputy Paula Butterly: It is based on rail, Deputy Mac Lochlainn. With a population of 140,000, County Louth is growing and houses are spawning at an accelerated rate. Our businesses are growing and we are attracting businesses into the county, month after month. However, our two train stations are jammed. There is no parking and there is no facility. I listened earlier when the Minister of State talked about how we have to be ambitious, and we are ambitious, but it is now time to have a serious conversation about a third railway station. We have the land zoned in Drogheda and it would make sense to have another train station in Drogheda, or north of it. However, if we are truly ambitious, surely we should consider a brownfield site half way between Dundalk and Drogheda and really plan for the future.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for raising that issue. As someone who has been in politics since 2004, I am glad to see the demands that are now coming for rail and for investment in rail. At that time, the agenda was to close down the railways and people continued with that up to two or three years ago. I am glad to see that my colleagues in the constituency have seen the light of day and are now supporting the implementation of and investment in rail. It is a success story and we are now in growth and investment mode. There are 285 new carriages on order at the moment, with a total of 750 to be procured over the next number of years. That is an investment. What is happening at the moment is that we have demand that is growing every year and that is great. What we have to do is make sure we, as a Government, provide the investment to make sure we can meet that demand and give a good experience to the passenger.

The idea of a new train station for Louth has a lot of merit. We need to get the population there travelling by public transport rather than by cars and all that goes with that. Over the next number of years, I will look forward to making sure we invest. My two colleagues here are totally behind me on that.

Deputy Albert Dolan: For fear there would be any confusion, I invite the Minister of State to look back through my social media since I was elected in politics in 2019. He will see that month on month, I consistently raised the need for the passing loop at Oranmore. On radio and in local media I have consistently pushed for the double tracking. Those projects are vital and they will be delivered but this has to be done collegially and together. I look forward to working with the Minister of State in the constituency to make that happen. We have a town that is growing at a rapid rate and the commuter service and the access to the city before 9 a.m. are vital. I appreciate the work that is being done but I would definitely invite the Minister of State to look back through my social media and I think he might be pleasantly surprised.

Deputy Seán Canney: When mentioned colleagues, I was not referring to Deputy Dolan but he knows the history of what people were trying to do. They were trying to close down lines and they were from political parties and none. Basically, I am saying that agenda is gone. What we need to do now is to work together to make sure we deliver what we can deliver. We have the will to do it and Iarnród Éireann is capable of doing it. We will start in a logical way. We are going to make sure that Ceannt Station is capable. In the meantime, while we are getting the double tracking done, we will get a passing loop and a new station at Oranmore.

We are also going to open up the line between Athenry and Claremorris, so that we can service the west of Ireland. I know well the Deputy supports all of that. The agenda has

changed and people are demanding investment. They are getting the investment and we will continue to do that. Not everything is going to happen at the one time. We have set out our strategic plan for investment over the next five years and beyond. When I met representatives of Irish Rail this morning, I got their programme. They are looking at the next 15 to 20 years. I am looking forward to seeing all of that being delivered, as the Deputy is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is wonderful to have that clarified and those in the constituencies are working together.

Deputy Seán Canney: Yes, I thank the Leas-Ceann Comhairle.

School Transport

105. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport if he will resolve the issues concerning bus drivers aged over 70; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2626/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask for the Minister to resolve the issue of school bus drivers, when they reach their 70th birthday, having to bow out and retire. This has to be addressed because it is causing problems. I have been raising this issue since January of last year. Right throughout the year, I have been at it. I hope there is some progress being made.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for asking the question. I know he is passionate about it, as are a lot of Deputies and Ministers, because it is something we need to get sorted.

The overriding consideration in relation to age limits for bus drivers has been safety. It is a matter for relevant bus companies, including Bus Éireann, to set their own terms and conditions in relation to employment, including retirement age. Bus Éireann applies a retirement age of 70 years for drivers across its wider road passenger services, including semi-State PSO services and school transport services operated or managed on behalf of the Minister for education. This approach is consistent across the PSO cohort, as neither Dublin Bus nor Go Ahead Ireland employ drivers over the age of 70.

Bus Éireann's policy of operating services with drivers up to age 70 is grounded in safety considerations. This policy is informed by the company's operational experience and also by ongoing engagement with relevant stakeholders, including the RSA and other public operators. At this stage, I have had contact with Bus Éireann over the past year since I came into office. I have asked it to look at the requirements for people over 70. It has been looking at that. It has a safety board and an accessibility committee and they are considering whether to increase the upper age limit to 75 for its drivers. Bus Éireann is looking at this at the moment and it will continue to engage with the Departments of Education and Youth and Transport on all of this.

Hopefully, we will get a conclusion on it which will be acceptable to all in the not-too-distant future.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for that. The issue is straightforward: bus drivers on the school transport scheme cannot drive beyond their 60th birthday. They

cannot drive a minibus for two or three hours a day with ten or 15 pupils on it, yet they can drive a 50- or 60-seater coach hundreds of miles, and are doing so. School bus operators are losing drivers every year, and in Laois this is a real problem. They are finding it very difficult to replace them because the work is part-time and really suits retired people. I emphasise this to the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. The cohort driving the school buses is largely retired people. People generally retire at 60 or 65 and get five or ten years' driving. I am not asking for them to keep going until 100 or 90 years of age; I am simply proposing that they go to 75 on the condition that they pass a strict medical test. This is the key. I do not want to endanger anybody. I can understand Bus Éireann and other bus operators being concerned, but there are real issues starting to arise here. I refer to somebody driving a minibus two or three hours a day five or ten miles to a local school. They can drive 50-, 60- and 70-seater coaches, which they are doing and I know people who are doing it, yet they cannot drive their local school bus. That is a ridiculous situation. The Minister of State is right that we need to address the safety issue, but we need to solve this issue as well.

Deputy Seán Canney: A private operator can be asked by the school to bring a group from Galway to the zoo in Dublin and someone aged over 70 can drive the vehicle, but someone that age cannot drive students in the local area to the local school, a route with which they will be a lot more familiar. There is an issue there to be resolved. In all fairness, Bus Éireann is looking at that. It has to look at it from a safety perspective. It also has to look at it from a logistical point of view as to how this will work. This probably affects the private bus operators more than Bus Éireann because they have people who are well experienced and school bus runs are part-time work.

This is a work in progress. The Department of education is involved in it as well as Bus Éireann. I will continue to work with them to try to find a solution, which the Deputy is requesting.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The school bus scheme is working fairly well, and it is good that is happening. I think problems were ironed out a bit quicker this year, and that is welcome. I acknowledge that. However, we have to have the drivers to fill the positions, and it is the Government's ambition, as I understand it, to expand the scheme, maybe to bring in people who are closer to the school and to reduce the distance from the school to qualify for it. If the Government is going to expand the scheme, that, along with an expanding population, will require more drivers. It is really important that we try to fix this because in September there were problems again trying to fill positions. Bus operators were frantically going around trying to get people to take on positions. We could extend the age by three, four or five years beyond 70 with a strict medical test. We do not want to see anybody put in danger. As I said, this has become a problem in Laois. I know it is starting to become a problem elsewhere because other Deputies have started raising it as well. The strict medical test is the issue. I ask the Minister and the Ministers of State to bear this in mind and to use their influence with Bus Éireann because the Department pays money to it every year. People's health is better now. They live longer now. Their health is better beyond 70. Seventy is the new 50.

Deputy Seán Canney: I reassure the Deputy and every other Deputy in the House that this is a priority for the Department of Transport and that I have the support of the Ministers and

the Government on this. We are making sure that any changes we make, or made, take into account all the safety factors that have to be considered as well. I agree with the Deputy. I see this in my constituency where private operators find it hard to get drivers to do part-time work and there are very well-qualified drivers who may be 70, 71, 72 or 73, who can do this and who were doing it last year but who cannot do it this year. We have to look at that and have a pragmatic approach, and that is what is being done at the moment. Hopefully, we will get the solution to it in the not-too-distant future.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

106. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the corrective action modelling project his Department is developing to correct the trajectory of carbon emissions from the transport sector out to 2030; when this will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2585/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Over Christmas, the Minister raised the white flag on our 2030 emissions targets four years ahead of schedule. One of the areas where Ireland continues to struggle is the emissions from our transport sector. The NDP sectoral plan the Minister published in November referenced the corrective action modelling project that the Department of Transport is leading to try to tackle the gap in our transport emissions. When does the Minister expect to publish that work?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: First, no one has raised the white flag. I read with real interest and, actually, amusement the Deputy's comments in that regard since he is someone who served in the Government in the past five years and his former party leader did a very good job in that area. We are reducing emissions while the economy and the population are growing. A lot of the projects we have been talking about today will help to further decarbonise our transport system. Transport is critical in that regard. I am being honest with people and changing that climate conversation to ensure that people see the benefits of the transition that is under way in this country. Really significant progress has been made across many sectors, including agriculture, transport and, in particular, energy.

We are clear on the climate obligations we have. I am committed to advancing the progress we have made. However, we also have to be very honest with ourselves about where we will land at the end of the decade. I gave a view on that, which was based on projections I have, and it is important people know that. That is not to surrender anything at all. I can see where we will further accelerate our progress between now and the end of this decade and in the early 2030s. That conversation itself needs to change, and we are having an honest conversation with people and stakeholders and further advancing the good work that was done by my predecessor and the previous Government. However, we need to be honest with people too. That is where the discussions we have had even here this morning about the competing demands, and rightly so, with regard to public transport will be critical. I refer to continued electrification of our public transport network and of our car fleet. We have exceeded targets, by the way, with regard to electric vehicles. We have targeted the supports there for people through tax measures and grants. We will accelerate retrofitting of homes as well. In no way has anyone raised a white flag in that regard. Of that I can assure the Deputy.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Minister's comments over Christmas cannot be taken in any way other than raising a white flag on this issue. What shocks me is that it is happening four years before the date for our 2030 targets.

Notwithstanding our disagreement on that, will the Minister speak to a particular project taking place in his Department, the corrective action project, which is to address the emissions gap pre-2030 as well as post 2030? If the Government is to effectively try to bring us on track in the transport sector pre-2030, this has to be published soon so those actions can start to be implemented and can take place. Has the Minister engaged with his officials on this project? Does he have any sense of the recommendations for new, extra measures, that this will bring forward? Does he have any sense of when that document will be published? Will any additional budget be provided for these extra measures?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will get back to the point of agreement in this regard. I thank the Deputy for the question. It has been widely acknowledged that transport is and continues to be a difficult sector to decarbonise, but we are making progress. The development of the transport chapter of the climate action plan identified and set out policies intended to put the sector on a pathway to achieve an emissions reduction of 50% by 2030. Current indications, however, are that the carbon budget 1, 2021-25, target of 54 MtCO₂eq has been exceeded and any overshoot will therefore be deducted from the carbon budget 2, 2026-30, target of 37 MtCO₂eq. Achieving that more demanding target will be a challenge. Again, we have to be honest with people on that.

With that in mind, my Department has been working very closely with the NTA over the past 12 months to deliver the CAP corrective action modelling project that the Deputy has asked about. The aims of the project are essentially to identify potential policies and measures to correct the trajectory, which we are doing; determine whether the transport sector can go beyond this in order to address the issue of unallocated savings for carbon budget 2-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will come back on the supplementary question with the rest of my time.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Green Party has called on the Minister and his Government to publish a plan B to show how, across all sectors of the economy, they will try to get us back on track to meet the emissions reduction targets. This project could serve as a model as to how that could be done across the economy. As regards one of the key consequences of the decision set out in the Department's sectoral plan for transport in November of last year, moving that 2:1 ratio of public transport to roads back to 1:1, I think we are already seeing the negative consequences of that.

12 o'clock

If the project recommends, in light of the height of our transport emissions and the importance of investment in new public transport, a return to the 2:1 ratio, will the Government accept that recommendation?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To put to bed this mistruth in relation to the ratio, the Deputy is not correct and has been peddling this mistruth. The 2:1 ratio always was and always will be a relatively rough and ready reckoner. Having said that, based on the NDP sectoral plan, the ratio is as at more than 2:1 in relation to investment in public transport versus new roads. That is a fact. The Deputy cannot dispute that. We are looking at an investment package in the NDP that is heavily weighted towards public transport. On that basis, the ratio is about 2.6:1 in favour of new public transport over new roads. That is a fact.

To get back to the Deputy's question, the corrective actions modelling project is progressing very well. That will feed into the 2026 climate action plan. It will be completed in the coming months. I cannot tell the Deputy that it will be this quarter but it is well under way. I met officials yesterday evening and got a progress update on that. Where we can take corrective measures, we will, and we have a real opportunity to do that in the transport sector.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Seacht mí ó shin, cuireadh Rialtas an Aire ar an eolas go raibh Airí, daoine atá íoctha suas le €200,000, i bhfad níos mó ná gnáthoibrithe na tíre seo, tar éis an iomarca pá a fháil. Seacht mí ar aghaidh, tá a fhios againn anois go bhfuil deichniúr Aire sa Rialtas seo nach bhfuil tar éis pingin rua den airgead sin a thabhairt ar ais. Ba chóir dúinn a bheith ionraic faoi cad go díreach atá i gceist anseo. Ní airgead an Rialtais ná airgead na Roinne é. Is airgead an phobail é, airgead cáiniocóirí na tíre seo.

Seven months ago, the Government was informed that Ministers, people who are already handsomely paid - far more than average workers - have been overpaid. Seven months on, we now know that ten serving Ministers have not paid back a single red cent. They have not arranged a repayment plan, settled their account or even taken the most basic steps of returning money that never belonged to them in the first place. On top of that, we know that 17 former Ministers have not repaid what they owe either. A total of 27 individuals who have held high office, some of whom still hold high office, who know better, who earn salaries and pensions far out of reach of the ordinary person, are still sitting on taxpayers' money. Let us call it what it is. This is not the Government's money. This is not the Department's money. It is the public's money. It is taxpayers' money. The shocking thing is that the public only came to learn about this yesterday after my question to the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in the finance committee. His explanation, if you could call it one, is that there is ongoing follow-up with the Ministers. Seven months later, and there is ongoing follow-up. Only in this Government could a phrase like that be used to justify a complete absence of urgency, discipline, accountability or consequence.

Let us be clear about the contrast here. If ordinary workers or pensioners are overpaid by the Department of Social Protection, through no fault of their own, they are not given seven months to agree to pay it back. What happens in the real world is very simple. The Department acts without delay. That is the experience of ordinary people right across the State. Why is it one rule for ordinary people and another rule for Government Ministers? Why is the ordinary

worker or pensioner given little or no time, yet the Ministers, some of them on up to €200,000, think it is okay for them not to repay the public the tens of thousands of euro they were overpaid?

These are not trivial sums. We are not talking about small numbers. We are talking about amounts of up to €30,000 that are owed by individual current Ministers and still, they could not be bothered to pay back even one red cent. These are the same Ministers who decided the recent budget, a budget that left ordinary, working people worse off in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. All the while, they are sitting on public money that does not belong to them, that they were asked to repay seven months ago, and that they have not repaid. These are the Minister's colleagues. God knows, they could be sitting beside him. What exactly are these Ministers waiting for? What is the Government going to do about this scandal? Will the Minister tell us today when every single cent of this public money will be paid back? There must be no vague assurances and no ongoing follow-up. Crucially, will the Minister please tell the Irish public what defence the Government offers that ten current Government Ministers have neither paid back this money nor even made an arrangement to pay back this money seven months after they were requested to do so?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for his question. I want to clearly point out that the underpayments and overpayments in question have come about through a series of administrative errors in the National Shared Services Office, NSSO. Critically, the cohort of people who are affected include, first, retired civil servants who previously work-shared and whose pensions were undercalculated and, second, current and former Ministers and officeholders and retired civil and public servants. Those are the cohorts who are affected by the error in the NSSO. Primarily for Government Ministers, what has happened is that, through a series of Government decisions where Ministers took a deduction in their pay, a salary sacrifice, the question was posed of whether the pension deduction calculation should be on the gross salary or on the net amount that was sacrificed. This was obviously brought to the attention of the Minister for public expenditure and reform last year.

Unlike what the Deputy said, there was a public statement on the matter and the Minister answered questions at that time. This was not the fault of any politician or former civil servant; it was an error by the NSSO. The Government immediately committed to having a review carried out by Derek Moran, the chairperson of the NSSO. That will report in March to ensure that something like this does not happen again.

Regarding the ten Ministers the Deputy cites who currently have not concluded the pay agreement to repay moneys owed, a number of clarifications have been sought about the calculations that were brought forward. I know that everyone has the right to ensure that they are paying the correct amount and every single Minister wants to ensure they are doing that. That is very important.

The Government is crystal clear that any retired civil servant or Minister who does not comply or pay back what is due to the Exchequer will not receive their pension because this is a key requirement in funding their pension. I also robustly challenge what the Deputy says about the social welfare protection code that we have in this country. I, like many politicians, do weekly clinics, meeting constituents who are very vulnerable. The Department of Social

Protection does not demand a repayment immediately. It works out payment plans that respect vulnerable citizens throughout the State.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Not seven months later.

Deputy Peter Burke: There are limits on the gross threshold that is deducted every single week, bearing in mind the vulnerable situations that families find themselves in. I have worked with the Department in representing people who, sometimes through no fault of their own, have an overpayment to the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Did you ever get seven months of a window for them?

Deputy Peter Burke: The second point I want to robustly challenge is that there is nothing in this budget for workers or those who are most vulnerable in society. We have put forward a €300 million package for people who are vulnerable and to ensure that those who are working on lower incomes are rewarded. We have increased the minimum wage by 40% over the last four years. Deputies will see from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, returns that real growth in wages in our economy has come through over the last number of years, with 13 sectors growing. We have also protected the most vulnerable by reducing the VAT rate on gas and electricity to 9%, which is €100 a month, implementing the free schoolbook scheme and increasing social protection payments by €10, which amounts to €520 for families every single year, as well as making improvements to the hot meals programme.

There is also the public service pay agreement, which gives an increase of 17% over the lifetime of the agreement to those who are most vulnerable, in particular, a 3% top-up for incomes under €50,000. That is how the Government is delivering and protecting the most vulnerable. To do that, we need to have a strong engine room, a strong economy, about which Deputy Doherty would know absolutely nothing.

A Deputy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Give the Minister a wee clap there because he defended some of you anyway. God knows, it may be the people beside you who owe the tens of thousands of euro, money that is still resting in their accounts no doubt.

Deputy Colm Brophy: There is a lot of dodgy money around-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister doth protest too much.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: How did you buy your constituency office? Yourself and Pádraig bought it for cash, did you not?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let me make the point. Maybe the Members heckling have the most to answer for in relation to this. The core issue is that Ministers were overpaid tens of

thousands of euro. Some Ministers paid that money back. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, he called on all the Ministers to pay it back. The Minister, Deputy Burke, did not even have the audacity or cop-on to do that. This money is not the Ministers' money. It is the public's money. These are Ministers who are paid €200,000, senior Ministers who are holding on to this money seven months later. There are clear rules in relation to this. The money has to be paid back within 12 months. Deductions of at least 8% have to be applied in relation to salaries and Ministers are holding out. It is absolutely unacceptable. These are the same Ministers who stand in front of me and tell me they did not leave people with disabilities high and dry even though we know they are €1,400 worse off. I do not know to this day whether the Minister in front of me today, yesterday or last week-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----owed €20,000 or €30,000 to the public purse and has been refusing to do it over the last seven months.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I ask the Minister to do the decent thing and-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----call on the ten Ministers and his former colleagues, the 17 ex-Ministers, to immediately engage in a repayment plan to pay that money back without delay. It is now seven months on. Nobody else gets that latitude.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: These Ministers think they are above the rules and it is not acceptable.

A Deputy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peter Burke: I robustly challenge that Ministers are not engaging with the NSSO and are not going to pay this money back.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: They have had seven months.

Deputy Peter Burke: This has a huge net in terms of the number of people affected. I listed the three cohorts that were affected by the NSSO, through no fault of any public representative or anyone who was in-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Should they pay it back?

Deputy Peter Burke: -----or anyone who was in receipt and was overpaid or underpaid in relation to a pension deduction for the NSSO. I am making quite clear that all Ministers are engaging with the NSSO, all Ministers will bring this to a conclusion and will ensure-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When? Will it be next year?

Deputy Peter Burke: When they get the clarification.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Peter Burke: People are fully correct and entitled to seek clarifications from the NSSO, which has made a series of errors in this regard over a number of years. People are entitled to seek clarifications right across the public service, and people are doing that. I can absolutely assure the House this will be brought to a conclusion.

I can also say that in terms of our budget, we have protected the most vulnerable with a €300 million package to ensure the most vulnerable in our society - our carers and those with disabilities - are protected and, critically, that our lower paid workers are getting an increase that is outpacing the rate of inflation in our economy.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Should the Ministers pay the money back?

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Government has not protected the most vulnerable. In the last hour, the consumer price index came out and it shows families had to pay more for basics like clothing, footwear and education costs over the past year. Inflation may be slowing but prices are still rising. The Minister knows this because under his Government's watch, the price of beef has increased by 44% in the last five years. It has gone up 24% in the last 12 months alone. Butter and milk prices have risen by 45% in the last five years. In the last year, the price of butter has risen by 10% and that of milk by 5%. In real terms, diced beef prices are up €4.10 in the last five years alone. This is the economic cut of beef to make a stew or a casserole and its price is up by that amount. The price of two litres of whole milk has increased by 73 cent in the last five years. This impacts everyone who has to go to the supermarket to feed a household. The average price of a pound of butter has increased by 55 cent and that of a kilogram of cheddar cheese by 62 cent in just one year.

These price hikes are hitting people really hard, especially now when we know from research that one in five people planned to borrow money just to get through the short but expensive Christmas period. It is not just the everyday costs that are going up. This week, we saw Diageo, a multibillion-euro company, announce that the price of a pint of Guinness will go up by 20 cent. An Post has announced that the price of a stamp is going up by 20 cent. This is just to send a simple letter. These increases are constantly chipping away at people's disposable income and their sense of financial security.

The most recent data we have on motor insurance costs show a rise of 9%. The cost of health insurance has risen by almost 10%. As we know, Irish households are paying more than most in Europe for electricity. People are getting hit in every single direction. The Government is even piling on the direct pain. The cost of third level education rose by €500. Road toll

prices are going up. Energy prices go up while the energy support payments are gone. Hope that this Government has any interest in tackling the affordability crisis has all but disappeared.

A recent study by Core Research shows the cost of living remains the defining concern in 2026, with 74%, three quarters of the population, not expecting it to ease. Of adults surveyed, 72% are unconvinced that housing affordability will improve. Some 52% of adults also now expect Ireland to face a recession in 2026. This is a damning indictment of the Government's ability to tackle the affordability crisis and to provide hope and confidence to people.

The question that has to be asked is whether the Government has just given up. It has no answers for increased grocery prices, no answers for increased insurance costs and no answers for increased utility bills. When is the Government going to step up and provide direct supports for those working people, vulnerable people, who need them? Is it prepared to look at such measures as windfall taxes on the big energy companies and the big supermarket chains to target supports at people struggling to pay their bills?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his question on a very important area which is very much to the fore in the mindset of the Government, namely, the cost of living and how vulnerable families grapple with the weekly shop and the price of groceries. In the context of budget 2026, I want to outline how we as a Government are supporting people who are the most vulnerable. We came forward in budget 2026 with a €9.4 billion package. This is about 3.25 times the size of the pre-pandemic package. In terms of wages, if we look at the CSO data, which is the gold standard, it shows a 45% increase in weekly wages since 2015. The average wage is over €1,000 a week. All 13 sectors of our economy are growing evenly. Critically, regarding real wage growth, we are outpacing the rate of inflation.

To assist the most vulnerable families, we extended the clothing and back to school footwear allowance to two- and three-year-olds. We increased the child support payment by €16 for over-12s and €8 for under-12s. We brought forward the reduction to 9% in the VAT rate and extended it to the end of 2030, saving people €100 a month on utility bills, at a cost of €254 million. We brought forward a number of changes to the social welfare code. We brought the fuel allowance to help 46,000 additional families. At this point, one in four households gets the fuel allowance. We have increased the allowance by 15%, which is well above the rate of inflation. Again, we are looking to prevent poverty and fuel poverty over these critical periods. We have also increased the basic rates of social welfare and the thresholds for the carer's allowance, bringing us on a pathway to abolishing the means test. Again, this is rewarding carers and trying to assist those who are protecting the most vulnerable and doing the State a huge service in keeping people in their homes and living independently.

We have worked very hard in increasing the basic social welfare payments by €520 per year. This, again, is a great assistance. We have extended the thresholds of the working family payment for those who are working and on lower incomes. In the public sector pay agreement, we can see how we have ensured that people on incomes under €50,000, those who are under the most pressure, get the greatest increase. Over the lifetime of the agreement, as I just outlined, the increase will be about 17.3%.

This demonstrates what the Government is doing and the action we are taking to respond to the challenges. This year, I will enhance the powers of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, the key agency that looks into competition in our sectors, to

ensure we are getting fair competition in the grocery sector. We have seen a number of investigations to date in this regard. We have also seen the work the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is doing in meeting the energy companies. They are very clear. They have hardship funds, and anyone who is in danger should liaise with their energy company. There is assistance there.

We want to work to ensure that everyone is protected in society. That is what you do when you have a strong economy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Has the Minister dealt with anyone who has tried to apply for hardship funds for a utility company? It is an absolute nightmare. None of these measures, unfortunately, are working enough. Why are people stopping me in JC's supermarket asking why I cannot reduce the price of groceries? Why are people turning up to my clinic, Deputy Wall's clinics and my colleagues' clinics with utility bills that they cannot pay? It is just not enough. That is the reality of it. The people who cannot pay their bills this month will not get any comfort from what the Taoiseach said yesterday about the Minister, Deputy O'Brien's affordability group that is being set up. No one is going to get any comfort when they cannot pay their bills this week and are going to have to go to St. Vincent de Paul or their community welfare officer and beg, plead and borrow. These are working people who are doing everything they can to try to keep a roof over their head.

This Government does not do legislation. That is clear from last year. It does task forces and working groups. It does not even do them well. What it does is procrastination and inaction, or, when it can, it does deflection. It is very hard to do deflection on the cost of groceries. The Government can do it on housing when it tries to blame immigrants, but it cannot do it on groceries or utility bills. When is the Government going to take on the big utility companies? When is it going to take on the big conglomerates? When is it going to provide targeted payments to those who need it, those workers who are doing everything right and are being let down by the Government?

Deputy Peter Burke: I have pointed out a series of actions that the Government has taken to protect the lowest-paid workers in our economy, those who are on disability and those who are caring for the most vulnerable in our society. There is a €300 million package aimed at child poverty, for which we have a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, trying to ensure that families are protected through what we see is a significant challenging period through inflation. Families are now in receipt of all of those actions throughout 2026. We want to do more as a Government. That is why we have set out a pathway that is sustainable. Some of the calls made in this House weekly are not costed and are not sustainable. Our job is to protect the most vulnerable in society through the social welfare code. As I said, one in four homes in our country is now in receipt of fuel allowance. We have seen improvements in terms of social welfare being linked to work with the back-to-work allowance, all those key areas that we need to do more on. If the Deputy looks at the warmer homes scheme, there has been an elevenfold increase since it was brought in in 2020 to future-proof homes throughout our country to ensure that we bring costs down and make our households more sustainable.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The issue I am raising with the Minister is house prices and the availability of housing. In County Laois, house prices are up, rents are up, homelessness is up and notices to quit are up. Despite the best efforts of the council, which has a good active

housing programme, the homeless figures increased by 60% when you compare December's figures with those last year. The Government's social housing target for 2025 was 10,000 - a low enough, modest target. In the first nine months of the year, just 3,143 were constructed - 31%. Cost rental and affordable to buy targets were not met, with just 925 cost rental and 563 affordable purchase delivered. Rents in Laois on new tenancies are up by 12.1% in one year according to Daft surveys. A small house in Kilminchy, a suburb of Portlaoise, is advertised for €2,100 per month. That is more than €500 a week. Workers cannot afford that. It is way over what people can budget for.

House prices are up 60% on average compared with 2020. Notices to quit are being issued every day. I do not know if the Minister is getting that in his office, but I am certainly getting it. There has been a sharp rise in the number of notices to quit since Christmas. Some rental housing is not yet registered with the RTB and there is no tenancy agreement in place. A notice to quit can just be verbal. I saw one last week that was sent to a girl by text. Before the Minister tells me this is illegal, I know it is. The tenants know it is illegal, but tenants cannot complain because they are in such a vulnerable position and are trying to get permission to stay there longer. Renters in some areas are going to face a 10%, 20% and 30% hike on 1 March and after 1 March. Laois will be one of those areas. Rents on new tenancies can be then set at the highest rate of the market - I just read out one case to the Minister - and thereafter 2% every year on top of that. There is a particular cohort of low- and middle-income workers, workers who are generally earning between €35,000 and €65,000. They cannot keep up with the rent hikes and cannot get on a local authority housing waiting list because they are over the income threshold, but they do not have sufficient income or savings to get a mortgage. Delivery of cost-rental and affordable purchase homes are key to sorting this out. We need to be able to get them into a situation where they can either buy an affordable home or rent one. The Government needs to scale up affordable and cost-rental housing.

Will the Government now take action to head off the inevitable sharp rent hikes on 1 March and thereafter for workers and families who will not be able to afford them? Will the Government and the housing Minister increase the number of cost-rental and affordable to purchase homes being constructed in County Laois and other counties? Can the Minister's Department and the Department of local government review the income thresholds for rented council housing to allow more low-income households to get on that ladder?

Deputy Peter Burke: Over the negotiation of our capital plan, the Government took a view that we have clear priorities. Critically, we know that if everything in an economy is a priority, nothing is a priority. In the €19.1 billion that we are going to spend this year, there are four clear priorities. Housing is number one, along with the enablers of housing in water, wastewater, energy costs and transportation, which are key to unlocking housing. For every single person in this State, it is one of the critical things. You have to see a trajectory for owning your own home, for getting the keys to your own home or to be supported in accommodation if you do not have the means to do so. That is why this Government has worked to ensure we are prioritising housing.

If the Deputy looks at the CSO data that was published at Christmas, apartment completions are up 30% year-on-year for the first three quarters of 2025 compared with the previous year. Other scheme dwellings have seen a significant increase, with 12,200 for schemes and single dwellings, one-off houses, at about 4,136. The first-time buyer rates are at record levels. A

total of 27,000 drew down mortgages to September - 60% of the market share. That is the balance we have had a huge challenge in reversing over the last seven years. We now have first-time buyers at that level of drawdowns in the market share. At this point, we have 29,000 social housing units that are at varying stages of completion in the cycle that will be coming into our economy. We also know in terms of our first-time buyers that we have 24,335 in the first three quarters of the year, which is up 13% year-on-year. That is why the Government is really focused on making the changes that are going to bring more affordable housing into the economy, to ensure that we have options for people who want secure tenure for renting in terms of our cost rental model, for those who are most vulnerable in social housing, and also the opportunity to buy and own your own home, like the first home scheme, which gives that opportunity, as well as the help to buy scheme, which has helped thousands of families across our economy get the keys and realise their ambition of owning their home.

I assure the Deputy that this is one area that is being supported by record capital on behalf of the Government to ensure that people get that opportunity. Year-on-year, the Deputy will see huge improvements, as the data shows. The Deputy only has to look at the CSO data. It is the gold standard. If you go around the country and look at the construction sites, people can see diggers on the ground, builders there and housing being delivered which is of the highest quality it has ever been in the State.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for his reply. He quoted different sets of figures from the CSO. I am quoting figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Yes, it has to be a priority, but the Government needs to scale up the delivery of cost rental and affordable to buy for that wedge of people, workers and families, who are caught just above the threshold for social housing but below the level of income that would make getting a mortgage achievable. One of the things I would say to the Minister, and I have said it to successive Ministers for housing, is that we need to reduce the bureaucracy around the construction of social, affordable and cost-rental housing. We need to work to standard plans. This is how the big developers are doing it. They are doing it and they are selling the houses like hot buns. There is no problem with that. People do not mind if their house in Laois looks the same as a house in Cork. The Department insisting on councils starting with a blank canvas for every scheme is not the way to go because it is costly, with architects' fees, etc., and it slows the production of houses. We need to mass-produce affordable to buy and cost-rental housing. That is the message I am giving the Minister today. It will save money and time and it will get people housed.

We need to house those people who are squeezed in that middle cohort.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Government has taken a number of actions across 2025 and into 2026 to try to speed up construction while ensuring that we are getting high quality housing into the marketplace. We have revised the national planning framework which ensures that we have the infrastructure matched with the zoned land to ensure that we are getting those high-quality houses. We have increased the amount of funding for the purchase of local authority housing. This is key to ensure security of tenure for those who fall into a position where their property is being sold. We have also increased significant investment in our State utilities, such as Irish Water, to ensure that we have the infrastructure and allowing developer-led initiatives. Again, this is trying to speed up the timeframe in which we can deliver housing. I absolutely

assure the Deputy that, in terms of cost rental, affordable housing and social housing, it is a fact that we are at record levels. These have not been seen since 1970s in terms of social housing and also since the records go back to 2007 in relation to first-time buyers coming into the economy. This Government is critically supporting first-time buyers to get their keys to a new home. This is vastly different from what other politicians offer in this Dáil. They want to pull the rug from under them. We want to support them.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The stated purpose of the Government rental reform package, including a six-year minimum tenancy to give tenants security and certainty, is something that we in Independent Ireland very much support. However, these measures now have produced seriously undermining consequences for families dealing with homes tied up in the fair deal nursing home scheme. Under the fair deal scheme, a loan secured on the family home generally has to be repaid within a one-year process. That would be the standard up and down the country dealing with nursing homes and the fair deal scheme in general. The practice is often required that they have to sell the property to pay for the bills that are there for the fair deal patient.

The new requirements under the new laws that the Government has brought in that offer a six-year tenancy directly conflict on some occasions with the obligations placed on the executors and executrices of these wills. It puts them in impossible illegal and legal positions. The executors have a duty to repay debts, administer estates promptly and protect asset values for the benefit of the beneficiaries. While it is technically possible to sell those properties that have a tenant in situ in that timeframe, it often reduces the sale price of the property and undermines the duty of, and conflicts with the burden that is on, the executor or executrix. The Government has accepted that these reforms will change landlord behaviour. We welcome that but, in these cases, there is probably something that we did not look at or did not think about.

In the case of families who are having to choose, they are in a situation where they are leaving the homes vacant rather than renting them out, which runs against the entire housing supply goals. These are the goals that were set up by the Government. Will the Government commit to reviewing the conflict and providing a targeted exemption or flexibility where property must be sold or repaid under a fair deal loan and settlement to allow the executors and executrices of those estates to administer within the law?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. It is a priority of the Government to get as many rentals as possible, cost rental and indeed in the private rental market, particularly those mom and pop landlords who have one and two houses, of whom there are about 85% in terms of those who have the market share. It is critical for a functioning economy that we bring in further supply into rental accommodation which is so important. That is why we have also been supporting renters by increasing the rental tax credit. This is critical to assist them and ensure that 320,000 people who are renting get that key support. If renters are jointly assessed, they get €2,000. It is so important that would continue.

In relation to the changes that the Deputy mentioned, I understand that the Bill is coming before the House shortly. It is critical that if there are any issues or unintended consequences, we can put forward amendments in relation to that. The pre-legislative scrutiny report has

concluded. That is being presented to the Minister and the Department. They will take into consideration some of the issues that have been raised by the Deputy and at the committee. It is important that we look at how we can get more rental properties into the market. That has to be the first objective here. Second, how do we protect those who are vulnerable and renting in our economy and ensure that we have and continue to have the security of tenure that we have done over this current Government? This is key to ensure that people have that certainty in the rental market. That is why there are so many forms of cost rental of rental options now which are critical for renters.

As the Bill comes forward, it will be up to the House to scrutinise it. The pre-legislative scrutiny report from the Oireachtas joint committee will also provide recommendations to the Minister. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is working very hard on it. There was strong collaboration with all the bodies in this sector in trying to ensure that there are no unintended consequences and that we get those key rental properties into the marketplace. This has been a challenge, if we are being honest, over the past number of years because of either the regulatory burden or the supply issue. That is what we are committed to resolving.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister for his reply. It is fair. There was no intention from anyone in any place to say that this was just overlooked. We in Independent Ireland will be tabling a couple of amendments when the legislation hits the floor. I am quite happy to meet with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, about this and bring to him a small delegation who have a number of concerns about the fair deal scheme. There are an awful lot of houses in Ireland that are sitting idle at the moment under the fair deal scheme that people are not renting out because of the situation. They are anticipating situations like this that are not currently being looked at in the legislation. Roughly 8,000 houses around the country are currently vacant due to the fair deal scheme.

Deputy Peter Burke: The fair deal scheme has its own primary legislation that underpins it. Any unintended consequences can be looked at through that prism. We absolutely do not want any policy that would go against the Government's incentivisation with regard to dereliction and vacancy. One can see the very significant moves we have made by bringing 20,000 homes back into use, supported by the vacant property refurbishment grant. We can see the extensions of that, particularly for over-the-shop living and through the croí cónaithe scheme where people can get a grant to bring a derelict property back into use, as well as grants from the SEAI. There is €100,000 collectively between both grants to bring derelict properties back into use. For those who are in a situation where they are embarking on drawing down the fair deal scheme, we will also have to look and ensure that we do not see properties vacant for a long time. We have to respect the wishes of relatives too. This is very important in that process. We will work with the House in the context of the pre-legislative scrutiny report and when the legislation comes before the Dáil.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Under Standing Order 38A, I call on Deputy Timmins.

Deputy Edward Timmins: The programme for Government states:

Local Government is the beating heart of our democracy. It is responsible for many of the essential services on which we depend – housing, local roads, planning [and many other things]."

I wish to talk about my experience of over 20 years as a local councillor before I came here and how the powers of the councillor have been diminished.

First is planning. In 2004, I could and did make changes that made a real difference to help rural planning. In 2022, I was told that they must comply with national planning guidelines, so my changes were not allowed. In the 2022 Wicklow development plan, we de-zoned vast areas of land because of the Planning Regulator's guidelines. These were based on the outdated 2016 census. We knew we had a housing shortage. At the time, I pointed out how crazy this was but nobody was listening to us councillors at the time. At one stage, the Planning Regulator told us that we could not zone for four houses in a town of 2,000 people. In addition, the section 140 powers for councillors covering planning were abolished.

Housing bodies have taken over much of social housing. They are not accountable to public representatives. As they do not have to sit before councillors at a monthly meeting, the democratic input is further reduced. Water and wastewater are completely outsourced. Again, the responsible body is not accountable before councillors on a monthly basis or through a strategic policy committee, SPC. The number of councillors has reduced from 1,627 to 949 after the changes in 2014.

This is one of the lowest *per capita* representations in the whole of Europe.

The only significant funding income for current expenditure comes from commercial rates and property tax. All other funding must come from central government. This further limits councillors' powers. The property tax was supposed to bring extra funding to the local authorities but all that happened was that it reduced Government grants. Some councils still do not retain all of the property tax collected and this needs to be addressed as it is simply unfair. I ask that we consider using the taxes that are very much local based, for example, motor tax, the residential zoned land tax and the new derelict property tax.

I understand the local democracy task force met six times and will produce a report in February. I hope it will recommend many of the points in the Seanad report on local democracy of October 2024. I urge the Minister and all of his colleagues to support these recommendations.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Timmins for raising this very important matter. Like him, I served many years as a local authority member and I was also privileged to be cathaoirleach of my county in Westmeath. I got a huge amount of experience through the process. I am always very much aware that local government is the closest arm of government to the citizen, with the more than 1,100 services it provides in many sectors of society. They are absolutely key and they are upheld and fought for by our local authority members throughout the country. This is why, when I was Minister of State with responsibility for local government I prioritised making improvements by introducing maternity leave for female councillors, which was so important, and bringing about proper pay and conditions for local authority members. I am very much aware of the challenges they face, particularly in our

modern era when devising county development plans, local area plans and all of the strategies that local authorities are now obliged to have under primary legislation.

Notwithstanding the 180 powers in the reserved functions they have, erosion has taken place in many sectors and many areas of our local authorities. I know from working with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, that he is doing great work in the local government sector. The Government established a task force on local democracy back in June. This has been working to progress and bring proposals forward. It held its inaugural meeting on 26 June and has met on seven occasions to date. It will meet again this afternoon. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will be in very close contact and will be watching over the reform proposals therein.

I am absolutely a strong supporter of local democracy and of our local authority members, of all parties and none, and the great work they do throughout our country. I would be very supportive of additional powers for our local authority members. We are very clear about the work they do. In many cases, and I know this from my work on local government, local authorities in particular are first responders. If we look at the Ukrainian crisis, when thousands of people came to our shores, local authorities were at the very forefront. We can look at the global pandemic and the work they did. We can look at any of the significant weather events that hit our country. Local authority workers, and particularly our ground staff, are often out there risking their lives, trying to ensure that people can get to work safely and that our local communities can function. A huge debt of gratitude is owed to all of our outdoor staff and all of our local authority members who work tirelessly to ensure we have stronger communities. They are working to plan how infrastructural investment takes shape in our communities through county development plans and local area plans.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I appreciate that the Minister understands and that he has been there. I repeat that powers are far too centralised in this country. We all know the word "subsidiarity". The programme for Government supports it, and it is stated in it, but we do not apply it to councils. They have the local knowledge and must be allowed more autonomy in decision-making. In addition to this, communication between Departments and local authorities must be improved. At the beginning of last year, I asked in the Dáil that the Minister give local authorities housing targets and that every quarter he would meet, on a formal basis, with the CEOs and directors of planning of the councils and that he would monitor these targets monthly. This must happen. It is too important not to happen. This will lead to hard questions being asked of the councils and also hard questions being asked of the Departments. Similarly, more communication needs to happen with county councillors. There are six times as many county councillors as TDs and we need to use this resource. The voices of the people who elect councillors are not being heard. The centralised decision-making process undermines our democracy.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Timmins for his response. I am very much at one with him and the vision he is setting out. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, along with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste, has brought in a number of local authorities and continues to do so with regard to housing and zoning. This is setting the trend that we need to be more ambitious to ensure we underwrite the infrastructure for the growth of the growing economy we have in this country and the significant growth in our population. Section 28 guidance encourages

ambition and local authorities taking a proactive view. This is what we want to see in the trajectory of local property tax, which gives a significant uplift to the budgets of local authorities; we need to see more responsibility being taken on. The local democracy task force is examining these functions and the report will be received by the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, in the coming weeks. We want to ensure that local authorities take responsibility and this will be important for housing. We have to hold the feet of the local authorities to the fire, and we are unambiguous in saying this, in respect of housing. We also commend them on their work in other areas, which is really appreciated by communities up and down our country.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want to return to the issue of the fact that ten ministers have not paid back money owed to the public funds, in some cases tens of thousands of euro, seven months after it was requested. When I questioned Deputy Chambers, who is the Minister responsible for the NSSO, the body which will deal with these repayments, he said he is not privy to the interactions between Ministers and the NSSO and that he does not know the identity of the ten. The Minister has made a stout defence of the fact that those ten have not yet paid back the money. I want to put a number of questions and I expect direct answers. Does the Minister know who the ten Ministers are who have so far not paid back the thousands of euro they owe the public purse? How many of them are Fine Gael Ministers? From where was the information the Minister put on the record of the Dáil today in their defence elicited, if it was not from the individual Ministers? Crucially, when are the Ministers going to cough up and pay back the money they owe the taxpayer? I ask for direct answers please.

Deputy Peter Burke: This is questions on promised legislation but I will respond directly to Deputy Doherty, as I have been very clear in relation to the NSSO. This is an error by the NSSO and Ministers are engaging with the NSSO. I do not know, nor should I know, the identity of anyone's payroll matters in the State. I do know from dealing with the NSSO because, as I said, between underpayment and overpayment everyone who served and gave a salary sacrifice in government, with regard to the decision to reduce salaries by 10%, was affected. This is why it is critical-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Where did you get the information on the ten?

Deputy Peter Burke: Let me finish. In relation to the ten the engagement is ongoing. My point was-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who told you?

Deputy Peter Burke: Because I dealt with it myself. I know exactly how-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How do you know what the other ten are doing?

Deputy John Cummins: This is promised legislation.

Deputy Peter Burke: Who said that no Minister is willing to pay this back? Who said that? That is the reverse of Deputy Doherty's question.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Jack Chambers said they have not paid it back and they should pay it back.

Deputy Peter Burke: He did not say that no one is willing to pay it back. We are very clear that anyone who does not take action will not get their pension.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do you know who the ten are? How many of them are Fine Gael Ministers?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will continue on. I call Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In the week when special school classes were announced for 2026, I need to raise with the Minister the case of River Valley Community National School in Swords. It is not looking for a class in 2026; it is looking for a class now. This is in agreement with the NCSE. The school is a developing school in good but interim accommodation. It is being refused by the Department of education the provision of an autism class right now only because it is in temporary accommodation, even though it has the space. I ask, please, because I will continue to bring this up, will the Department meet the patron body and the principal on site to get this matter over the line? Autistic children are being let down, as are mainstream children and the staff. This can be resolved, please, Minister.

Deputy Peter Burke: I know there is record level of investment in places for those with special and additional educational needs for 2026. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is working very hard on improving it and ensuring everyone has a place. I will raise the specific issue in Deputy Smith's constituency with the Minister for education and report back to him.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Compliance with the law is not a gift for X to give to this State but this is the benevolent tone in which it announced this morning that it will indeed comply with law in jurisdictions where that law exists.

This belated assurance for geo-blocking, which in itself is hugely problematic because it can be so easily circumnavigated, is too little, too late. It is not surprising that we are hearing this tone from this tech company because kid gloves is the approach that this Government and this State has taken to dealing with big tech and the harms it is wielding on society. The response over the last two weeks has been chaotic and it has taken a Minister of State in the Minister, Deputy Burke's Department to actually cajole this Government into action. I want to hear an update on what is happening with the Attorney General and his analysis of the law. I want to know if the Garda investigation, which we heard about yesterday in committee, has finally reached the doors of X on Fenian Street, and I want to hear what further Government action is going to happen so that we can take off those kid gloves and wrestle back control from big tech on the absolute havoc it is wreaking on society.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Gibney for her question. I really want to stress that the primary concern of the Government is our people and our children. Irrespective of any revenue that ever comes into this State, that is our main objective to protect. We have independent institutions that administer justice in our country.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: But they are not doing-----

Deputy Peter Burke: An Garda Síochána is investigating this matter. It has confirmed this week at the committee that it is investigating breaches in this matter.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It has not got to X yet.

Deputy Peter Burke: I cannot instruct the Garda where to go. It is independent. It conducts its investigation and we must let that take its course.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: There are regulatory bodies supposed to deal with it.

Deputy Peter Burke: Under the Digital Services Act, DSA, it is very clear. Coimisiún na Meán and its chief executive were out stating that they were examining this issue. They will take action with our European authorities in the Commission. The Government is being very hard on this issue.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The UK is threatening to block. The Irish Government could be much stronger.

Deputy Peter Burke: We will protect our people. We will protect our children and that will always be the case on behalf of the Irish Government.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Charles Ward: The Housing Agency is finding new ways to exclude people from the remediation scheme. We have already seen the system fail when pyrrhotite in concrete was ignored. The agency has now introduced a new method to refuse access, stretching IS 465 and selectively presenting facts. The approach will not withstand scrutiny and must be addressed. The decision has been independently reviewed by engineers and a legal expert, both concluding it is wrong. Reliance on an appeals process to correct such decision is reactive, costly and causes harm to homeowners. The Minister has the authority and responsibility to act proactively and treat the decisions as a test case and set a fair, consistent standard before people are affected. This matter goes beyond a single property. Now that this has been brought to the Government's attention, will the Minister intervene to stop this and review the test case or will it be allowed to continue? I want a simple "Yes" or "No".

Deputy Peter Burke: Obviously, I am not the Minister for housing, but I will take this issue up with him. I would point out that the Government has been very proactive in protecting homeowners in Donegal. I acknowledge all those homeowners who have applied for the

current scheme, which was enhanced, and the work done throughout our communities to ensure people and families are protected, because that is a primary concern of the Government for all those families that are affected in Donegal. I will raise the specific issue Deputy Ward brought up with the Minister for housing.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In Ireland, we use over 200 million single-use tea and coffee cups a year. That equates to at least 20,000 cups an hour. That is a staggering figure. Coffee cups are, according to Irish Business Against Litter, among the top five most littered items in the country according to a recent survey. Most of these cups cannot go into recycling bins because of the polyethylene lining used in the paper, making them non-recyclable. The Government had proposed a 20 cent levy as well as other measures. As the Minister knows, the litter issue is one thing, but the long-term environmental damage is another. When is the Government going to use or amend the Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2022 to bring in a refundable deposit? Along with other products that I have referred to before such as the vaping material and nitrous oxide canisters, they are littering our country and we need to have something with a behavioural impact as well as increased fines.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Government has made significant progress in this area, particularly with the deposit return scheme, which we can see has had a very significant impact in our country. I will raise the Deputy's specific issue with the Minister in relation to the circular economy. A lot of retailers are taking action themselves. That is one area where customers can choose a more sustainable model. I will raise the Deputy's concerns with the Minister.

Deputy Tony McCormack: In County Offaly, renewable energy developments are mainly located on peatlands around Rhode, Croghan, Edenderry, Banagher and Cloghan. These projects require abnormal load vehicles of up to 135 tonnes on 16-axle trailers. The damage caused by one trip of one of these vehicles is equivalent to one year of normal traffic. As a result, these peat-based roads now require annual maintenance, placing major pressure on our local authority roads budget and taking funding away from other roads that also need work.

Offaly has historically carried the heaviest load in providing power to this country and we are doing so again through renewable energy. We are simply asking for a fair crack of the whip and that separate, dedicated funding be provided to Offaly County Council for these road projects.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy McCormack for his important intervention relating to Offaly. I will raise it with the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, in connection with the request for additional funding that Deputy McCormack has placed on the House. Our road network, particularly in rural counties, is of significant importance to the community.

Deputy John Clendennen: I am very proud to come from a small village called Kinnitty where we have benefited significantly from multimillion euro investment in the public realm, public services and the development of the Slieve Bloom mountain bike trails. However, in the last 12 months, we have lost our post office and our last shop, which had served the community for decades. Thankfully, a 68-year-old man, Mr. Jodie Flaherty, has stepped into

the breach to open a new shop. However, it is a reflection of the challenges in the market conditions and trading environment for micro-businesses in small villages right across the country. I appreciate the measures the Minister has introduced through, for example, the local enterprise office in terms of supports, but there is a concern around viability. I ask the Minister and the wider Government to ensure there are further measures to make sure the viability of our micro-businesses in the best interests of our public good, our economic good and our social good.

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge the huge work Deputy Clendennen is doing in being a firm advocate for our small family businesses. I know, as Minister for enterprise, that they employ two thirds of people right across our community. We have taken a number of initiatives this year around viability and worked to ensure that they are more viable, including setting up our small business unit and working with our cost of doing business advisory forum, which is looking at the interoperability of regulators that are currently on our landscape and ensuring we are doing things faster and being agile as an economy. We also have a huge amount of work to do, as is outlined in the programme for Government, related to other viability measures. We will work with Deputy Clendennen to ensure our small businesses continue to grow. As I pointed out in my earlier contribution, all 13 sectors of the economy are in a strong growth phase right now.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Yesterday, the Irish Wheelchair Association and other disability organisations had a session in the audiovisual room. They gave some stark facts and figures to us. Sometimes, we all get lost in statistics and figures. The reality for people with disabilities is that they are affected far more by the high cost of living - approximately 16% more. They are in need of some form of a one-off payment now. This winter and the next few months can be severe and extremely cold. At present, they are receiving huge electricity and gas bills, some up to €500. They told us they were in a position where they had to give up a few meals a week to heat their homes and stop their home dialysis treatment and go to their local hospital to save on their electricity bills. There are a few cases where they stopped recharging their mobile wheelchairs.

I ask that the Government consider a one-off targeted payment of €400, with an estimated cost of €145 million. Considering the surplus billions of euro that is in the coffers at the moment, it is a very modest ask for the most vulnerable people in the country. As they say themselves, they are 22% of the invisible minority.

Deputy Peter Burke: During Leaders' Questions, I raised quite clearly what the Government was doing for people who were most vulnerable, particularly the 15% increase in our fuel allowance, of which one in four households is now in receipt of, to reflect the challenges related to the cost of living. I also mentioned the social welfare increase for carers, those with disabilities and those on the margins of society of €10 per week. There are further interventions that assist people through the social welfare code. I always point out that the community welfare office is ready to assist people if they have any one-off shocks or meet a liability they are unable to discharge. I assure people that the Government will continue to work to support people with disabilities. In 2026, we have a record budget for disability services - this is a fact - and the Government wants to continue to support that sector.

1 o'clock

Deputy Michael Cahill: The importance of public transport and connectivity in rural areas cannot be emphasised strongly enough. In that regard, I acknowledge the tremendous work of Alan O'Connell, manager of Kerry Local Link, and his staff. As a councillor, I called a number of years ago for a hop-on, hop-off bus service on the Ring of Kerry. Today, thankfully, there are several buses going in both directions but there is a great need for additional routes. The tender process for the Killarney to Mallow route is complete and we await funding.

I will raise three other important routes: Beaufort to Killorglin via Whitefield; Kate Kearney's Cottage at the world-famous tourist attraction, the Gap of Dunloe, to Beaufort village and on to Killarney town; and from Dooks in Glenbeigh to Cromane and on to Killorglin town. Will the Minister ask the Minister for Transport to allocate the necessary funding to the NTA for the Connecting Ireland mobility scheme to allow these important routes to proceed?

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Cahill gave us a good tour of the kingdom. I join him in articulating how important Local Link is and the agility it provides for communities across the age spectrum. It is striking to see in my locality the varying age groups that use it weekly to help them socialise or go to hospital appointments. It is a key asset to our community and another way of thinking. I absolutely support the Deputy's call and will raise it with the Minister.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Minister for Health and the HSE agreed to provide funding for the first floor of Mallow General Hospital to be developed so 24 beds could be put in place. Work is ongoing. What progress has been made on bringing forward the opening of the development? There is huge pressure on Cork University Hospital and on Mallow as regards extra beds. I understand day beds are being used in Mallow to accommodate inpatients. Can the opening of the 24 beds be brought forward to alleviate the pressure on the hospitals?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): The Deputy is right to highlight the opportunity Mallow presents and has presented for some time to HSE south west to provide step-down facilities and other healthcare facilities, particularly to help with the discharge from Mercy and Cork University Hospital. There have been beds there that have been available. I am having a full seminar with HSE south west on 5 February, when I will go through all of that in detail, including making sure all the beds funded are opened on time and in a timely way, as well as making sure all discharge pathways that currently exist are being fully utilised by all model 3 and model 4 hospitals there.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am supporting a local family in Drogheda in dire straits because of a mind-boggling decision made by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to bring forward an arbitrary deadline of 1 October for parents seeking special class or special school placement for their child in the upcoming academic year. Eight-year-old Alfie has a diagnosis of developmental language disorder and global delay sensory overload which means he cannot deal with change, has issues eating and drinking, needs help with toileting, wets and soils himself regularly and has severe anxiety and stress along with no sense of danger. He has been hospitalised owing to stress responses and mental health difficulties. The challenges he faces

have increased since moving to mainstream education and his mam advises that only following hospital admissions in early October did she begin pushing for special class placement and learned of this deadline. They have secured a place in a special class in a different school that would meet Alfie's needs but the application could not be completed without a letter of eligibility from the NCSE. The school closes to applications tomorrow.

I do not like raising individual issues on the floor of the House but, having contacted the local SENO and the NCSE to plead for flexibility in the deadline, I have been told the facility to issue the letter of eligibility has ended. It is completely unacceptable the NCSE's refusal to issue a letter of eligibility will mean Alfie or any other child could not complete an application for a special school placement. For the sake of these vulnerable children, this arbitrary deadline needs to be scrapped.

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

Deputy Joanna Byrne: As well as that, I ask for urgent intervention from the Government with the NCSE to ensure Alfie and his mam get the eligibility letter they need for tomorrow and Alfie gets the education and care he deserves.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It seems a very genuine case in connection with Alfie. The date was brought forward to give greater certainty but the Minister is working with the NCSE. If the Deputy raises that with the Minister on a case-by-case basis, I hope we will get a satisfactory resolution.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: My office has been inundated with telephone calls from worried carers in receipt of carer's benefit and carer's allowance. A number of them received letters from the Revenue this week and last week telling them they are liable for tax. Does the Minister accept many of these carers were unaware there was a tax payment due or a burden upon them? Will his Department consider exemptions and thresholds for transition and protection of carers affected to ensure they are not penalised. Carers are among the most vulnerable people in our community. The Minister mentioned how big our welfare system is and how big the budget is. I find it entirely unfair people who are giving up and sacrificing and are getting out of the house to get a break for a couple of hours while caring for and committing to their families are receiving worrying letters from Revenue saying they are being audited, owe tax and will be paying tax on their carer's benefit or carer's allowance.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I am a firm advocate for carers. We in society owe a huge debt for the work they do. That is why the Government is responding through supports and is on a trajectory to abolishing the means test for carer's allowance to demonstrate our support for the sector. The taxation is based on other income people may have received. The Taoiseach has sought a briefing on this. It was raised in the House earlier this week. We can revert to the Deputy in due course.

Deputy George Lawlor: In December the IDA published its annual results for 2025, stating it has secured a record 323 investment proposals, representing a 38% increase on the previous year, and expected to deliver over 15,000 new jobs. In Wexford last year, Bank of New York

Mellon disposed of 310 highly skilled jobs. The workers lost their jobs and the offices are on the market in an IDA business park in Wexford town. This is an ideal opportunity to acquire a really good suite of offices in a building that an IDA company could move into. I urge the Minister to impress upon the IDA to purchase this building and secure employment - perhaps replacement employment for the 310 workers of BNY Mellon who lost their jobs in Wexford.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. I assure him the IDA is liaising with BNY on the building and a future occupant for it. That will be to the forefront for any building that becomes vacant because of a change in operations, like BNY had in terms of its consolidation. We will do everything we can to get a replacement tenant in it. One of the things I am really driving the IDA on is the dispersement of jobs. We need to see a strong proportion going to regional areas. It has hit 56% or 57% and we hope that will continue throughout the remaining four years of the current strategy.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I raise the horrific case of a peaceful working family in Finglas who suffered the terrible trauma of being petrol bombed out of their home. Their house was destroyed in the arson attack and they just made it out alive because of the brave actions of one of the children, Amanda Uwase, who is in the Gallery today. She went back into the burning home and rescued her younger brothers and sister. Her mother works as a carer and was rescued by the fire services. However, the response from the Government and the State to this terrible attack on peaceful working people in Finglas has been absolutely outrageous in its silence. The family has been left homeless. This is not good enough. Where is the response from the Minister for justice to find the perpetrators, bring them to justice and be tough on such a heinous crime? Is the lack of response because these are disadvantaged communities?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: This is disgraceful.

Deputy Mary Butler: This is scandalous.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is it because this attack could have been racially motivated? Members could give me the respect of letting me finish.

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

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Give the gardaí some respect.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is it because some people's lives are worth more than others?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have asked you to conclude, Deputy Hearne.

Deputy Rory Hearne: A child was murdered in an arson attack in Edenderry.

Deputy Mary Butler: That is appalling.

Deputy Rory Hearne: An entire family was almost murdered in Finglas. Will the Minister meet with Amanda and her family-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Hearne, you should conclude, please.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----and do everything possible to ensure they are moved to appropriate housing and the gardaí find the perpetrators? These are reasonable questions and this is a reasonable ask.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: You are politicising gardaí.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The family is homeless.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Deputy Hearne should be ashamed of himself. He really should be.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Deputy Brophy should be ashamed of himself. The family is homeless.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Where is the response?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Where is the response? Where is your press release?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have some order, please, Deputies?

Deputy Gary Gannon: If it was a deportation flight, you would be out. The family has been made homeless and nobody has talked to them. There has been nothing in this Chamber about it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Minister resumes his seat, we will just move on. Do the Deputies want to listen to the reply?

Deputy Peter Burke: I want to acknowledge Amanda's presence and say how proud of her I am. I saw her report on the news. The work she has done in tertiary education has been exemplary. As an Irish Government Minister, I want to say that she and her family are really welcome in our country. My heart goes out to her on what she has had to experience.

I will say to Amanda that we have an independent justice system in our country. I absolutely assure her that An Garda Síochána will investigate this heinous crime in full and ensure that someone is brought to justice for it. I also acknowledge the huge contribution that people who come from many different countries make in ours. I am very proud of the one in five people working in our economy right now who were not born in Ireland. They make a contribution to our healthcare and hospitality sectors. Many of them keep the cornerstones of our economy together. Amanda, you are very brave. Keep the faith. This country will have your back.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why is the Government demonising them every day?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Families in Kildare North are still reporting that their children do not have confirmed secondary school places for September. This is despite the apply to school pilot programme the Minister for education introduced in Celbridge and other locations around the country to provide earlier clarity and reduce duplicate applications. The overlap between towns in Kildare North is delaying offers and leaving parents and, more importantly, sixth class children in complete uncertainty. If this pilot is genuinely producing more robust data, then that information needs to be used to identify where additional capacity is required. This is particularly pertinent to Maynooth Community College, Maynooth Post Primary School and Salesian College Celbridge. I ask the Minister to ask the Department of education and the Minister how the data from the apply to school pilot is being used to ensure that the children still awaiting places in Kildare North receive timely offers and how it will inform capacity planning moving forward.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising those very important issues on behalf of his constituency. I will raise them with the Minister for education and ask her to revert to him on the policy position directly.

Deputy Joe Neville: What specific measures are the Minister's Department and Enterprise Ireland undertaking to ensure that SMEs in Ireland stay up to date with advancements in AI and digital technologies as they grow at a rapid rate? Local enterprise offices, LEOs, have been very good at giving grants to small companies but what I am talking about are mid-range SMEs that would like to get involved with Enterprise Ireland but sometimes struggle to do so. What steps can we take this calendar year and next year as we look forward? These changes in our society are huge. Rapid improvements are being made and we need to get them into our companies to ensure that we stay in touch with technologies and companies from outside Ireland.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this very important issue and for the work he is doing for the enterprise sector to ensure rewards for enterprise are very much embedded in our economy. A number of offers are currently going through Enterprise Ireland. We have doubled the value of the innovation voucher, which is a huge assistance with tertiary education. It provides for a great deal of the commercialisation of research that can be seen taking place in our economy. The grow digital voucher offers up to €5,000 for smaller businesses. To support them, we also have bespoke schemes offered by Enterprise Ireland for cybersecurity, business consultancy and process innovation. These allow businesses to see how bringing in artificial intelligence can result in greater productivity and, critically, allow workers to work on other areas, focusing on growing business and bringing more revenue streams into the economy.

We have seen record growth among Enterprise Ireland companies this year. Exports were worth €36 billion, which is something never heard of before. We want to continue that growth, add 75,000 additional jobs over the next five years and see growth in research, development and innovation, where the tax credit will help. We are aiming to bring approximately €2 billion into the economy through Enterprise Ireland high-value jobs and continued exports. I will work with the Deputy to help companies to start growing in scale through the schemes we have over the coming years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Did the Leas-Cheann Comhairle call on me?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I did.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sorry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do not be shy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will try not to be.

How does the Government justify ploughing ahead next Thursday with a Bill that still allows the counselling notes of victims of sexual assault, rape and child sexual abuse to be accessed in trials despite all it has been told in recent months and years about how damaging and traumatising that is? I refer to the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026. This provision should never have been contained in this Bill because it is such an important issue. It has been thrown in with pepper spray, street furniture and a million other things in order to get it passed. On 22 December, the Minister said that he was going to look at further amendments but the Bill has appeared with no further amendments. People are still going to have to choose between therapy and trial. The only change is that, instead of the person waiving their right, it will now be passed over to a judge for a disclosure hearing on whether the counselling notes should be allowed. This does not take away the chilling effect of your notes being accessed. It forces the victim to choose between proceeding with a trial or proceeding with therapy. It is absolutely disgusting that any law that allows this exists. The Government has had ample opportunity to outlaw it completely.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising this very important issue. I understand that the Bill was published on 9 January and that it is down for Second Stage in the House. It is important to raise those issues. I will raise the Deputy's specific concerns with the Minister for justice during the week.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They have been raised with him already.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: It emerged this morning at the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts that there had been a significant overspend on an IT system for SUSI grants, which has now cost almost three times the originally budgeted figure of €2.2 million. The Comptroller and Auditor General drew attention to this at this morning's meeting. The project, titled "My SUSI", began in 2015 and by 2024 it had run to €6.4 million, although it is still only at the pre-project phase. What does the Government know about this? What oversight is the Department providing?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): I understand this is an historical issue. As far as I am aware, there was a write-down on the project in 2021. Value for taxpayers' money is paramount. The project

should deliver. As the Deputy has said, the project is ongoing. It is an important and fundamental system but it must be delivered efficiently in a cost-effective manner. I have asked for a full inquiry and will update the Deputy and the House as that goes on.

Equal Status (Access to Toilet Facilities) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Mark Wall: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to entitle customers with certain medical conditions to make use of staff toilet facilities in retail establishments in certain circumstances, to provide for redress where the entitlement is not met, and to provide for connected matters.

I am delighted to introduce the Equal Status (Access to Toilet Facilities) Bill 2026 to the House today. Some people simply cannot wait until they get home to use toilet facilities. This is particularly true for those who live with chronic and invisible health conditions such as Crohn's disease or bladder conditions. Organisations like Crohn's and Colitis Ireland and Spinal Injuries Ireland offer "no wait" cards. These aim to empower individuals to request access to toilet facilities when they are in urgent need. However, these cards have no legal standing in Ireland. This is in contrast to places like California and Texas, where there are laws providing people with certain medical conditions access to a staff toilet when they need it most.

The lack of legislation in Ireland places many people living with Crohn's disease and other conditions in social isolation. My Bill aims to offer a compassionate and practical solution to this by placing no wait cards on a statutory footing, ensuring that, where there are no public toilets available, shops and businesses with a staff toilet will make it available to a person with a medical condition who is in urgent need. The Bill also addresses previous concerns from businesses regarding liability under section 3 of the Occupiers' Liability Act 1995 by excluding businesses under section 5 of that Act. There will be no cost implications under the Bill on businesses to make any adaptations or other changes to staff toilets for the purposes of their use.

This Bill is not just about access to toilet facilities. It is fundamentally about recognising the lived realities of people with chronic medical conditions.

It is about creating a caring Republic. It could be life-changing for so many people.

I want to use this opportunity to thank Maria Crowe from my home county of Kildare. Maria contacted me a number of months ago and we met up to discuss her condition and the problems she was having with businesses refusing her the use of their facilities. I was immediately struck by how brave she was and how she wanted to help others who were suffering in the same way as she was. She created the "No wait card Ireland" social media page and I encourage everybody listening and looking in today to support that page and the Bill I am launching today. I am asking the Government to work with me and Maria on this Bill for the sake of so many people. Of course, the reason for the need for this Bill is the lack of public toilet facilities in this country. That is something that will take time and we must have further conversations about it. However, time is something those who need such a card simply do not have. We need to reassure businesses that they would have no liability for allowing

people holding this Government-issued card the use of their facilities. I have already reached out to their organisations to discuss this important matter.

I have Crohn's disease and I know there are other people in this House who unfortunately have that disease too. We are among over 40,000 people in the country who suffer from this chronic disease. Many more thousands have chronic bowel diseases and problems which need such a card. Believe me when I say that when you get a flare-up from this disease, your life is put on hold and there is only one room in your home that you are concerned about. This is why it is so important to introduce this Bill. When a person with such a bowel disease gets an invite to go out with their friends, as many of us do, their first concern is not what to wear or how they might look, but finding out if the location has publicly-accessible toilet facilities. That is the quality of life for so many people in this country. It can change and they could have a better life and make better life choices if such a card was accepted by Government and introduced in the quickest possible time. I appreciate the Minister of State staying with us today. I ask him to work on this card with me, Maria, and everybody who suffers. I plead with the Government to fast-track the introduction of this card. It could be life-changing for so many people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): 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 Mark Wall: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.23 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.23 p.m. and resumed at 2.03 p.m.

Artificial Intelligence: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): It is a great pleasure to address the House on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, who will join us momentarily.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment asked me to begin by addressing the serious concerns that all of us have in relation to the abuse of AI capabilities, more specifically regarding Grok's ability to "nudify" individuals without their consent. To be absolutely clear, the sharing of non-consensual intimate images is illegal and the generation of child sexual abuse material is illegal. Coimisiún na Meán, as Ireland's new online safety and media regulator, is at the heart of Ireland's online safety framework, including the regulation of social media. Under the online safety framework, there is an obligation on platforms to act

on reports of illegal content, so the public can report illegal content to the online platform, which must react on that report, and to Coimisiún na Meán. A failure by the platform to protect against illegal or harmful content being shown can lead to significant financial sanctions and, under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, continued non-compliance can lead to criminal sanctions for senior management. Under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission has powers with respect to the proliferation of illegal content online on platforms, including X, and the protection of fundamental rights, including protection for minors. Coimisiún na Meán is engaging with the European Commission in this context in relation to Grok. The Attorney General has also been asked to advise on other mechanisms within the legal framework to protect people from digital harms like these.

To move on, the Department would like to share its key priorities and long-term vision for Ireland's approach to artificial intelligence. Our country has long been recognised as a dynamic and forward-looking digital hub, but maintaining this position demands continuous effort and ambition. To secure the country's place at the forefront of technological change, it is essential to embrace the transformative potential of artificial intelligence across the economy and wider society. Last week's announcement of the €4.7 billion sectoral capital plan marks a decisive moment in our ambition to lead in innovation and advanced technologies. This is the largest ever investment in our enterprise and innovation ecosystem. It is a long-term commitment to jobs, competitiveness and building the infrastructure that the world's most advanced enterprises demand. Crucially, more than €1.3 billion of this plan is dedicated to enterprise, innovation and commercialisation. That means sustained investment in disruptive technologies, technology centres, research partnerships and major European projects.

Through these investments, we are clearly signalling our ambition to position Ireland as a global leader in advanced manufacturing, AI and space technologies. As the Department pursues this ambition, we must also acknowledge that rapid technological progress brings real societal challenges, particularly around safety, privacy and the protection of fundamental rights. Building public trust in AI is at the heart of Ireland's AI strategy. Our Government has prioritised putting in place the appropriate governance mechanisms and guardrails to ensure AI is used responsibly in Ireland. The opportunity AI offers is immense, but so too is the Department's responsibility to get this right and to use AI for our greater good in business, the economy and wider society. That is why the Department has been actively working to build public understanding of AI through trusted independent voices, including the enterprise digital advisory forum and the AI advisory council; implementing the EU AI Act; rolling out standards and certification for AI; establishing a new AI office of Ireland; and making Ireland's voice heard in international AI governance forums.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment will continue to couple bold innovation with strong, trusted governance. Citizens and businesses need confidence that AI systems are safe, fair, trustworthy and accountable. The Grok AI scandal and the misuse of AI to generate appalling deepfake images is a prime example of why governance is so important. This leads me to one of my, and the Government's, key ambitions in the broader AI agenda, namely, cementing Ireland's position as a centre of regulatory excellence and as a strong voice in Europe advocating for well-designed digital regulation that is fit for purpose to protect individuals' safety and fundamental rights while enabling innovation. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is firmly committed to implementing the EU AI Act, which is a forward-looking framework that balances innovation with proportionate safeguards.

The Department is making very good progress. It has adopted a distributed model implementation allowing businesses to work with regulators who understand their sectors, making compliance more practical and effective. This past Tuesday, the Government approved priority drafting of legislation to give full effect in Ireland to the EU AI Act.

Looking to the months ahead, the AI office of Ireland is set to be established by August 2026, supported by €1.5 million in start-up funding. Work is well under way on the general scheme of the regulation of artificial intelligence, which will create the office as an independent statutory body. The office will act as Ireland's central authority for implementing the EU AI Act. It will also promote research and adoption. All businesses should begin assessing their AI use and compliance. The Department has already put resources in place to help businesses do that, through CeADAR, Ireland's national centre for applied AI, the Department's website and the EU AI Act service desk's compliance checker. The Department also needs a place where businesses can safely test, learn and innovate. An important function of the office will be to ensure the establishment of a national AI regulatory sandbox. This sandbox will support Irish businesses, particularly SMEs and start-ups, to navigate the AI Act requirements while driving innovation.

Together, these measures strengthen our national framework for trustworthy AI. They are also aligned with a wider European effort to ensure regulation is effective and proportionate. In October, the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, sent a letter to her colleague, Henna Virkkunen, European Commission executive vice president for technological sovereignty, security and democracy. This letter called for an ambitious digital simplification package that supports the EU's strategic positioning as the location of choice for trustworthy digital innovation. The European Commission's digital simplification omnibus package, published last November, is an important development because it includes proposals to simplify rules on data, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. These proposals are a very welcome first step to improving competitiveness at an EU level.

The Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, has been vocal at meetings with ministerial colleagues across the EU that Ireland believes the digital simplification package should take a dynamic, ambitious and risk-based approach, focused on removing regulatory overlaps, reducing administrative burdens and yet supporting compliance. However, the Department wants to be clear that simplification does not mean deregulation. The proposed simplification measures have been arrived at through significant stakeholder consultation by the Commission.

They maintain the same high standards for safety and fundamental rights protection while ensuring more effective implementation of the AI Act. The Department is confident we can create a future where innovation and integrity go hand in hand with a more simplified and straightforward approach to deregulation.

Trust and effective regulation give us a strong foundation. Equally important to our future success is to fast-track widespread adoption of digital and AI technologies across the Department's enterprise sector. The Department has seen first hand the impact that AI can have on boosting productivity and enhancing competitiveness in firms of all sizes. The Department's key focus is to empower more businesses, particularly SMEs, to do exactly that. The Department is working with the local enterprise offices, European digital innovation hubs and enterprise agencies to ensure that every SME is aware of the benefits of AI use and the State supports available to them. These range from targeted funding programmes, expert

guidance and consultancy to research and development grants. The Department is building on this momentum and recently announced a further €23 million in additional funding for Ireland's four European digital innovation hubs to support SMEs in their uptake of AI and other cutting edge digital technologies. These hubs in Cork, Dublin, Mullingar and Sligo are delivering real and practical supports that help SMEs understand, test and adopt advanced digital technologies with confidence.

Ireland already has a strong reputation as a choice location to research, test, develop and scale the latest cutting-edge technologies. This has not happened by chance. It is the result of sustained investment in our talent, creativity and capacity to innovate. The impact of this investment can be clearly seen in initiatives like the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund. This fund awards funding to collaborations between SMEs, multinational corporations and research performing organisations and AI is increasingly at the centre of these projects. The number of DTIF projects placing AI at the core of their solutions has grown rapidly. To date, €183 million has been invested by Government in the 51 DTIF projects that place AI at the core of their solutions. The Department is determined to accelerate this progress even further so that Ireland remains well positioned as new technologies continue to evolve. Our recently announced sectoral capital plan reflects that ambition. It will strengthen Irish SMEs and attract world-class foreign investment. Under this plan, €1.33 billion has been allocated for enterprise innovation and commercialisation, including €190 million in funding for technology centres, €196 million for the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund, €170 million for European Space Agency programmes and €120 million for Important Projects of Common European Interest.

Innovation is what drives our competitiveness. By investing in disruptive technologies, research collaborations and digital transformation, the Government is positioning Ireland as a global leader in advanced manufacturing, AI and space technologies. The Department also allocated €250 million to the seed and venture capital programme and €100 million to a new scaling fund for Irish SMEs. The Department will continue to develop an environment where funding for entrepreneurs is accessible, and ambition is backed so that transformative ideas that create jobs and drive progress can be realised and scaled right here in Ireland.

The Government shortly plans to publish an updated national digital and AI strategy, which will set out a clear roadmap for Ireland's digital and AI adoption and development in the years ahead. The strategy will take a whole-of-government approach. Alongside commitments to AI adoption across sectors and company sizes, it will address the wider critical enablers for a successful digital economy, building on Ireland's strengths in digital skills to infrastructure and the way we deliver our public services.

As Ireland prepares to take the wheel for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is a huge opportunity for Ireland to shape and drive forward work in the areas we believe are of the greatest relevance for the European Union and, crucially, its citizens. Next October Ireland will host an AI and digital summit in Dublin. This will be a flagship event bringing together over 1,000 participants to include thought leaders, businesses, governments and innovators. The Department is looking forward to showcasing Ireland's leadership in AI and digital innovation, fostering collaboration across EU member states, and exploring opportunities for ethical, sustainable, and inclusive technology development.

This debate comes at a particular moment but it is a timely one regardless. It gives us a great opportunity to discuss events that have occupied the public mind over the past number of days and weeks, and indeed have haunted the minds of many people who use social media or, more pertinently, have children who use social media. It also gives an opportunity to talk about the wider strategy. I look forward to engaging thoughtfully and earnestly with all Deputies from across the aisle and the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, looks forward to responding at the end of the debate.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is unfortunate we are here discussing AI at this particular time because it forces us into a space that nobody wants to be in. At the outset, I want to talk about the benefits. If everything in the plan presented by the Minister of State is to be implemented to its fullest in a timely manner, then we will be making progress. As a party, and personally as the spokesperson on enterprise, tourism and employment, we will work with the Minister of State to progress that. It is true it can bring many benefits to businesses and individuals, from reducing costs to improving productivity. One thing I say with regard to the many millions of euro announced is that we make it easy for small and medium sized businesses to access that money in an easy way because small businesses will not have the resources to do that. The last thing we want is for AI to end up costing the businesses which are already on their knees and struggling to survive. We need to be really conscious of that.

I was glad to hear the Minister of State say that simplification does not mean deregulation because that is enormously important. The Minister of State knows that the drivers - some of the richest people in the world - will be driving for that simplification to turn into deregulation and we must be acutely aware of that and stand up robustly to not be sucked into that. That speaks to the whole EU agenda following the Draghi report. The difference between simplification and deregulation is hugely important. That needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis.

The Minister of State also referred to public services. They obviously can be delivered in an efficient way with AI but at the same time, it can give rise to much social exclusion. I am talking about people who are not AI literate or indeed technological. People who are elderly and disabled are not used to that and just want to talk to a human being on the other end of the phone. Because of AI, they get one message after another. It is impossible for them to access public services, so I again ask him to be acutely aware of that and put measures in place to ensure everybody can access public services in the same way. Everybody deserves the same treatment.

Last week I was at the Stripe Young Scientist Exhibition and saw the wonderful and innovative projects created by students from my own county of Mayo, from Claremorris and Crossmolina. It was fantastic to see what they have achieved, and I commend everybody involved in that and the winner. To me, everybody who was there was a winner.

AI is the present and the future and it can be a force for great good. However, without robust regulation it can be destructive and dangerous. What we experienced this week, particularly on social media platform X, exposes the darker reality. AI is only as ethical as the rules that govern it and right now those rules are failing us. Over recent weeks we have seen the disgusting and appalling behaviour from users on Elon Musk's X who deliberately promoted the platform AI tool, Grok, to generate child sexual abuse material and non-consensual nude

deepfake images, predominantly of women. Let us be absolutely clear. This is not experimentation. It is not curiosity and it is not victimless. It is sexual abuse facilitated at scale by technology and enabled by corporate and government negligence. It is vile and misogynistic. It is criminal sexual exploitation, regardless of whether the image is synthetic or not.

What makes it even more alarming is that it was not even hidden in the dark web. That will tell you the arrogance and impertinence of some of the people promoting that. It happened in plain sight on a mainstream platform owned by one of the wealthiest individuals on the planet, who has many followers in this country I am sad to say. X chose to deploy a tool without adequate safeguards and effective moderation and without regard for the predictable ways it would be abused by its users.

X last week confirmed Grok's image generation function had been disabled. I welcome that, but it says this has been done in jurisdictions where actions are deemed illegal. It should be disabled immediately across the globe.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on these statements. I would like to have the opportunity to talk about the potential benefits and the approach we need to take to reap those benefits and mitigate the potential negatives. This debate will have a significant focus on the real negatives. We did not have to imagine them because they presented in very clear terms. The Garda confirmation yesterday of 200 active investigations into child sexual abuse material generated by the Grok AI chatbot is not just alarming; it is a damning indictment of the despicable conduct of X and its owner. This is a platform and leadership that has shown a blatant disregard for basic decency and the safety of our children, treating both Irish and EU regulations with contempt. I say that even in light of the partial row-back overnight.

The very ability of this tool to create such vile images represents a profound failure of corporate ethics and a direct assault on the most vulnerable in our society. This case exposes a toxic culture emanating from the very top of X, where the pursuit of profit and a warped sense of free speech are placed above human dignity and the law. When the company's CEO openly ridicules legitimate concerns and regulatory efforts, it fosters an environment where abuse is facilitated. Therefore, this scandal must be the catalyst for immediate and forceful action. We have laws in our Statute Books, from Coco's Law to the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act, and the EU Digital Services Act. The critical deficit is enforcement. Legislation alone is meaningless without the power and will to apply it. Coimisiún na Meán must be empowered and resourced to act decisively. The European Commission must follow through on its warning and use every enforcement lever the Digital Services Act provides, without delay, including by imposing dissuasive fines and sanctions. Platforms that wilfully enable the generation and distribution of child sexual abuse material cannot be allowed to operate with impunity.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: AI, including generative AI, is the most challenging issue of our time. It is architecturally composed of a mixed blessing, with both good and ambiguous components. We were all shocked and disturbed by the recent revelations regarding Grok and how AI can manipulate and destroy a person's reputation in a split second. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure proper regulations and that laws governing AI platforms are

complicit with human rights, the protection of citizens' intellectual property and GDPR, and, above all, that they encompass the rights of children.

As a member of the Oireachtas committee, I welcome the establishment of the national AI office in August and the AI observatory. However, I believe it would best serve the nation if it was a separate independent entity, with a dedicated commissioner and its own budget. I ask the Minister to consider placing an AI joint committee on a permanent footing to provide ongoing parliamentary oversight and ensure democratic accountability. This is a very important recommendation as it would have the effect of holding these platforms accountable to the public and provide a forum for all of our citizens and any organisations that find themselves being denied due process to deal with these platforms.

Approved terms of reference must be established for any advisory bodies placed on a paid, permanent footing, ensuring clarity and mandate and accountability. The obligation on platform owners to provide the use of AI recommender systems for misinformation campaigns aimed at destabilising society should be included. I ask the Minister to address these issues.

All bots must be clearly identified to users. Operators must provide transparent notifications regarding data storage, ownership and sharing practices. We must also insist that data centres publish their electricity and water consumption figures and develop new and innovative cooling systems. As has been said, these are very challenging issues. AI will have a positive effect on many mundane and repetitive tasks, but it must be accompanied by civil rights, the rights of children and the rights of those sections of society that are most vulnerable.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In April last year, two young men died by suicide. I am not going to put their names on the record but they are in the public domain. Both of these young men had been chatting with an AI bot at the time of their deaths. Their families say that a specific version of this artificial intelligence bot designed to be friendlier, more empathetic and encouraging had in fact encourage the deaths by suicide of these young men. These claims made by the families are being investigated. These cases serve as a lesson because AI is easy and fast, and it is becoming a tool more and more people rely on. Therefore, it will increasingly become a tool that people communicate with. It is not necessarily always a force for good and there are more than two families who have real reasons to watch this and other debates as they try to make sure we get this right. We know that artificial intelligence offers huge potential but it carries with it great risk, as is the case with all new technologies. There has to be regulation. This particular form of technological endeavour might move a little faster than others, but that does not mean regulation should not be able to move fast as well.

We know the EU has put a lot of store in its digital policy work. It obviously wants to be a world leader in the online space, as does Ireland because that would make us good and fair Europeans. In practice, it is going to fall to Ireland, as the place where many of these companies are based, to be the regulator.

In the previous Dáil, I was worn out pleading with the then Minister for enterprise, Leo Varadkar, to intervene and help content moderators, as their jobs were being outsourced and downgraded. Content moderators are the front-line defenders when it comes to online activity. They are the people who stand between the user and the AI platform. The then Minister response was that a lot of that work would probably be done by AI in the future. Mr. Varadkar is not here but I am sure if he was, he would regret those words. We need to put safeguards in

place, which will not be easy. This cannot just mean banning social media for under-16s because social media can be harmful to over-16s and over-18s. Austin Gordon, who was 22 when he died by suicide, had identification that would have enabled him to use the platforms. The protections must be real and workable.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I acknowledge and very much welcome the Minister's comments on deregulation. The stories we have heard over the past few weeks in relation to the Grok feature on X have shocked many people here and across the world. The AI element within social media has been encouraged by tech tycoons such as Elon Musk, owner of X. The Grok website features a claim that, as part of X, Grok offers real-time search image generation, trend analysis and more. Musk also claims Grok is now a source of objective information that users use to verify information. We have all seen the Grok "Is it true?" questions on X, but let us be honest, that is not what Musk invented this for. Recently, a clip went viral of Musk speaking about Grok's ability to do a viral roast of somebody you know recently. In essence, you can take a photograph of somebody and ask Grok to make fun of that person in increasingly disgusting ways, as Musk put it. That Musk found this hilarious is really worrying. This is the man in charge of an AI revolution on social media, who now says, after a lengthy bout of criticism from all corners of the globe, that Grok will no longer be able to use and edit photographs of real people, including children, to show them in revealing clothing in jurisdictions where it is illegal. This is nonsense because social media, as we all know, has no borders and can be read across the globe. That feature needs to be disabled completely.

How can we trust Elon Musk and this technology going forward? We know he thinks this type of thing is funny, even though it is so damaging to women and young children. We need the Taoiseach to stand up to Musk and his ilk and ensure this nudification feature on Grok is completely outlawed. We also need to ensure we are not prioritising data centres to facilitate AI taking precedence over new homes, because AI is insatiable when it comes to energy. We are going to need an increasing number of data centres if we have to keep this up.

Information obtained by my party colleague Lynn Boylan states that a single data centre in west Dublin consumes enough energy to power 200,000 homes.

We have already seen a data centre given priority over a housing development in Castlebaggot. This was meant to be for houses but because of the first-come, first-served model, it was given to data centres. A Herbata Limited data centre is set to be built in my constituency in Naas, County Kildare and many constituents have been in touch because they are really worried about this because we have power cuts all over north Kildare and we just cannot keep up.

Deputy George Lawlor: Over the past year or so, we have all seen the emergence into the general populace of what can only be described as a profound technological transformation. Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant concept. It is here and it is partaking in every part of our daily lives, shaping our economy, public services, our ways of communicating and, increasingly, our vulnerabilities. The decisions we make in this House or further afield in other parliaments will determine whether AI becomes a force for human flourishing or a tool that magnifies and indeed encourages exploitation, inequality and harm. AI is not inherently good or bad but it is powerful. Power, as history teaches us, must be governed with foresight, responsibility and moral clarity. We cannot afford to be passive observers.

Today, we all need to speak frankly about both sides of this technological revolution - the extraordinary benefits AI can bring to Ireland and the world but also the grave danger it poses, particularly when it comes to the sexual exploitation of women and children. I also want to address without equivocation the deeply troubling behaviour of certain AI systems or apps and platforms, including the Grok app on X whose reckless design choices and permissive content generation have raised legitimate alarm. I welcome Grok's announcement overnight with regard to its facilitation of clear abuse of people, albeit enforced on it by worldwide outrage.

Ar dtús, let us begin with the positive, because the potential is immense. AI is already helping doctors detect cancers earlier, analyse scans faster, and personalise treatments with unprecedented precision. AI assisted radiology can identify tumours invisible to the human eye. Predictive models can anticipate cardiac events before symptoms appear. Virtual assistants can support people with chronic illnesses, improving quality of life and reducing strain on our health system. Imagine how the HSE would benefit where waiting lists shrink because of an AI triage system that would streamline diagnostics and where rural communities in particular gain access to world class expertise through AI powered telemedicine. This is not fantasy; it is happening now. For instance, AI apps are analysing vital signs for heart conditions, diabetes, hypertension and fall risks.

AI can also be transformative in education and learning. Tools for students with dyslexia, ADHD or autism can level the playing field. In a country which in theory commits itself to opportunity for all, AI can be a great leveller.

As we are all aware Ireland's tech sector is already a global powerhouse. AI can both enhance and amplify that success. It can drive innovation in agriculture, manufacturing and renewable energy. If we harness it wisely, AI can strengthen our competitiveness and create high-quality jobs for decades to come. AI can help Government operate more efficiently and transparently and God knows nobody in this building would denounce that. Fraud detection systems can protect public funds. AI driven analytics can improve transport planning and reduce congestion. Emergency services can use predictive modelling to allocate resources more effectively. In short, AI can help us build a smarter, more responsive state and community.

However, we must also speak with equal clarity about the dangers because the same technology that can diagnose cancer can also generate deepfake child abuse imagery. The same algorithms that can personalise education can also personalise harassment. The same systems that can empower us can also exploit. The sexual exploitation of women and children is the darkest frontier of AI misuse and it is expanding at a terrifying pace. AI can now fabricate hyper realistic images and videos of people - often minors - without their consent. These deepfakes are being used to harass, blackmail and degrade. There have been cases where teenage girls discover their faces pasted onto pornographic images circulating among classmates. Women have been targeted by ex-partners who use AI tools to create fake sexual content as a form of coercive control. Predators use AI to generate fake child abuse material that is indistinguishable from reality.

This is not, as we know, hypothetical. It is happening now and at a frightening scale. The psychological devastation inflicted on victims is profound. Their reputations, their sense of safety and their dignity are all shattered by images that never existed but feel real to everyone who sees them. We must be absolutely clear. AI generated sexual exploitation is sexual

exploitation and is absolutely and completely a criminal offence and must be punished. AI generated child abuse imagery is child abuse and is absolutely a criminal offence and must be punished. The harm is real.

The Grok app on the X platform has become a symbol of this irresponsibility. Its design choices and its willingness to generate inappropriate, sexualised and harmful content have demonstrated a profound failure of duty. However, Grok is not the only app to facilitate this type of deviant behaviour. A quick Google search this morning revealed a myriad of such apps. A review of one of them stated:

Using the app was a surprisingly engaging experience. The interface is user-friendly, making it accessible even for individuals with limited technical skills. I uploaded a simple photo, and within seconds, the AI generated a stunning transformation. The ability to adjust the level of nudity was particularly impressive, allowing for a customized outcome.

What an amazing review of such a deviant app.

We must condemn, in the strongest possible terms, any platform that treats safety as an afterthought. We must condemn any AI system that trivialises harm or enables exploitation. We must absolutely condemn the culture of "move fast and break things" when what are being broken are people's lives. We must most definitely ensure that the people responsible face the rigours of the law and face criminal conviction. We, as a Parliament, must show in the strongest possible terms, using every available power we have, that we cannot and will not tolerate AI systems that facilitate abuse, harassment or exploitation. We must hold platforms accountable legally, financially and morally.

AI can also generate convincing fake news, fake speeches and fake evidence and, as a result, democracies are vulnerable. A society is judged by how it protects its most vulnerable. Women and children are disproportionately targeted by AI enabled abuse. That is a fact we must confront. Ireland must lead with strong, modern legislation. We must establish clear rights for victims, including rapid take-down mechanisms and legal recourse. We have already seen that we cannot rely on voluntary codes of conduct. We need enforceable laws. AI does not respect borders and neither should our response. We simply cannot do it alone. We have to work with the EU, the UN, and international partners. It is also imperative that we equip parents, teachers and young people with the knowledge to recognise and report AI enabled abuse. Digital literacy is now a form of safeguarding.

Despite the dangers, I certainly remain optimistic because AI, with proper governance, can be a force for extraordinary good. We should invest in AI tools that protect, not exploit. AI can empower people with disabilities with real-time captioning for the deaf, AI powered mobility aids for the visually impaired and communication tools for people with speech impairments. That is AI at its best, expanding human capability.

We cannot stop the AI revolution, nor should we want to but we can shape it. We can use our powers to guide it. We can ensure that it serves humanity rather than harms it. The question is not whether AI will change society. It already has. We have to ensure that platforms that feel they can operate without consequences get the message very directly that there will be no hiding place for their ambivalence or inaction. AI in the wrong hands can do dreadful things but in the right hands - in responsible hands - it can save lives, expand opportunity and strengthen our society. Let us in this Chamber and in this Oireachtas ensure that Ireland stands

as a global leader in ethical AI. It is our responsibility but we must act with the urgency the times we live in demand.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I welcome the opportunity that has been afforded to all Members of the Dáil to speak on AI. I particularly welcome it in my capacity as Vice Chair of the Oireachtas AI committee. A few moments ago there was a school of young children sitting in the Gallery. I am fairly certain that somebody here thought it wise to perhaps say that this was not a debate that their ears should be listening to in the context of what we have heard this week, so a simple act of child safeguarding took place and the children left the Gallery a few moments ago. It really beggars belief that an AI provider, a global organisation, a multibillion-dollar organisation, cannot implement the most basic levels of children's safeguards in the operation of what it is trying to produce. What has happened this week is a stark reminder of the challenges and the risks we face with AI.

We know what the public think about AI. In every poll in this country, in the United States, all around the world, people are fearful of AI. The majority of people are fearful of AI, and it is our job in this Chamber to ensure that as AI is introduced into society and into our State, we regulate it in an appropriate way so we can harness its benefits.

I am extremely proud of Ireland's membership of the European Union. I am extremely proud that the European Union, in great distinction from the United States and China, is adapting a regulatory approach to AI. We are certainly not there yet, and this week is a reminder of the challenges we face, but I am very proud that An Garda Síochána does not discriminate between what is taking place online and what is taking place within the real world. From the remarks that were made in the Oireachtas committee yesterday, it is quite clear that the gardaí in this country will be carrying out the laws that have been initiated in these Chambers to their fullest when it comes to any illegal behaviour that takes place, whether it is Grok or any other AI provider out there. They must comply with the laws of this country, and we must ensure that when it comes to the EU regulations we are introducing here, Ireland becomes a beacon, a global leader, for regulatory enforcement.

The EU Presidency, which Ireland will host, is a great opportunity for Ireland to lead in this direction. There is the intention to host an AI summit that would champion regulatory enforcement. We have already demonstrated that Ireland can attract some of the biggest technological companies in the world to base here, to attract a skilled labour force, to be supported by universities and research, that can develop extraordinary things that will literally change mankind. We have been able to do that, support employment and provide a regulatory based environment in which they operate. Ireland can show, when we host the Presidency and implement the AI Act, that we established the AI office and we have multiple competent authorities. We know that AI will touch every edifice of every single Government Department. We can show that with a strong regulatory environment, we can harness the benefits from AI and address the harms.

Out there in the public, however, there is no doubt about it. We are talking this week about sexual harm that can be imposed from how AI entities can be manipulated, but one of the biggest concerns people have when it comes to AI is the disruption to the labour market. That is why it is so important that right now we get this right and that we adapt AI in a way that we ensure we are meeting the future skills needs for the kids who were here earlier, the kids who

are in primary school, secondary school and third level. Whether we like it or not, this is a pivot moment in society the likes of which we have not seen for generations. We have seen in Ireland when moments like this arise that people stand up. One thinks back to T. K. Whitaker and all the changes that were made in this country to open Ireland, to open our economy, to give us the kind of society and the kind of wealth that was unimaginable in decades past and that we have today, that we survive off today and that puts Ireland in the envy of Europe when it comes to employment. This is another one of these moments where we, as a State, as a country, have to decide how Ireland will harness the benefits from AI, how we will change how we operate in education and how we will change how we operate in our health services. For that reason, I really welcome this opportunity to speak.

Deputy Joe Neville: I want to speak about AI because it is obviously so important, it will become so important and, as Deputy Geoghegan has outlined, it will cut across different boundaries and different areas. Other speakers will probably choose to speak on other areas on which we all well know the impacts. We can see even on social media that it has become a topic of conversation not alone in Ireland but across the world. I think that will be covered in the debate. It needs to be covered and we really have to be conscious of it. I will focus on the impacts AI will have on business, what we can see, the positives and the negatives, the risks associated with that and, ultimately, how we need to be ready, as Deputy Geoghegan outlined, countrywide. I will focus on business.

Under the leadership of the Minister, Peter Burke, we have seen the announcement of a dedicated AI office to co-ordinate strategy, policy and implementation across all sectors. This really needs to be done to ensure that our businesses are at the forefront. We know that AI can lead to a huge competitive advantage, possibly for different companies, but if we are not at the forefront, we will lose out. We are at the forefront in many ways in Ireland, mainly because of the FDI we have had over many years, its impact and how it has soaked in around the country. We have so much knowledge coming from those companies that came here, including ex-employees who have gone on to build other companies and smaller companies. We have seen it in med-tech, finance and agri-tech. All across the areas we have seen these companies start up, but we need to ensure that they are using AI and that we are in the position as a Government to supply the companies with the relevant supports. Earlier today I raised a question during Questions on Policy or Legislation on that point specifically. We need to ensure that we are driving SMEs with innovation in SMEs, that we are driving not only funding but also the knowledge and the need for these AI tools. We know that Enterprise Ireland is an amazing section of our Government and how our country runs. As a CFO previously, I sought its benefit. It helped keep so many businesses afloat during Covid, but sometimes the difficulty with Enterprise Ireland is how you navigate getting into it. We need to ensure that Enterprise Ireland is part of the network that is going out to these SMEs to make sure that they can actually use those tools and involve themselves in getting those tools because some people will have the ability and the knowledge but not everyone will.

We also have to be aware in many ways in Ireland, because we have so many of these high-skilled jobs, that AI integration into business will change how business is done. As someone who came through from PwC, I saw many people starting off in year one. You wonder in a few years about all the work. Will people starting off in their careers be there to do it, or will an AI model simply go through invoices and do checks and spot checks? Obviously, the world

is changing. If we are not there at the forefront, we will lose that but we will have nothing else to replace it.

As we know, AI offers benefits but it also means that we need to be strategic. We also need to be fully ready, through governance and everything else, to make sure we do not fall behind. Ultimately, if we delay AI adoption, or if the skills are not put into the Irish companies, we risk ceding advantage not just to the US or maybe the UK, which we previously would have been focused on, but all across the world. We deal in English in business. That would have been an advantage we had before, but we see all across Asia and all across eastern Europe that all these countries are as adept at the business world as anyone else. There is no reason to think we will be special and will continue to stay ahead.

That is why I come back to the Government support. The Government has been at the forefront, as I said, with the AI office, but we also need to ensure that that gets out to the individual businesses. In a way, what we can do there is invest in the companies, put out funding into the companies and monitor all the way through. Something we have been really good at from an IDA perspective is going abroad, but Enterprise Ireland is building companies from within. We really need to use that to champion AI and to push it across all systems, be they supply chain, business, financial or even sales tools, in order that all across that AI ecosystem we can ensure that our companies are ready, more so than anyone else, to be there for the future generations of what the business world might look like.

As a Government, we have taken the proper steps to date and we need to continue that.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: While AI has many benefits for convenience, it is not a force for good, and therefore must be regulated, as Grok's widespread generation of sexually explicit images of children has proven. Grok is run by the platform of X and the European headquarters of X is just a 20-minute walk from this Chamber, so there is no excuse for the Government not to act immediately. While AI is a form of high-tech plagiarism, and certainly makes life easier in a range of areas, convenience generally comes at a price. It is a kind of Trojan horse that we invite into our lives.

The infrastructure that makes AI possible is a network of data centres. AI has significantly driven the demand for the roll-out of such centres across Ireland. These centres service the needs of transnational corporations and their profit models first and foremost. The multimillion euro corporation Echelon is planning to install two such centres in my local area, just outside Arklow. However, data centres and AI come at a high cost to the local consumer. I attended its glitzy reception in the Arklow Bay Hotel last year. However, Echelon conveniently did not tell us about the cost, nor do politicians who seem fanatical about AI and the rolling out of such data centres. They are okay with proliferating a vast network of centres in Ireland so that we have to bear the burden and process an ever-growing load of social media content from much of the world's population. They talk up and greatly exaggerate the supposed benefits but conveniently do not mention the high cost to upgrade our electricity network, a cost borne by Joe and Josephine Public in their electricity bills. We know that an AI search consumes between ten and 30 times the amount of energy of a normal Google search and that one data centre alone can consume an equivalent amount of electricity to the city of Kilkenny on a daily basis.

Meta uses 3.1 billion litres of water for the cooling systems of its data centres each year. Numerous groups and even senior departmental officials, in a confidential memo, warned Government Ministers that Ireland's rapid growth in data centres to facilitate AI is using up electricity capacity and adding to the risks around energy costs and climate targets. They estimate that these centres, to power AI, will devour 31%, or just under one third, of Ireland's electricity by 2030 and that this will affect homeowners in getting connections to the electricity grid.

On the morning of Echelon's launch, we officially opened the Arklow wastewater treatment plant nearby, which will allow for badly needed housing development to take off in the town, which could not take place previously. What guarantee is there that these future homeowners will be able to connect to the electricity grid? Who will be given precedence, the local Joe or Josephine Public, or a multibillion euro corporation? Of course, Government politicians will not mention that inconvenient truth, because Ireland, is in effect, getting prostituted out for the interests of big tech corporations.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: When I think of AI, I get so excited, because I genuinely see this as an evolution of us as a species from when we first picked up tools to a point in our history where we are about to see those tools take on a life of their own. It is genuinely awe-inspiring to consider the transformation that could bring to us as a globe and what it could do for us as a population, but sadly, the other thing I think of is that we cannot have nice things. Unfortunately, the way AI is being governed and managed is wreaking havoc on our society. Nobody is talking honestly about labour displacement from AI. We are talking about the fact that it will displace jobs, that it will create other jobs, and that it will have to keep up with the tech and create better, more high-skilled job. That is simply not true. We will see labour displacement at a scale which is unprecedented in our history. We have to start talking about the just transition which that will require on the same level that we will see the environmental just transition. It is already happening, with issues with labour quality and labour precarity that we have already seen happen over the past number of decades simply being a result of the automation and AI that we are seeing. Unfortunately, those who are most structurally disadvantaged in society will be the ones pushed into poverty and disadvantaged even further.

Another way that it is wreaking havoc on society is through decision-making, because ultimately, when we think about it, what AI can do is allow us to delegate decision-making from humans to machines, which is exciting when considering the efficiencies that can bring about and potentially the impartiality, but, unfortunately, again, what we are seeing is that those tools are being developed with biases and errors that we as humans bake into them, only now, when those biases and errors play out, they are at such a scale that they can absolutely destroy parts of our society.

The area which I am most concerned about, which we are seeing play out right in front of our eyes, is the vulnerabilities that we as humans are exposed to, and the exploitation. Just as the business models of big tech right now exploit our data, AI will exploit our human emotions. That is exactly what is happening. We have heard stories of the suicides that people are being pushed to through AI chatbots. We have seen across society over the past couple of weeks the horrific way in which it is being used to promote image-based sexual abuse and the development and proliferation of CSAM. It makes me so sad, because I see so much that could happen if we were properly governing AI. We could look at labour displacement in a way that

allowed us to have more leisure time in our lives, that allowed us to care for our loved ones without the poverty that normally ensues.

There is so much we could do on labour. There is so much that we could do on decision-making and the vulnerabilities that I mentioned that could be flipped on its head and turned into positive forces in our society, but because the governance and regulation of AI is so weak in this State, in the European Union and across our globe, that is not happening. I want to pick up on one thing that the Minister of State said in his opening statement about the fact that simplification does not mean deregulation. I absolutely reject that statement, because that is what it does. To deny the fact that big tech is lobbying Brussels, Washington and Dublin is just sticking your head in the sand. Of course it is about deregulation and capitulation to these big tech companies. I also have issues with the fact that the dedicated AI office, which I appreciate is going to be detached from the Department of enterprise, is being developed within it. I see a slew of conflicts with the fact that that is a Department helping and assisting enterprises to use AI while also trying to govern it and the sandbox in which those things are being tested. AI will only have this transformational impact on our society if the public has trust in it. None of the things that this Government is doing are inspiring that trust right now. I laud the Minister of State with responsibility for AI and what she has done to shift this Government into action on this issue.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I have been keeping an eye on the statements. Many of the issues have been raised and I do not want to go over them, so I will give these two minutes over to young people's opinions on AI for the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond's, interest. The National Youth Council has been leading a programme where it has had youth juries on AI, specifically on themes such as education, the environment, jobs and misinformation. The last of those juries, this weekend, is on laws and regulation. So far, they have come up with very interesting recommendations. We often speak about AI and social media. The concern goes straight towards children and young people and their interaction with these apps and services, but their own voices are often misheard. To give a flavour of some of those recommendations, they state that Government should fund research on the social development of young people and the impact of AI on that development; the national AI office should have an explicit mandate to address AI in vulnerable groups; and when making a complaint in an AI-enabled app or service, users should have the option to automatically send a copy of that complaint to Coimisiún na Meán. They are some practical steps that the Minister of State might take on board and consider in his future work. Young people's voices need to be central in any debate about AI. They are predominantly using it every day. We have seen so much research. Young people too often rely on AI for friendships, relationships and support. It is about how we do that safely. I appreciate that young people's voices are central as part of that debate.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This week's Grok scandal tells us something important about artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is never neutral. It takes the values of the people who build it and the people who control it. What we saw this week was one of the most powerful AI tools aligned to a social media company in the hands of a creepy little slimeball who has shown again and again that he does not care about harm. Under Elon Musk, the platform X has rolled out an artificial intelligence tool that could be used to undress, sexualise and humiliate real people, women, men, teenagers and children, all without consent. That was

never a glitch but a design choice. We are told it was about innovation, but it clearly was not. It was simply about power being exercised without any restraint.

3 o'clock

A billionaire with a track record of recklessness is now shaping how artificial intelligence interacts with human bodies, identity and dignity. What predictably followed when there was an uproar was that we were told this feature to do all of those horrific things would only be available to paid users. Now, we are getting different information today that it will be turned off. That is not nearly good enough. If someone built a tool allowing strangers to create sexualised images of children, we would shut it down immediately. We would not ask for patience or wait for a voluntary code of conduct, but because this tool sits inside a tech platform, there was hesitation. That hesitation is and will continue to be dangerous.

Ireland hosts these companies, regulates them and gives them legitimacy. This means we have a duty to act when their products cause harm. This week is not just a story about Grok; it is a warning. AI in the hands of people who lack empathy, restraint or basic decency will be used to hurt people.

Deputy Jen Cummins: AI has the ability to be useful and harmful. In the last couple of weeks, we have not been able to open newspapers without seeing the negative impacts of AI. As a result of the disgrace of Grok on the X platform, I will no longer be using it. I was a Twitter user for about ten years. I have to say that since its current owner took over, I will not be using it because of the misogyny, the meanness and the racism. I have to say the step too far for me is the generation of child sexual abuse material. It is a step too far for humanity and there is no benefit to this tool whatsoever. It needs to be banned and legal steps need to be taken to prosecute the platform.

At the education committee before Christmas, we discussed leaving certificate reform and the use of AI and examinations formed part of it. Part of the conversation was about the fact that educators needed to be enabled to support young people who were using generative AI instead of doing the work themselves for coursework or exams. Of course, we also discussed the use of AI as an excellent way of assisting young people and, actually, everybody in terms of learning. It is a tool, like books and the Internet, to help students learn. However, if they are not able to use it as a tool in a way that helps them learn instead of just generating the work itself, that is where the difficulty lies because they are not learning the stuff themselves. Again, educators need to be supported in understanding AI. It is moving at a pace that far exceeds our training and CPD provision for educators now.

In two weeks, I will be hosting the CyberSafeKids charity in the audiovisual room. I am looking forward to the conversation because it is saying it wants to discuss the use of AI and other technologies in children's lives. It is calling for stronger regulation enforcement, embedding critical digital literacy into school curriculums and equipping parents to assist their children in their online lives. I encourage all TDs and Senators to attend because the organisation has a lot to say and we have a lot to learn.

Deputy Keira Keogh: The EU AI Act aims for AI to be transformative, trusted and transparent. I think we can all agree that, in recent days and weeks, we have seen how swiftly

AI can move to put dangerous tools in the hands of millions of people all across the globe. Make no mistake, though, Grok might have put the ability to nudify into the public domain and it might have opened the eyes of people and governments who were not already aware of the huge dangers of these tools, but these tools, especially the nudify apps, are not a new phenomenon. We know AI is being used every day, hour and second to exploit mostly women and minor girls. This is why, no matter what pay walls or features are geographically disabled, we must continue this focus that has been so sharp in the last couple of days and the urgency for global co-ordinated action, stronger regulation, mandatory safeguards and accountability measures to prevent AI from becoming a weapon of exploitation. We must ensure that innovation serves human dignity and does not undermine it.

As the Chair of the Joint Committee on Children and Equality, I am committed to advocating to protect our young people. To do that, we have to provide legislation and regulation, but also education and empowerment. We did a survey in November that went out to over 2,200 parents. At that point, Grok had not even been launched. In some ways, then, that survey is nearly out of date. We do not know what is coming next week or the week after. We do not know what other apps and technologies are coming down the line, so we have to give people tools to prepare them for the unknown. We have to start building in safety by design.

Safety by design and even co-design are also key when we look at AI for people with disabilities. I also sit on the Joint Committee on Disability Matters. We have heard of the fantastic ways in which AI can assist those in our disabled communities, including 131,764 children in Ireland. AI is bringing massive help in the form of assistive technologies. This includes things like screen readers, speech-to-text technology, navigation aids, eye tracking, voice recognition, real-time transcription for those with hearing impairments, etc. These AI tools can lead to greater autonomy, inclusion and participation in education and society. However, we heard really loudly and clearly in the disability matters committee that AI, as it becomes increasingly integrated across public and private services, has the ability to further push the inequalities already present. There are built-in biases already in many of these tools, and new barriers can be created. In the short time we have left to us, therefore, we must use the opportunity to ensure that people with disabilities are properly supported and are meaningful co-designers, especially in things we are using across public services, so AI continues to be a tool for inclusion and not inequality in the disability space.

In the time left to me, I want to touch on something Deputy Farrelly mentioned, namely, the rise of AI companionship, especially in relation to our minors. We have seen that there has been huge growth in romantic relationships with AI chatbots. I was alarmed to see that 10% of adults in Ireland had had an AI romantic relationship in the past year and 12% were considering it. That is a massive number of people. The adults in Ireland now did not grow up with chatbots. We grew up learning about relationships in what I do not want to say is the normal way, because maybe this is the new normal, but the teenagers coming up now who are starting to engage in these romantic relationships do not know what to expect. The AI romances are all about control and customisation. You could have the perfect partner and it is really dystopian. We must ensure, therefore, that we are providing supports so our young people coming up are not becoming emotionally dependent on chatbots. We have seen the harm caused in relation to suicide. We are not, though, fully seeing yet the harm being caused in relation to physical and sexual abuse when it goes from offline to the real world, so we really must tackle this crisis.

I will finish by saying AI offers unprecedented opportunities for accessibility and inclusion, but only if it is governed by robust regulation, ethical integration and ongoing research into its impact on children, underpinned by education and empowerment. We do not know what is coming, so we have to ensure technology serves human dignity and supports independent living rather than redefining or diminishing it. AI is here. We cannot fight it and we cannot resist it, but we can legislate for it, regulate it and guide it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move to the next Deputy, I advise Members to be aware there are some young attendees in our Gallery. The usher will advise their chaperone that this may not be an appropriate debate, I am afraid. We do welcome you, other than that.

I call Deputy Ryan O'Meara.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Go raibh maith agat. I might change my speech around a bit from what I was going to start with for a few minutes to talk about the positives of AI to begin with, just to give the group in the Gallery a moment. What I was about to say here was quite negative and scathing of what we had seen through Grok and X in recent weeks, but I had planned on concluding by saying the positives were there for AI and an entire conversation was to be had around that point. I am not coming in here to be entirely negative. It is obviously the future and it has the potential to be transformative for our society, economy and the way we do so much in terms of productivity across our country. The positives are there, with an awful lot of work needed.

Am I okay to go ahead now with the other part of my speech?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, you are.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I would like to talk about Grok. Requests to Grok have included: "remove her clothes", "take her clothes off", "Grok, bikini now", "put her in a bikini", "replace her clothes with dental floss", "Grok, make her clothes transparent", and "Grok, make her look like she is kneeling for Donald Trump in a bikini".

These are some of the requests made by warped individuals on X to take photos of women without their consent and produce sexually explicit, harmful and illegal imagery. Elon Musk's AI invention on X, Grok, duly complied with all requests, normally within minutes. *The Guardian* in the UK has reported that relatively tame requests by X users to alter photographs to show women in bikinis rapidly evolved during the first week of the year, hour by hour, into increasingly explicit demands for women to be dressed in transparent bikinis, then in bikinis made of dental floss, placed in sexualised positions, and made to bend over so that their genitals were visible. By 8 January, as many as 6,000 bikini demands were being made of the chatbot every hour. Also reported by *The Guardian* in the UK, a woman called Evie had an image of her altered by Grok to depict her in a bikini covered in baby oil. Evie said:

People saw it was upsetting me and I didn't like it and they kept doing more and more. There's one of me just completely naked with just a bit of string around my waist, one with a ball gag in my mouth and my eyes rolled back. The fact these were able to be generated is mental.

The article further states:

Some users, mostly men, began to demand to see bruising on the bodies of the women, and for blood to be added to the images. Requests to show women tied up and gagged were instantly [created within minutes].

Ashley St. Clair, the mother of one of Elon Musk's children, had pictures of her as a child undressed by Grok. Images of a child actor from "Stranger Things" were produced at the request of warped-minded Grok users of the child in a banana bikini print. The more women spoke out at the exploitation and sexual harassment inflicted upon them, the more Grok was asked, and duly complied, to create even more explicit images of the women brave enough to speak out. It was first used to harass women, to inflict emotional and mental harm on them. Then, where women were brave enough to speak out, it was used to intimidate and silence them. I am angry about this. The general public should be angry about this. Parents concerned about online safety should be angry about this, but we have to do something with that anger.

For the year since the last general election, many of us in this House have focused on online safety, and rightly so, across all parties. We are working genuinely hard to try to make the online world a safer place. When we talk about a smartphone ban and a social media ban for under-16s, what would those do to protect the women and young children who have been victimised in recent weeks by warped-minded individuals on Grok and X who have asked for these images to be created as well as the horrendous, mindless and numbing individuals who created this to begin with and who stand over it? It is not a veil of incorporation that is creating this. People are responsible for it, like Elon Musk, who is making billions from the technologies he is creating, but the people working for him, too. What sort of human beings are they? They allowed for laws to be broken. They allowed for mechanisms to be created without protections in place for these images to be created of women and children. The people who asked for these images to be created should be prosecuted, too. We should take a very firm stance on this and we should go after every single person who created child pornography in recent weeks.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Like any technology, there are pros and cons when it comes to the use of artificial intelligence. It has the potential to be incredibly important in areas like healthcare, science and technology. We saw that at the Young Scientist exhibition last week in the RDS, where many of the projects demonstrated to us how it could be a force for good. A school from my own constituency, Gaelcholáiste Reachrann, had a really impressive project on how AI could improve mental health supports. Indeed, the overall winning project also used AI as a part of a brain cancer diagnosis tool.

Unfortunately, in recent months, we have all seen how this technology can be abused, the most obvious being its use on X to produce illegal sexual abuse material and other images intended to humiliate people. It also led to a huge increase in misinformation, not to mention serious copyright and privacy laws infringements.

We have also seen the use of AI systems by militaries, particularly by Israel in Gaza to completely blur the lines of accountability when it comes to the responsibility of war crimes. Like any new technology, the regulation governing its use needs to evolve at the same pace. We have all probably heard about situations where AI is being used to screen applicants for jobs, for example. There are concerns that this could result in applicants of certain

backgrounds, class, gender or race being excluded from a shortlist when CVs are filtered through the system. That can just be down to the original data used to train the system not being reflective of society as a whole. There needs to be strict monitoring and regulation of AI systems used for this purpose.

The big issue here, and it is something that the National Youth Council of Ireland mentioned recently, is the need for proactive public engagement and education on AI systems. Digital literacy and education for young people is particularly important because the reality is this technology is not going away, so they need to understand it. They need to know the rules around it and they need to be equipped for the challenges that it also poses.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move on, I welcome Baroness Margaret Curran of Townhead in the city of Glasgow and Mr. Chris Murray, an MP from Edinburgh East, who are in the Visitors Gallery as guests of Deputy Conor Sheehan. They are most welcome to the Parliament.

I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There was an interesting opinion poll a few weeks ago that showed only 27% of Irish people had a positive view of AI compared with 48% who believed that it would be a force for bad in the coming years. Research by RED C found that Irish people have among the lowest levels of trust in AI in the world. That demonstrates some good sense. Why? I think it is because people smell a rat. This is being forced down our throats by big tech and by propaganda from a Government that is in thrall to big tech. People get it. This is not improving my life. It is not making my life easier.

Last year, the Taoiseach told us that AI was "in the same realm as the industrial revolution, and the printing press". I challenged him on this on one occasion and he stood over it, 100%. He said this was just as significant as the printing press or the industrial revolution. His conclusion was that the EU needed to innovate more and regulate less when it came to AI, that it must not "tie companies up in knots so that don't over-regulate to the extent that we paralyse certain sectors of the economy". On Tuesday, he said that arresting the people in X who were responsible for Grok producing child sexual abuse imagery would be like *1984*. How low can he go in bending over for big tech? We now have the rightful and righteous horror of people about the realities of AI and what it is being used for, but the Government is going to continue on its same track of being fundamentally subservient to big tech. What is really Orwellian are the breathless claims that AI is some kind of fourth industrial revolution.

The Government has drunk the big tech Kool-Aid big time if it believes that churning out child sexual abuse imagery and misogynistic image-based sexual abuse of women on an industrial scale - over 160,000 images in one 24-hour period at the start of this year - is an industrial revolution. If it is, it is an industrial revolution that ordinary people want no part of. This is a revolution of the warped, big tech billionaires and their Government cheerleaders. They want this pollution in our lives because it makes them so much money. If you look at Musk's reaction to the scandal, it was to say that the feature would be limited to subscribers in order to monetise it. For depraved billionaires like Musk, Zuckerberg or Bezos, there is no such thing as bad publicity, only free advertising and opportunities. To hell with the human or

the environmental cost. Their latest reaction to attempt to assuage public concern was to geolimit it.

In other words, if a person has a virtual private network, VPN, they will be able to continue to access and produce this abusive and illegal imagery.

The background to the latest AI scandal is the Covalen strike. Content moderators hired by big tech and outsourced to police the wild west that it has created are to be replaced by AI. Anybody worried about AI should support this strike. Without humans moderating it and social media, it will become even more of a hellscape than it is already. Content moderation is an incredibly hard job that is traumatic. It should be highly paid and carried out by humans. Otherwise, child protection is going to be left to AI. Does any parent want that?

The only way that the AI revolution is genuinely industrial is in the escalating demand for power and for water-hungry data centres. The 19th century industrial revolution turbocharged the burning of fossil fuels for profit, ultimately laying the basis for the climate crisis. The AI revolution is doubling down on that, accelerating climate collapse. Donald Trump told the World Economic Forum last year that he wanted to double US energy production to power AI and big tech and that they could fuel it with anything they wanted, including coal. Our Government is following Trump's lead by bending over backwards to facilitate data centre expansion. Data centres are already maxing out the grid. They are already swallowing up electricity that we need for housing and public transport even though we do not know what is going on. We got a glimpse from the genocide in Gaza where Irish data centres were holding Israel Defense Forces, IDF, intelligence data used to target and murder whole families. They are used to train AI using vast amounts of stolen data created by artists, creatives and ordinary people in their social media posts. They store vast amounts of our personal data that they use to target us with advertising and algorithms.

Next week, I will be introducing our online safety recommender algorithms Bill to turn off these hateful toxic algorithms for children under the age of 18 and turn them off by default for adult users.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Donald Trump's pal - the richest person in the world - Elon Musk is profiting from producing sexualised images of women without their consent and, disgustingly, child abuse material. When the alarm bells are raised and people express anger about it, Elon Musk still wants to monetise it. It is far from clear that the announcement, which has been forced on X as a result of the outrage that has been expressed over the last while, will mean that this sick, depraved practice and the profiteering of Elon Musk from it is going stop.

Last Friday, when I was on national radio and suggested that the laws existed and the police should be sent into X at that point, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, was saying that it was the users who were responsible, not the companies. To my knowledge, nobody - the Government or the Opposition - were suggesting that the police should be sent in directly to X. There was talk about legislation being done over time and so on. However, it turns out that, as we learned from the Garda, there are complaints being made and investigations are taking place. We were right.

We are still having a protest outside X's headquarters on Saturday at 12 noon. This sickness and the people profiteering from it need to be protested against. People have been abused.

Children have been abused. Women have been abused. There is absolutely no certainty. I am gathering from reading between the lines from Deputy Kelly's comments yesterday that, of the companies that say that they are coming in, the one that is not is probably X. This is the attitude of these people. They do not give a damn about the abuse of children or women if they can make money from it. Insofar as they have been forced to do something about it, it is because of outrage and pressure from the public.

Then there is Covalen. I wish to echo Deputy Murphy. I was just talking to one of the workers in Covalen at the moment. It really tells a lot. They will be picketing outside the headquarters of Covalen in Sandyford today between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. and again tomorrow between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. They are content moderators doing content moderation for Meta, which is another company. Their job was to train AI. It now turns out that they were training AI to get rid of their jobs. Three hundred of them have been made redundant. Covalen is owned by Cpl, which is another important name with lots of Government contracts working for the HSE and so on, and using the bare minimum statutory redundancy that it can get away with legally. There is no engagement. It is refusing to recognise the trade union and so on. It is miserable treatment of these workers who were the ones who had to sift out this sick material, who protected the public and children from this sick material. That is what they do, but now it is AI that is going to do it. That is where we are heading with this stuff. The workers, who are protecting us, stressed to bits and have to deal with mental health issues over protecting our mental health and our children, are treated in an absolutely despicable way and have to go out on strike.

I hope we are going to get intervention and support of the Covalen workers from the Government and certainly from the public. It is not only in the interest of the workers that they are successful in their fight for union recognition and decent treatment, but they are protecting us from these profiteers who make money from the sort of depravity we have seen from X.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam an deis an seans seo a thapú labhairt ar cheist na hintleachta saorga. It is a timely discussion. It is important to recognise that the recent surge in conversation has led us to an reset about how we think of AI, the potential it brings and the power it has as a technology. Oftentimes in this House, we have looked at the positive benefits and positive potential of AI as a new technology. However, this is a point for us to reset that conversation and talk about it in terms of harnessing the potential, placing as much import and emphasis on the harness as we do on exploring the actual potential. It is a pivotal moment where societies will need to come together, understand fully the risks and take a risk-based approach to how we take account of the fact that there is a new technology in AI. No one is going to reverse the technology, but we need to make sure that our legislative frameworks and regulatory approaches are fit for purpose and allow us to benefit as a society from what AI can do while ensuring that we fully eliminate the risks.

Any parent who has observed the discussion in the last few weeks has been disgusted by the use of AI tools to create child sexual abuse material, CSAM, and the weaponisation of intimate images of women, which it is important to emphasise are already illegal according to Irish law. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, for her proactive approach in leading from the front on this and vocalising what a lot of constituents have been saying to me about the horror they have felt at this underbelly of AI use.

When we talk about the harnessing of potential, that indicates the importance of talking about the guard-rails that we put in place, the responsibility, the governance and, most importantly, having control as a society. AI can be an excellent servant for our society, but it can be a wicked master. We need to make sure that the balance is perfectly set back towards governments steering and regulating the overall direction of the technology.

In this House, we have explored the potential of AI already regarding healthcare, the improvement of diagnostics, early detection and personalised care, and assisting in administrative support for our front-line workers, such as gardaí, nurses, prison officers and so on. There is a role AI can play in education and expanding innovation, which many of us saw in the RDS last week when we visited schools from our constituencies that were using AI as part of their work. Regarding the overall economy and approach to work, there are gains to productivity that AI gives many workers across the economy in various different sectors by allowing them to focus on being creative and bringing into focus the importance of emphasising human skills, such as the ability to work as part of a team, think critically and solve a problem. These are skills that are not developed by AI and are intrinsic to human beings.

As we have this discussion about the impact that it will have on the world of work, we need to acknowledge that there will be disruption in the employment market. That is why it is important that we take a skills first approach to how we set up our society and our economy to take advantage of the AI technology. This is not just in terms of digital skills. We have work to do in terms of ensuring that digital skills penetration is where it needs to be to allow the population to take advantage of AI. It is also about ensuring that people understand what AI technology can do. It can have biases built into it by its creators. It is ultimately artificial. It is built on training data. It does not have the intrinsic ability of a human being to analyse and think about a problem. It is a machine and not the equivalent to a human consciousness.

This is why I encourage the need for reskilling, not only for digital skills but also in the area of critical thinking. I know the Minister, Deputy Lawless, is working on this. This is where arts, humanities and social sciences are so important in promoting these skills and making sure that when people see content on the Internet they do not take it as gospel but question the source from whence it came, the assumptions on which it is based, whether it is strong enough to hold up and whether it is something we should hang our hat on.

We know that in various spheres of the economy, and I have spoken about e-scooters in this House previously, that technology often outpaces regulation. The discussion in recent weeks shows us the need for our policy-making apparatus to be up to scratch in order to have the skills to be able to engage with those it seeks to regulate. We need to protect our children above all else. It is important we protect them from harmful materials and the AI-generated risks they encounter but there is also the fact they are entering a world that has AI, as opposed to our generation for whom AI entered the world. They are growing up with AI. They need the basic skills to be able to engage with it properly. Ireland has the opportunity to position itself as a world leader, not only in terms of the benefits of harnessing AI but also in taking a rules and risk-based approach to regulating it properly and preparing all aspects of society for it. The economy can benefit but society knows how to steer it. I look forward in particular to the AI summit to be held next year.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Artificial intelligence is no longer emerging; it is already embedded in how society functions. It shapes how information is ranked, what people see online, how decisions are made and, increasingly, how power is exercised. This reality requires us to move from abstract discussions and act with urgency, clarity and competence. One of the biggest misconceptions about AI is that it is something people choose to use. In fact, the most influential AI systems today are the ones people never consciously engage with. They sit inside platforms, search engines, social media feeds, recommender systems and automated decision-making tools that quietly influence behaviour at scale. This is where the real impact is. Systems such as Grok, which we have discussed this week, embedded directly in social media platforms demonstrate how quickly AI can shape public discourse when it is trained on live data, optimised for engagement and applied in real-time and, in Grok's case, enables legal non-consensual image manipulation. These systems are not neutral. They reflect incentives, values and commercial priorities. When these priorities conflict with the truth, well-being or democratic norms, the consequences are serious.

Another major shift that is still not widely understood is the move from AI that responds to AI that acts. We now see the rise of autonomous AI agents that will carry out tasks across multiple systems, write and deploy code, interact with other AI tools and make decisions without continuous human interaction. These systems are already operating enterprise environments and will soon appear in public services. Our governance frameworks are not yet equipped for this level of autonomy.

We must also confront the impact on children and young people. Algorithms are designed to maximise attention and emotional engagement. For children this can mean exposure to content loops that amplify anxiety, distort self-image and damage mental health. If we fail to recognise algorithmic exposure as a child protection issue, then we are falling behind the reality that families already deal with. This is why the establishment of the national AI office is not only important but urgent. I published legislation to create the office because I believe the State needs dedicated expert capability focused solely on AI. The office must be more than a future structure box ticking exercise. It needs to be operational now.

AI systems have already been deployed across public and private sectors. Decisions are already being automated. Data is already being processed at scale. If the national AI office is still finding its feet in eight or ten months' time, we will already be regulating after the fact. What should the office be doing immediately? It must act as a centre of real technical expertise in the State, not only regarding a legal interpretation of things such as the EU AI Act but a genuine understanding of how models are trained, how data flows and how risks emerge in practice. Without this, oversight will always lag behind deployment. The office must actively guide public bodies that are already experimenting with AI. Departments and agencies need clear practical advice on what is acceptable, what is risky and how to deploy AI safely. Silence or delay create uncertainty and drive poor decision-making. The office must be able to intervene quickly. AI deployment cycles are measured in weeks and, in some cases, days rather than years. If our response mechanisms are slow, fragmented or overly cautious, and if we are dealing with AI purely in the political cycles, then we will fall behind. We have already fallen behind and let us be clear about this.

AI is not waiting for us to get comfortable with what it is and what it is doing. It is moving fast and it will continue to do so regardless of how prepared we are. The real risk is not that

we act too boldly but that we move too slowly and with too little understanding. The natural fear that is there around AI has caused us to act slowly and to double check and double think what we are doing, particularly when it comes to regulation. Particularly when it comes to the national AI office, we need to act quickly and boldly and ensure that people can see the State is working to protect the interests of the public. Ireland has the talent, the credibility and the values to lead in AI, particularly with regard to regulation, but leadership requires urgency, expertise and the willingness to engage with AI as it exists today and not as we might wish to exist in future. We can shape it if we engage. Putting our heads in the sand and asking whether it will go away will not cut the mustard.

Deputy Mark Ward: Artificial intelligence is playing a bigger role in society today. While it has some benefits, I do not always see artificial intelligence as a force for good and I will give an example. South Dublin County Council has a system in place, and I know Deputies Shane Moynihan and Gogarty are well used to using it, whereby elected representatives can contact South Dublin County Council on behalf of constituents and get a written response which we are able to send to our constituents. Before Christmas I noticed some very unusual language in some of the responses I was getting. I contacted South Dublin County Council and asked whether it was using AI to generate the responses. The response I got was that it has 25 staff members with access to AI and they use it to generate content, including responses to elected members. The council stated it is committed to maintaining human oversight of these responses but I have concerns. I have had to contact the council numerous times about some of the responses I have received which did not make sense. I have been using the system since 2016 when I was first elected to South Dublin County Council. I know when I am getting a computerised response that does not make any sense. We cannot send them out to constituents.

Constituents in Dublin Mid-West cannot meet a council official face to face since the civic offices in Clondalkin were closed to the public. When they make a phone call they get an automated message and they cannot get a human at the end of the phone. While AI has its benefits, we must not lose human contact. Constituents and people need this human contact as they go on.

People have spoken about Grok on Twitter being used to make sexual images of children and women. The Minister of State has condemned it and everybody in the House would condemn it because it is absolutely deplorable. It needs to be tackled with the full weight of the law. If the law is not strong enough, it is up to us to make it stronger. I have heard horrendous stories of women who have had sexual images made on Grok without their consent. Earlier this year, and it is at the lower end and I will not compare it, an image of me was AI generated. It was at the lower end of the scale but it did involve the removal of some items of clothing. I reported it to X and the first response I got was that it did not go against its community standards. On 8 January I received another response because the account was reported by numerous people on X. This response, after several complaints, stated it did break X's abusive behaviour rule and the account is now locked. It is locked but it is not banned despite several complaints. The bigger issue is whose account was locked. It is an anonymous account. There is no accountability for people with anonymous accounts and this needs to be tackled. I have no problem with people having a different opinion and having a go at me over my political opinion. That is fine but at least own it and do not hide behind an anonymous account.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Artificial intelligence is already embedded in all aspects of our lives. We look at healthcare, education, transport, the creative arts, music, business and Government services. As others have said, there are many practical applications that are useful but, equally, there are a lot of dangers out there which have been referenced. They are now impinging on our basic human rights and we need to protect our children and manage threats to our energy resources.

It is not going too far to say there is an existential threat to humanity from AI. Even the creators of it have acknowledged that. We need to be very careful. That said, AI is not going to go away which is why it has to be hugely regulated to protect our basic freedoms. The likes of Musk talk about taking away freedom but to protect our freedom we need to regulate him and his ilk. It should not be left in the hands of the tech bros. None of these massively wealthy individuals has shown any inclination or ability to put the common good at the heart of their businesses. The algorithms are all about prioritising engagement no matter how negative, no matter how down right evil. They are all about maximising revenue and there is little or no moderation left. As others have mentioned, moderators have been fired to push up the profits.

That is why I welcome that Ireland has taken some first steps in implementing the EU Artificial Intelligence Act and designating the 15 national competent authorities to enforce it, which places it among some of the first EU member states. However, if we want this legislation to truly protect our citizens, we need rigorous enforcement, enhanced transparency and resources to adapt to any technological advances as they come. Quite frankly, the jury is still out.

As of now, we have regulation under bodies like the Central Bank, the Data Protection Commission, Coimisiún na Meán, the HSE, the Health and Safety Authority but we still need one single, empowered point of co-ordination. I am interested to see how the proposed national AI office is actually going to work. Will it be in place by this year? Will it be properly resourced? I am talking about technical experts, the engineers, the auditors and the data scientists who can do a deep dive into the AI and algorithms, rather than just carry out sample audits and tick boxes.

Enforcement must be proactive, not reactive. High at risk areas like policing, elections, healthcare and employment must be routinely inspected, not monitored after the harm or after the event, and non-compliance needs to have the strict penalties at our national remit and at EU level. I acknowledge that the EU is doing a much better job than other jurisdictions but we need to go further and not ease up due to pressure from the likes of Trump.

I note the Minister, Deputy Burke, has said that building an AI ecosystem requires something that is informative, trusted and transparent. To deliver on that we probably need a public register of high-risk AI systems that are deployed in Ireland and keep our public in the loop rather than let them be disinformed by the trolls and the bots.

The EU AI act is a landmark piece of legislation but we need to resource it to keep up because the technology is going to change all the time and we need to be at the forefront and keep up the pressure. If they are not going to play ball, we should get rid of the AI systems.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the next speaker, I welcome our visitors to the Gallery. They look like minors. They are very welcome. I am not sure where they are from.

I am going to leave it up to their chaperone but we are having a debate on AI and the recent Grok controversy. It may or not involve some explicit detail and it is up to the visitors' chaperone as to whether or not they stay and hear the content.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Aontú is a long-term critic of AI and its gross under-regulation in this country. We were the first party to call for an Oireachtas committee on AI. We believe there should be far stricter democratic oversight of AI. There is little regulation if we are honest and that is because a lot of governments are afraid to stand up to the oligarchs who own the technology. In many ways, AI, like nuclear power, can be used for good but for sure it can be used for serious damage. However, imagine the damage nuclear power would cause if it was not regulated properly.

I want to speak to the Grok crisis this week. We, as a party, have drafted Bills previously to ban the provision of hardcore pornographic material to children. We regularly provide evidence to this Dáil of the damage of that material to young minds. Hardcore pornography distorts the minds of children, it leads to horrific violence against women and it leads to rape and murder. Yet, we have very little support for this Bill in this House. All we received from the Government is shrugs and measured tones in response.

There is a subsidiary of Pornhub that operates in Dublin as part of the Government's foreign direct investment policy. It pays corporation tax to the State. Pornhub provides hardcore pornographic material to children without checking their age. There is a US lawsuit against Pornhub alleging the distribution of child pornography yet, as far as I can see from this Government, it is ignored. Aontú is currently drafting a Bill that will see smart phones for children under the age of 16 banned. The damage these screens are doing to our children is incredible.

Regarding the nudification tools, there are nudification tools provided by Grok, Merlio AI, SoulGen, Nudify-Online, Undress AI, DreamGF, deepnude-cc, Promptchan.ai and Candy AI. They are all should be criminally banned. The Wan video generation tool was developed by the Chinese giant Alibaba. It is completely unmoderated. The users are free to upload a photo of anyone at any age and generate any AI video they want. This is a disgrace. ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, offers its own unmoderated video generation tool which also allows users to generate nudification images for a small fee, completely unmoderated. This should also be banned. Why is there no focus on these companies as well?

Any legislator that stops using X but does not use their legislative power to ban these tools is not doing their job. They are substituting the real beneficial action to citizens for virtue signalling that makes absolutely no difference. We need to get strong but we need to do it with legislation.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister of State for joining us in the House. I know she had a personal situation this morning but in fairness she and her office reached out to nearly every Member of this House to tell us why she would not be in the House and I appreciate that.

I may be misquoting the Minister of State but when she took this Ministry role, I think I read somewhere that she said she did not have a huge amount of experience when it came to artificial intelligence. In fairness to her, what she has produced so far, and calling a spade a

spade, she has been very good in her role. As my grandfather used to say, I might not have gone to school but I met the scholars on the way home. The Minister of State has played a very progressive, active role.

My experience with AI has been very positive. I remember visiting a Shanghai hospital a number of years ago, going to a training unit in that hospital and witnessing how AI was so important, not only for diagnosis of cancer and for checking all results coming through the hospital but also for the training processes for nurses, doctors and surgeons. I went into a virtual reality room depicting a crash site, and we were geared up like "Star Trek" or "Star Wars", but you were able to operate, to assist and to learn all through AI. It was absolutely fascinating. They are the benefits of AI and they are areas which prove that AI works very well.

There are huge benefits for someone like me who is dyslexic. I have Copilot, which is the programme allowed on the Oireachtas computers. It has been enormously beneficial. Dragon NaturallySpeaking 9 has been enormously beneficial to me. I can upload something from Leinster House which could be 100 or 200 pages and it reads it back to me. It is very helpful to me. AI has been beneficial to many people in society today.

There is a lot to say, and I know I have a short time left on the clock, but people have mentioned Grok and those images that are circulating. It is absolutely appalling that non-consensual images are allowed of males, females or children on any social media and that has to be regulated in Ireland and Europe. However, I wonder if the owner of Grok had been Greg Brockman or Sam Altman, who are the directors of ChatGPT, whether it would be a very different story with the outrage here.

Given the outrage that has come from TDs today, I must ask about all those people who have gone through the court systems in Ireland and who have walked away with suspended sentences for downloading thousands of genuine child pornography in this country? Continuously we are seeing people walking out of court rooms with suspended sentences. I would like to see the outrage that has come from some Members of this House applied to those getting suspended sentences.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: That is an absolutely shocking statement.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I think this is the second set of statements we have had on artificial intelligence. A bit like the previous speaker, I do not think anybody in this House is an expert in AI in the same way as there are in industry. That is part of the challenge for us as representatives of the people. That is why we are here. It is for us to understand, articulate and predict an industry that is rapidly changing. Its applications are rapidly changing. What we saw this week was a fairly grotesque application of a tool.

We would be wrong to think in terms of one platform or in terms of AI being the issue. The issue here was the application of the tool. That could happen on X, ChatGPT, Copilot or others. It often does not because those companies have put safeguards in place. Initially, at least, X seemed to revel in not putting any restrictions on technology. That is because of the overall ideology of its owner. If somebody goes on X and asks somebody to create an image which involves the sexualisation of children and a company produces that image, my view is the

person who requested it and the company which generated it both created the content. Whether you use a camera and a light, a Photoshop from ten years ago or AI, you are responsible when you generate sexual images of children. I understand there are investigations and I hope that is the interpretation the Garda takes, regardless of what Acts are in place. I note the comments from the Taoiseach on the 1998 Act. There is also Coco's Law, which we probably never thought would apply in the area of AI, but it has. Both of those Acts appear, in my reading of it, to be sufficient for the Garda to act. This is now an enforcement issue. I welcome the Minister of State saying she is willing to look at new legislation. Of course we should look at new legislation.

There are many areas of AI. When we think of AI as an additional tool, we have to think of how it will impact. Whether it was the industrial revolution, rural electrification, the Internet or AI, this is just a different version of new technology and of course it will have impacts. An area of concern is creativity. When somebody creates something, who are they creating it with? They are contributing their ideas and prompts, which can be creative and dynamic, but they are co-creating it with a platform. Who is credited for that? How will that be credited in terms of creativity and rights going forward?

There is the area of skills. My daughter is in transition year and has an AI class. They are learning how to use AI; they are not necessarily learning how AI can replace traditional work. There are so many societal impacts. Grok caught everybody by surprise because it is a company that did not seem willing to be bound by the norm of not approving images involving sexualisation of children. There are many people out there who do not accept the norms of society. That is why the Government should step in and make changes where required.

I acknowledge the work the Minister of State and the Taoiseach have done. I hope the Garda Commissioner will follow through. In the American system, the chief police officer is able to stand up and say, "We're going after this guy", and make a public statement. Our police do not operate in that way. That is regrettable. If there had been a statement from the Garda earlier in the week, we might be in a different space in the debate. I wish good luck to the Minister of State. It is a very open area and one we have to be careful of. It is a tool with positive and negatives. Our job as legislators is to balance that.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome this debate. This is an incredibly important subject. I thank the Minister of State for the leadership she has provided in this space. Working with me as chair of the Oireachtas committee, she has been very co-operative, as have officials in her Department.

As my colleague Deputy McAuliffe said, artificial intelligence is a tool, not a goal in itself. We use any tool to, hopefully, improve all our lives, our community and the delivery of public services. It is here and there are many positive use cases. I have been fortunate to experience those, such as the National Library using it to translate ancient manuscripts and GP surgeries using it to assist patients. Recycling companies are now using it.

I read something interesting recently from the AI for Good Lab. Ireland is, among the working-age population, the fourth highest user of artificial intelligence of all countries around the world.

I have just come from Amazon Web Services where they had a hackathon. Their programmers and others worked with charities such as Vision Ireland, Rehab and GOAL to see how AI and technology can improve delivery of their services.

I am sure the Minister of State was at the Stripe Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and was amazed by the number of projects about AI and in which students used AI. I draw her attention to one she will be interested in, a project from Bunclody Community College, an excellent school in north Wexford, by Sam Bolger, Thomas Larkin and Aaron Sharlott called "The Firehouse Effect", which looked at misinformation and disinformation and how AI can supercharge those.

We know all these changes are happening in society. The Minister of State will be aware of the interim report of our committee from before Christmas in which we made 85 recommendations. The key to what our committee is trying to do, which is critical to Ireland's approach to this area, is proper regulation and safety by design, and that we balance that with supports for innovation. We have to get the message out clearly that regulation and innovation are not mutually exclusive concepts. We have to make sure they work hand in hand. Throughout history, as Deputy McAuliffe pointed out, with any new invention, proper regulation allows it to develop appropriately.

We have to focus on how Ireland can become the AI island. That is about tackling the problems Grok and others have caused. Our first obligation is to ensure our citizens and those who reside here are as safe online as offline. We also need, through the use of sandboxes and so on, to encourage innovation, particularly in deploying AI against the dangers we face.

The Minister of State is driving the national AI office. It is important it does not become a "thou shalt not" office, but an enabling office that is focused on supports for SMEs, charities and community organisations to use AI safely to improve their services. It should be a hub supporting other regulators operating in the space. It is critical those regulatory bodies are sufficiently resourced and have the necessary people to carry out the functions expected of them.

I am a big fan of the creation of an AI observatory. We are seeing huge changes. The Higher Education Authority, HEA, recently produced a report on the huge changes we will see in the skills base in this country. We need to upskill and reskill across nearly every category of work. It is therefore important we have an observatory that can inform us in real time of changes in society and the economy. We can respond to that. The Minister of State and I have been working with the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy Lawless, on this, particularly on the development of short programmes and microcredentials, so every individual can access, for example, a simple programme or course on what AI is, and SMEs can embed AI in their business and use it safely to improve their processes.

We need to start thinking about what is coming down the line. I introduced the Protection of Voice and Image Bill to the House. Part of our digital identity is not just the standard form of data and, particularly as politicians, our voice; the image, identity and likeness of every citizen are crucial. We need to address that as soon as possible.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The AI genie is definitely out of the bottle. It is a technology with huge positive potential for medicine, mental health, construction, media, education and all parts

of human interaction. In the wrong hands, however, AI has the potential to do huge harm. Palantir Technologies is a significant presence in Israel, providing the Israeli military and intelligence agencies with advanced AI and data analysis tools. What does that do? It creates kill lists for the Israeli military.

4 o'clock

It also enables drones and remote machine guns to identify individuals in the West Bank and Gaza and to shoot and kill them without human interaction. That is what AI can do. That is the danger of this type of technology in the wrong hands.

I will go back to Grok and Elon Musk's X. Grok has manipulated photos of people to create images, often removing their clothes or making them pose in suggestive ways. Members of An Garda Síochána were here yesterday. They said the organisation was dealing with over 200 new cases of women and children being abused. Can the Minister of State imagine that? There were 200 cases in the last couple of weeks. The Garda knows where they are being produced. It is just down the road from here in X's headquarters. That is where these images are being distributed from. I acknowledge what Deputy McAuliffe said because he was absolutely spot on. He said that there are people sitting at computers asking Grok, which is just down the road, to do despicable things to women and children. They could not produce those images without the technology of Grok and X. They could not do it. I simply cannot believe that this Government is as outraged by the actions of Musk and X as the Irish people are because it did not deal with this immediately. I am not talking about looking at new legislation, considering doing something down the road, having a look at it or seeing if it fits into some category or other. The Government did not go to An Garda Síochána and say that it knows that digital images of child abuse are being produced down the road. It is mind-boggling that this has not been done yet.

I genuinely ask the Minister of State if she can imagine any other circumstances in which the Garda knows that a company is enabling the distribution of child pornography and the abuse of women who put up photos online on their own social media profiles and no action is taken against the producers of that technology. I am sorry but I do not accept that taking the details of more than 200 victims of abuse is good enough. By the time the perpetrators, those people who created those images, get to court, there will be thousands of victims. I apologise to the Ceann Comhairle; I will finish with this but it is really important. If Joe Bloggs sitting in his bedroom had created this technology, that house would have been raided, the computers would have been seized, that person would have been in court and he would have been charged. The reason that has not happened is because it is Elon Musk, Trump's buddy, and X. That is the only reason.

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 Jen Cummins - To discuss core funding for Ballyfermot Youth Service.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the development of equine therapy facilities at the Toghermore Campus in Tuam, County Galway.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss funding for a nurture room at St. Brendan's College, Belmullet.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing use and misuse of e-scooter vehicles in urban areas.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss drug-related intimidation and associated violence.

Deputy Sean Fleming - To discuss the need for womens' refuge accommodation in Portlaoise.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss section 39 arrangements for healthcare assistants.

Deputy Dessie Ellis - To discuss funding for the breakfast club for St. Malachy's MNS, Finglas south, Dublin 11.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the labour market conditions faced by young people.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss waiting times for children awaiting speech and language therapy assessments in CHO 9.

Deputies Joanna Byrne, Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss losses of connectivity for vulnerable people using a health monitoring or pendant alarm.

The matters raised by Deputies Gary Gannon, Louise O'Reilly, Joanna Byrne and Conor D. McGuinness, and Rose Conway-Walsh and Dessie Ellis have been selected for discussion

Artificial Intelligence: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I will begin by thanking colleagues around the House for their understanding that I could not be here at the very beginning of the debate. I also thank the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, for taking the reins. I thank colleagues who made contributions here today, which were all very heartfelt. This week has shown how we can react and respond. It is not just about reacting. I will take up a couple of the points that were made here today in a more nuanced way.

We have three laws in place in this country that I believe are very robust. We have Coco's Law, the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act and the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act. These laws provide that this activity is not allowed to continue. These laws make very clear that, in this country, it is illegal to create, possess, disseminate or share these images. Those of us in this Government, in this House and in the Upper House could not be in any clearer that these are the rules here in Ireland. I appeal to any companies listening to this debate to obey these laws and to abide by them. Our law enforcement body, An Garda Síochána, came before the committee yesterday in the committee rooms here in Leinster House and it was made very clear that we have these robust laws in place. I appeal to An Garda Síochána to enforce them. I have to be reasonable and measured in my contribution and say that I know enforcement takes a little bit of time.

If a provision to shut down X was available to me when it became apparent to me that this vile poison was available so freely online, I would have liked to have the opportunity to ban it. I am very serious and earnest when I say, as Minister of State with responsibility for AI, that any user or creator who continues to perpetrate this type of abuse against our citizens, whether male or female and including children, will be stopped and held criminally liable because it is a criminal offence to do what we have seen over the last week. I know it has been going on for a little bit longer than a week but it became very apparent to me in the last week. I have reacted and responded as quickly as I possibly could. I have met with Coimisiún na Meán and with the Taoiseach and I am meeting with the Attorney General this afternoon to be absolutely clear in my mind that all of the necessary provisions are in law. If they are not, I will bring legislation in here as quickly as I possibly can. Looking around this Chamber, I know I will have support in doing that.

I thank the Chair of the Committee on Artificial Intelligence, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, who is here. I thank him and his committee for their first interim report and the associated recommendations, which I take very seriously. I also thank Deputy Alan Dillon in his absence for the work he is doing. I encourage all of the tech companies who have been invited in on 4 February to come before that committee. Its members are our legislators and do the pre-legislative scrutiny that informs me and the Government. It is critically important that those companies present themselves before our legislators on 4 February.

If the Ceann Comhairle will allow me, I will also take a moment to thank our Artificial Intelligence Advisory Council, led by Dr. Patricia Scanlon. It has done incredible work. The members are experts in lots of different areas within AI. They worked very quickly to provide me with a concrete document that has given me a deeper insight and advised me about the existing legislation, giving me the confidence that sufficient legislation is in place. It is about enforcement. I appeal to anyone listening in to make reports to Coimisiún na Meán, An Garda Síochána and the hotline. There are mechanisms available to report. There are also supports for victims who have had their images used, distorted, shared and disseminated. There are supports in place and I encourage victims to use them. I thank the council for the four recommendations it gave to me and the Department. I thank my officials. I may be the face but a team of people have worked night and day over the last week since this issue became apparent to address it in the quickest way possible to protect our citizens, man, woman and child. Our goal is to protect our citizens and we will continue in that vein over the next number of days.

I assure Members that I am also meeting with X. That meeting is happening tomorrow. I will relay all of the views that have been made very clear to me today. I will also relay that what has happened over the last week is illegal and that X will face the full rigours of the law here in Ireland.

There are a number of things I want to highlight because not all of the conversation today was about that issue. Really important issues were raised here today. Deputy Gibney raised the issue of skills. She has been very vocal on that issue. The Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Artificial Intelligence and Deputy Ó Cearúil also raised the issue. I assure them all that I am working very closely with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to ensure that observatory is created very quickly as well as the AI office.

The transposition of the EU AI Act will be done as quickly as I possibly can. I assure Members that the AI office is established, not in its fullest sense, but it is established. There are resources behind it and a location for it. It will be at arm's length from the Department and will be able to work independently of any of us. That gives me good confidence as well.

I will point to a few of the other measures within the Department that address education, skills and regulation, which has been to the forefront of all of our minds over the last week. Digital and AI technology is transforming every aspect of our lives, for good and for evil, it has to be said. What we have seen over the last couple of days is evil. Not everyone has equal access to the benefits of these technologies. In 2025, I introduced a charter for digital inclusion as a landmark step in Ireland's mission to create a more inclusive digital society. The initiative emphasises the importance of partnership, particularly the role of larger businesses, to support SMEs to adopt and benefit from digital technologies. I know Deputy Gibney feels very passionately about this. I do acknowledge and am looking at how we can mitigate job losses that will happen. It is inevitable. I do not deny that for one second. The charter reflects the UN's principles of leaving no one behind, as outlined in Digital for Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Roadmap. This sets out commitments for businesses and organisations to help close the digital divide by promoting digital skills, affordability, raising awareness and enabling access to online resources. I assure Members that I work closely within the Department and that my colleagues here have a number of forums within the Department that give us direct access to people who are at the coalface. We are constantly engaging with small, medium and large businesses to provide financial support and also to hear from them, where and how they are struggling and how we can support them. We will do everything we can to do that.

Artificial intelligence is a disruptive technology. I am acutely aware of the concerns raised regarding the impact of AI on the labour market. The impact of AI and the future of work is still unfolding. The expert group on future skills needs report on AI and the Irish labour market shows that Ireland is relatively more exposed to AI-related disruption than other advanced economies, with higher exposure among those who have higher educational attainment. It also indicates that female and younger workers are more likely to be in the roles that could be affected. The research also found that Ireland's enterprise sector and workforce are adapting rapidly to AI, with strong demand for AI skills matched with solid supply. However, as the report rightly notes, the Government must continue to monitor and address any risks AI poses to our workforce. That would be the role of the observatory. Doing that with the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, who is all about further education and the skills base, means we have the right combination to make it work well.

My Department, with the ESRI and the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, is undertaking research on the potential impacts of AI on key sectors of the Irish economy. The final report is due to be published early this year. It is clear that the development of new capabilities and capacities within the workforce will be necessary as it is very likely that new types of work will emerge. Ireland has always had an agile and adaptable labour force. The Government's priority, through targeted investment in reskilling and upskilling initiatives, is to empower the workforce with the skills needed to thrive in an AI-enabled economy and to meet the demand for evolving roles. We will also create an observatory, as I have said, dedicated to monitoring the use of AI across enterprise. Working in tandem with a new national skills observatory, it will guide the development of future enterprises.

I thank Coimisiún na Meán and wish to remind anyone watching this difficult debate today that there are supports in place. I urge them to report, report, report.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Crime Prevention

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is great to have the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy in the Chamber again today. It follows on from the conversation that was initiated by my colleague, Deputy Hearne, earlier. The Ceann Comhairle was not in the Chair herself but there was quite a furore in the Chamber earlier. My colleague was speaking on behalf of a constituent of his, Amanda Uwase, who was in the Gallery at the time. Over Christmas, Amanda's family experienced an absolutely terrifying ordeal very few of us could even comprehend, when their home was targeted in an arson attack. The Garda is investigating so I will not speak to the specifics of the incident, more to the follow-up. Deputy Hearne was making the point that there are perhaps differences in how some communities are being policed. The community which Amanda came from is quite disadvantaged. That resulted in some interruptions, and understandably so. It is a charge that is highly emotive. One may consider it to be fair or unfair and that is absolutely fine.

I went for a cup of coffee with Amanda after the session. She was speaking to the horror of seeing her house targeted, having to go back inside a burning home to rescue two of her siblings and watch another of her siblings jump from a second-storey window through which she, too, had to leave the premises, and then wait for the fire brigade to come and get her mother from the burning building. It was terrifying. In the weeks that have passed, Amanda's family has not been allocated a Garda liaison officer yet. I find that extraordinary. They have been placed in an accommodation that is not only too small but also minutes away from the home that was targeted. They are absolutely terrified. The council they are dealing with has not been overly responsive. Amanda today, with a bandage still on her arm, had to do another interview with the media. She is so frustrated by the lack of engagement from the State with her family's experience that she has had to park her trauma and muster the courage to speak to RTÉ earlier in the week and another media outlet today. That does mean something. I cannot imagine another community being targeted and not receiving comprehensive engagement from the State.

There was an horrendous incident in Edenderry at the start of December where a child was murdered in an arson attack, again, a four-year-old and a 60-year-old caregiver who was his great aunt. I expected to come into the Dáil that week to have statements and to hear it described as a line that we shall not cross again, and that we must really get to grips with these incidents.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I just want to be careful because these are all under investigation. I know the Deputy is cognisant of that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will speak more broadly. I will not even refer to the fact that a woman in Clondalkin opened her door to be smeared with petrol and set on fire also. There

have been 2,500 incidents of drug-related intimidation since 2001. Of these, over 150 were arson attacks linked to drug-related intimidation. Arson attacks connected to drug crime rose sharply, from just 13 in 2022 to about 50 last year. Despite more arrests, only 4% of cases have led to prosecutions. Recorded incidence of drug-related intimidation overall has increased by roughly 38% since 2001. It is fair to say we are reaching extraordinary levels of intimidation targeted at particular communities. It is not just urban communities. I appreciate that there has been a significant increase in smaller, rural environments.

I have no clue as to what the response is from the State. I know we have one small initiative that is badly funded and poorly advertised, yet we have what can only be described as pandemic levels of intimidation being experienced by communities. There have been no statements on the matter, no major interventions, nobody tweeting from their accounts, just silence. I would love to hear what the Minister of State and his Department are doing about this issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I have a reply on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, to the topical issue as originally put forward. I was here earlier on for the Deputy's intervention. I am very glad to have an opportunity to make this point. From where I was sitting, I felt and still feel that some of the Deputy's comments were totally unacceptable. An Garda Síochána is an organisation which this country can be justly proud of. It investigates all crimes equally and fairly. There was a major attempt made by the Deputy and his colleague to politicise or to imply that there were other motivations or reasons why An Garda Síochána was not acting in a particular case. I think that is wrong.

I acknowledge and endorse the remarks the Minister, Deputy Burke, made in his answer to the Deputy in relation to the bravery and wonderful contribution people make when they come to our country. They should never have to encounter that type of violence but I will stand by An Garda Síochána. I will not ever sit and listen to Deputies who I believe, for political point-scoring reasons, are trying to undermine one of the institutions of the State.

On the more general point, I will outline some of what we are doing. I assure the Deputy that we are tackling the scourge of drug dealing and targeting organised crime groups who intimidate and inflict violence and misery on families. Drug-related intimidation is a pervasive issue that inflicts profound harm on individuals and families. I am conscious that such intimidation can be a terrifying experience for families. I agree with the Deputy that, unfortunately, we have seen several incidents of this serious and reprehensible criminal behaviour recently. I assure him though that tackling drug intimidation is a major priority for An Garda Síochána, which he probably does not accept. It is successful in securing convictions and putting those responsible behind bars. The Garda Commissioner has tasked an inspector in every Garda division to respond to the issue of drug-related intimidation.

Investigations and convictions cannot happen, however, without people coming forward and reporting instances of drug-related violence and intimidation. We want to significantly reduce the harms caused to families and communities by illicit drug use. The three main policy objectives of the Minister in this area are: tackling organised crime; minimising the harms caused to those with addiction issues; and diverting people from involvement in crime. We know that organised crime groups are the ones carrying out these threats. The Government is fully committed to providing An Garda Síochána with the resources needed to fight organised

crime. That is reflected, and again the Deputy will probably not give us any credit for this, in a budget of €2.74 billion in 2026.

An Garda Síochána operates Operation Tara, which aims to disrupt, dismantle and prosecute drug trafficking networks, at all levels, which is again something the Deputy will probably just dismiss. Under Operation Tara, individuals and groups involved in the drug trade are the target of enforcement activity based on intelligence and the latest crime trends. In terms of minimising harms, An Garda Síochána takes the issue of drug-related intimidation extremely seriously. The Garda will afford the person or family subject to a threat with the best level of security, advice and support that can be offered. Most importantly, An Garda Síochána will deal with this issue in the utmost confidential and secure manner.

In May of last year, the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, launched the drug-related intimidation and violence engagement, DRIVE, project. DRIVE brings together law enforcement, health services, social services and community organisations to tackle drug-related intimidation from multiple perspectives. It operates on a national scale across Ireland, ensuring consistent and comprehensive support in all regions. DRIVE's primary goal is to establish effective systems and structures for a unified, timely and sensitive response to drug-related intimidation. It focuses on responding to incidents, supporting those affected and preventing future occurrences.

There are also over 400 publicly-funded drug services, including family support services, across the country, which advise and support people affected by drug-related intimidation.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I went back and read Deputy Hearne's contribution as the Minister of State was speaking. His contribution was targeted at the Department of justice and the Minister responsible. We do not doubt for a second the work of the Garda, given the supports available to it. It is not the Garda itself that leaves police stations understaffed or undermanned. That is the responsibility of those who allocate budgets, which is the Government.

I find it quite insulting to the Garda that because we have an exchange in the Chamber to do with budgetary allocations and absolute priorities, the Minister of State says we are going after the Garda. Let me be clear: we are going after his Department - the Department of justice. It was not the Garda, for example, that failed to facilitate a parliamentary discussion on drug-related intimidation, which we have been asking for since early December. It was the Government and Chief Whip, who was present today, that did not allow those discussions. Please do not conflate the two. Gardaí do a difficult job in difficult circumstances. It is the absence of priority from the Government that enables a scenario in which some communities are absolutely not policed as well as others. That is also something the Minister has written into the record of this House, when he said that there are parts of Dublin that are not as safe as other parts. Which parts was he referring to exactly? Probably not his constituency in Dublin 4. It is definitely the more marginalised communities that are left to deal with these incidents. It is also hard to take the Government seriously when it tells me that it is tackling drug-related and gang-related intimidation and violence when we see that only 4% of cases have led to prosecutions. That is only 4% of cases out of 2,500 incidents since 2021.

I would like to work with the Department on prioritising the issue of drug-related intimidation. It is very clearly costing lives and destroying communities. The DRIVE programme is a good start but it does not have the right level of funding allocation. People do

not know too much about it and it is not endemic in the heart of the communities that are most impacted by the violence we are discussing.

Deputy Colm Brophy: We are doing stuff. I will take a few moments to outline what we are doing. Among the number of key actions we have taken is to increase the maximum sentence for conspiracy to murder from ten years to life and enact new laws that criminalise the grooming of children into a life of crime, which is legislation that is at the forefront of anything any other European country is doing. We are drafting new laws that will provide for the use of facial recognition technology and investigation of certain drug offences. We are rolling out the support programme to break the link between gangs and the children they try to recruit.

I also mention in particular the Criminal Assets Bureau. The motivator for all the organised crime groups when it comes to dealing drugs is money. CAB is at the forefront of fighting organised crime in this country and disrupting its activities. The Minister is progressing legislation that will strengthen the State's ability to seize criminal assets and target the proceeds of crime. The new Bill was also speed up the process of disposing of seized assets.

This Government is fully committed to fighting drug gangs, crime and resourcing An Garda Síochána. It is fully committed to making sure that is done in a way that treats everybody fairly and equally, enables An Garda Síochána to go after people who are committing crimes that we do not want to see and doing everything in our power to ensure that the Garda has the resources to tackle them

Youth Unemployment

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to have this discussion with the Minister of State. You will often hear reference made to some person, group or entity being the "canary in the coalmine". I believe that young people, when it comes to unemployment, are that canary in the coalmine. Looking at the trend, the general unemployment rate increased from 4.5% in quarter 3 of 2024 to 5.3% in quarter 3 of 2025. When you delve down into that, that is where you find the canaries, if you will. For those aged 15 to 24, which is the group known as "youth", the unemployment rate stood at 14.1% in quarter 3 of 2025, which was an 11.5% increase on quarter 3 in 2024. That is almost three times higher than the national rate. Not only is the rate higher but the rate of increase is also higher. There are 54,800 unemployed people, 9,400 of whom are classified as young people.

When we look at the trends, we see a number of things. The reason I put this Topical Issue down was because of talking to friends, family and people in my constituency. This Christmas was a very bittersweet one for many. Young people in families were having their last Christmas at home because they are going to Australia - the Minister of State will know this - Canada, Dubai and America, although fewer and fewer are going to America. They are going to places where they think they might be able to build a life or shelter from the housing crisis and perhaps come back when, under a different Government, there might be better options. I put down this Topical Issue because when I spoke to people, I was prompted to look at the statistics. The statistics bear out what I am saying, which is that while the general rate of unemployment is

low, although the trend is going slowly upwards, for young people the trend is going upwards at a much faster rate. They are proportionately representing a larger group.

Young people face a lot of challenges. They are already subject to subminimum rates of pay, which is something the Government could change by way of legislation, and are at the business end of the housing crisis. What is needed is specific research into those labour market conditions that are being faced by young people. It is only by conducting the research into those labour market conditions that the Government can get the accurate picture and from that come up with a strategy to address it.

The Minister of State has heard it said, and it has been said to me by young people, that this generation of younger people coming through will be the first to face a worse standard of living than their parents. You can see it. People are not able to buy their own house. The average age at which people can afford to purchase a house has gone up almost to age 40. That was certainly not the case when I was younger. All of these factors point in the direction of a need for specific research and specific targeting for this group of people. They are not necessarily the same as the general population of unemployed persons, so they need that bespoke research and a targeted plan of action.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am grateful to Deputy O'Reilly for raising this important issue. While I am taking it on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, it is one I have a personal interest in. We spent many a day on this topic in the previous Dáil. As the Deputy will know, the programme for government sets out a strong enterprise and fiscal framework prioritising economic and employment growth, with a target of creating 300,000 extra jobs by 2030. I am pleased to report that Ireland's labour market continues to perform strongly with record employment of over 2.8 million people last year, rising participation and sustained growth.

For clarity there are more people at work today in Ireland than the population of Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. This reflects the resilience of the economy and the success of Government policies supporting job creation, fostering innovation and providing opportunities across sectors. Skills and talent are in high demand with near full employment and continued growth in ICT, pharmaceuticals, medtech, financial services and agrifood driven by both indigenous firms and foreign direct investment providing opportunities for young people to begin exciting careers.

All the research in the past week from three or four different bodies showed that the Irish workforce and population is now either the fourth or second most educated workforce in the world. While unemployment edged up to 5% in December, it remains broadly consistent with full employment. As the Deputy rightly points out, the youth unemployment rate reached 14% in December at 50,700 persons, which is below the EU average of 15.2% and euro area average of 14.8%. As everyone would accept, I think it is not unusual for youth unemployment rates to be higher than those of older cohorts, due to a lack of relevant work experience among younger workers, skills mismatches or difficulties experienced moving between education and employment, with clear seasonal and demographic patterns. This is nothing new in that regard. However, many of these factors are temporary in nature. As young people widen their

professional networks and gain broader work and life experience, their employment prospects improve.

The Deputy raised an action plan. It is a valid point and anybody in this Chamber can work on these things. It does not need to be party political. As she will be aware, in May 2024, the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, and the Minister, Deputy Burke, launched the updated Pathways to Work Strategy, which included a number of initiatives to reduce youth unemployment and the employment and youth engagement charter, an initiative to support and inspire young jobseekers and other marginalised groups to build their knowledge, skills and experience to enhance their employability. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and its agencies will continue promoting employer awareness and encourage uptake of supports such as the expanded JobsPlus subsidy scheme and the work placement experience programme. The Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Social Protection to implement revised Pathways to Work actions and to develop the successor strategy, which will support jobseekers to find and maintain quality employment.

The Deputy alluded to the anecdotal experiences of many families at Christmas, which I do not dispute. In my new role as Minister of State with responsibility for diaspora, I have spent the past seven months extensively engaging with the Irish abroad. Some have been abroad for generations and some only recently. There is this notion that people are fleeing Ireland because there are no jobs, which was certainly the case when I left university when we were in the grips of the financial crash. We need to knock that on the head. There is a great opportunity to emigrate and move abroad but when we look at the category of people who came back to Ireland last year, we see over 30,000 Irish people returning after an experience abroad. We talk about housing and destinations such as Canada and Australia. The biggest issues there are the affordability and availability of housing with average prices in rental terms in cities such as Melbourne, Toronto, Vancouver and Sydney all ahead of Dublin.

It is important that we play fair. This is an issue. I am not denying it is an issue. It is an issue being experienced by other European partners. We have a strategy in place and we are more than happy to work with the Opposition to make sure that it is fit for purpose and that we listen to those canaries in the coalmine the Deputy alluded to.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister of State said he thinks we would all agree that it is not unusual for youth employment rates to be higher than those of older cohorts. I respectfully disagree with him. Dr. Elish Kelly from the ESRI has described the youth unemployment rate as it currently stands as a worrying trend because when you look at that age profile the chances are that they have lower levels of education and attainment. They are more likely to be employed on temporary-type contracts and in more vulnerable sectors that are often the first to let people go when the economy takes a turn. The ESRI would challenge the Minister of State's view that it is not unusual. I am pointing it out to him simply because within the overall trend not only is it ahead of the general unemployment rate but it is rising at a faster rate. When I say the canaries in the coalmine that is what I mean. It is worth looking at that.

The Minister of State will not find anyone on the Sinn Féin benches objecting to a body of work in that regard. He knows that we will work with him. The first thing that needs to happen is research into those labour market conditions. A job is one thing but a job that can sustain you and you can live on is very much another thing. The Minister of State knows what the

rental rates are like. Notwithstanding the fact that they might be high in Melbourne, young people are still going there in large numbers. They are going in numbers that are bigger than have ever been seen before. I think the year before last, 22,000 visas were issued for Australia alone.

Deputy Neale Richmond: That is after five years of low numbers.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: What we see as part of the trend within the general unemployment figures is something that should be concerning, and no more than that. I think it bears more examination and that piece of research into those labour market conditions and the factors driving that faster rate of increase would be useful.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Where we are in agreement is that the trend is the concern. Youth unemployment being ahead of general unemployment is something we can accept happens but the rate at the moment is a worry. I share that with the Deputy and it is important we clarify that. That is why the Government continues to monitor labour market conditions and the youth unemployment rate and several of our recent initiatives will be central to supporting the broader economy, not least our ambitious investment plans and the action plan on competitiveness and productivity the Department published last year.

An interesting thing when I was in the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment was the work of the labour market activation committee, which brings together that Department and the Department of Social Protection to see where those gaps are. They are consistently working with stakeholders from civic society, the labour movement, industry and representative groups as well as those academics who look into this research, whether from the ESRI, the Nevin Institute or any other bodies of a similar nature. That is something constantly looked at by the Government as well as why there is a constant evolution of our enterprise strategy and why we say we need to create 300,000 extra jobs in the programme for Government. That is not simply to stand still or offset anything. It is just to move forward, which is so important.

We look at the general economic trends across the European Union and in the United Kingdom. There is a serious worry there but Ireland, thankfully, has not been caught up in that. However, there are serious headwinds. One thing of particular focus is the fact that when we are creating 100 new jobs per week, these are new jobs and that they are generally tailored with the educational abilities of the next generation of Irish workers coming out at whether at second level or third level.

Certainly, any trend that is slightly above normal requires investigation. The Government is committed to looking at that on an ongoing basis. If Sinn Féin wants to contribute to that research or have its own research, we are more than happy to work in tandem in the national interest.

Medical Aids and Appliances

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Storm Éowyn was the first test for this Government in the new Dáil term. It took almost three weeks for power and connectivity to be restored to all homes, farms, schools, businesses and clubs. The Government failed its first test.

Lessons have to be learned. Ministers cannot just sit in meetings or berate Internet providers, because we will have another storm like Storm Éowyn. Power and connectivity will be lost again, especially in rural Ireland, and we must do everything to mitigate the risks. We must take proactive steps now and into the future to remove potential threats to the network.

Storm Éowyn damaged or took down more than 6,000 telephone poles, which had to be replaced, along with vast expanses of cable. The majority of this damage was caused by extreme wind and diseased and damaged trees. The length and breadth of this country, there are elderly people doing their best to live independently but who rely on health-monitoring and pendant alarms. When that damage was caused, a number of elderly and vulnerable people had no monitoring in place for an extended period of time throughout the country. This is not acceptable. Our citizens' lives are at risk if they cannot call for help. I have asked questions on this matter of the Department. The Department formed the telecommunications response and resilience group, the purpose of which the Government has said is to promote resilience and high availability of Ireland's telecommunications infrastructure and provide a co-ordinated sectoral emergency response capability. So far, no proactive steps have been taken to address the damaged or diseased trees.

The Government has said that the issues of vegetation and forestry management and vulnerable persons are, per the review of Storm Éowyn published in October by the Department of housing, complex and multisectoral and will likely require an all-of-government approach. It has been a year since Storm Éowyn, so what is this proactive multidepartment approach and is connectivity for vulnerable people using a health-monitoring or pendant alarm a priority of same?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Last January, Storm Éowyn exposed serious weaknesses in how the State protected older people and sustained rural communities. In many rural areas, the loss of power and connectivity carried consequences far beyond inconvenience and unpleasantness. For elderly people living alone, often at a distance from family and neighbours, pendant alarms and home-monitoring systems are a vital safety net. Those systems exist precisely because Government cuts and neglect mean Garda and ambulance response times are too long and there is a dearth of public services in rural communities. When connectivity fails, that safety net all but disappears. What happened during Storm Éowyn and in subsequent weeks followed a well-worn pattern. Large numbers of older people remain dependent on copper landline-based alarm systems, even in areas where fibre broadband is available. These systems are more vulnerable to storm damage, harder to repair and, in most cases, operate without any mobile network backup. When overhead lines go down, the alarm systems go down with them. Alongside this, local community and voluntary organisations are carrying a growing burden. They manage alert systems, support vulnerable residents and step in during emergencies, often with limited funding and capacity.

Demand continues to rise as our population ages, yet funding and supports have not kept pace. If the Government is serious about the future of rural communities, practical steps are required. Communities must be supported to move away from copper-dependent alarms to

modern devices with mobile backup, and monitoring systems need to work properly with fibre where it is available. Providers in the State must also be equipped to deploy mobile-enabled alarms quickly after major storms.

Rural communities are being asked to live with higher risk, weaker services and slower responses. That needs to stop and they need to be listened to. We need to see this becoming a matter of political priority and older people taken out of harm's way, this issue being recognised and action being taken.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank both Deputies for raising this important Topical Issue. I welcome the opportunity to outline the position on this important matter on behalf of the Minister.

This Government takes the safety of vulnerable individuals in our society extremely seriously and recognises the effect of Storm Éowyn and the impact it had on power, water and telecommunications services for those individuals. The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht is responsible for the seniors alert scheme, which provides older people with personal monitored alarms. These personal alarms operate over available telecoms networks to connect users to the monitoring services, allowing users to call for assistance. Since the scheme was launched in 2015, 159,090 participants have been approved, including more than 17,700 in 2025 alone. Participants are provided with the device for free as well as free monitoring for the first year.

I am informed by the Minister, Deputy Calleary's officials that the Department is currently reviewing all aspects of the seniors alert scheme, including the technology and services available, and plans to launch a new iteration of the scheme in 2026. The new scheme will take account of the learnings from recent weather events and will also have regard to modern technology advancements to ensure that the most reliable, robust devices currently available are procured.

With regard to the broader issue of connectivity losses during emergencies and the work ongoing in the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport in relation to this issue, the Deputies should be aware that the provision of electronic communication services such as mobile phone and broadband services is a matter for telecommunications operators, which operate in a liberalised market, regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg. ComReg is independent in the exercise of its functions in accordance with section 11 of the Communications Regulation Act 2002.

Storm Éowyn had an unprecedented impact on telecommunications networks. The impact of power loss on the sector during the storm, and delays to repair of overhead lines in some areas afterwards, had significant effects on citizens, particularly in rural areas of the north and west. The Government and the telecommunications industry recognise the challenges faced by those whose telecommunications connectivity was impacted during the storm, in particular vulnerable individuals who rely on the functioning of this technology for health monitoring and pendant alarms.

Since the storm, the Department has undertaken significant engagement with a variety of stakeholders to address gaps in sectoral preparedness and response. Operators have independently assessed their preparedness and committed to a variety of network-specific

measures, including reviewing the power requirements of sites, acquiring additional backup battery and generator capacity, preventative network maintenance, enhancing redundancy with backup routes to their core networks, and accelerating the use of satellites to provide additional resilience.

The Department has formed the telecommunications response and resilience group, the purpose of which is to promote resilience and high availability of Ireland's telecommunications infrastructure and to provide a co-ordinated sectoral emergency response capability. The members of the group, which include Government stakeholders, ComReg and industry, have agreed an initial work plan to include the development of measures to improve the physical and power resilience of networks, co-ordinate and communicate more effectively during emergencies, and prioritise key infrastructure to provide minimum levels of connectivity during emergencies. The focus of the group's initial efforts is to improve the resilience of telecommunications sites, particularly mobile, as well as communication and co-ordination between response stakeholders. These broad, impactful and achievable measures will restore connectivity more quickly to all customers during emergencies, particularly those who rely on using health monitoring and pendant alarms.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: There are clear, proactive actions that can be taken by the Government. The Government can review the tree-cutting capabilities each local authority has so that it can respond adequately when we have another storm event and tackle trees on public land. The Government can ensure landowners are complying with the Roads Act 1993 to remove diseased or damaged roadside trees throughout the State. The Department should, and must, engage with pendant providers to identify who the vulnerable users are and what type of network they are connected to. The expert advice we have received is that home-monitoring and health alarm customers should be migrated from copper landline-dependent devices to newer hardware devices with a mobile network backup. Home-monitoring and health alarm customers should be migrated onto more modern devices that will work with fibre to the home, FTTH, broadband where such networks are available to them. FTTH networks are significantly more resilient to storm damage than copper landline networks and are more easily repaired. We should maintain a stock of monitoring devices that work with mobile networks and can be deployed by the providers following major storms to impacted customers who are likely to experience extended fixed-line outages.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: To follow on from what Deputy Byrne said, it is not good enough for the Government just to acknowledge the challenge and engage with industry on this. That is helpful, but it does not change the reality on the ground. Older people were left without monitoring during Storm Éowyn and will be again when future storms that are bound to come cause similar levels of destruction. The same vulnerabilities remain in place and that is what needs to be tackled. Copper-based alarm systems are still widely used, fragile and unsupported by mobile backup. We need to see the Government investing in that stock of mobile devices that can be deployed at short notice in those communities that are impacted. Community organisations should not be left to absorb this level of risk indefinitely. Families cannot substitute for a functioning system when a storm hits.

We also need to see local authorities empowered to deal with trees that are not being cut down by landowners. Anyone in this Chamber who used to be a councillor will say that the

most a local authority can really do is write letter after letter to a landowner, sometimes a landowner who is no longer receiving letters and may no longer even exist on this Earth. It is really important that local authorities be empowered to tackle these and are resourced to do that work.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The review of Storm Éowyn, published in October of last year, by the Department of housing recognised the particular challenges of providing humanitarian support to vulnerable people during emergencies, acknowledging the complex and multisectoral nature of developing effective response measures and the complexities of defining, reporting and sharing information in relation to vulnerable people.

However, it did more than just acknowledge it. Some of the recommendations of the review include exploring outreach structures to ensure communication is possible with vulnerable and isolated people in the event of an emergency, where typical challenges of communication are unavailable, and that the area of vulnerable people be further developed under the auspices of the Government task force on emergency planning. The Department will continue to engage with relevant processes developed as a result of Storm Éowyn and, where appropriate, link industry with developments in State response measures, including central government and local government.

The review recognises the importance of the role that An Post played during Storm Éowyn. When the impact of the storm on telecoms and data infrastructure made contacting people difficult, An Post staff delivering post provided a direct link to persons living in remote locations and checked on the welfare of older or vulnerable individuals. An Post has indicated a willingness to continue to support the co-ordinated response to a national or local emergency in this capacity.

The ComReg consumer care team is also dedicated to offering help to all consumers who may experience difficulties with their mobile phones, home phones or broadband providers, including vulnerable elderly people and consumers with disabilities who experience difficulties in outages or have no service. Where a consumer has difficulty with a provider, it recommends contacting its consumer care team, which can be done via a wide variety of channels outlined on its website. An information campaign is under way now to make sure that people are aware of those channels and that it is not simply when the event happens that people are desperately seeking around to know how to make contact, particularly when that might be the very reason the person is having to make contact.

School Meals Programme

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I would like to raise an important issue with regard to St. Malachy's Mixed National School, St. Helena's Road, Finglas south. St. Malachy's is a mixed senior DEIS band 1 school and has been central to the community of Finglas south for almost 50 years. When it opened first, it catered for over 200 children. St. Malachy's was the third primary school in Finglas south along with St. Finian's National School and St. Oliver Plunkett's Junior National School. At its height from the early 1980s onwards, St. Malachy's had almost 600 children and 19 teachers. However, from the late eighties, numbers began to fall gradually and today there are 132 students. Currently, the school has a principal, seven class teachers, three

special education teachers and one shared home school liaison officer. St. Oliver Plunkett's Junior National School has provided around 95% of the children to the school since the late 1970s.

St. Malachy's became part of the DEIS programme of support for schools in 2005. It is also a trauma-informed school. The school ensures that there is a safe, nurturing and supportive environment for all of the students. For example, many of the children who attend St. Malachy's have experienced or are experiencing homelessness and this has had a major psychological effect on them and greatly impacted their education. That is why the school's participation in the school completion programme is so important. The school completion programme provides support for children and young people at risk of early school leaving. Through this programme, St. Malachy's has access to four play therapists, a breakfast club and a school transition programme, assisting the sixth class students with their transition to secondary school. The programme has proven to be very successful, as many students come from vulnerable communities. Through this programme, they are encouraged to complete their education, helping them to develop into confident and accomplished young people and young adults.

However, it is a struggle for many of the children. Some come from as far away as Ashford because they are living in homeless accommodation. It would be difficult for an adult experiencing these circumstances, but it is 100 times more difficult for a small child to get themselves up and about to be in time for school in Finglas. It is no surprise that many of these children will not have a breakfast and probably will not have a proper meal until they get home late in the evening. This is why the provision of food at school is so important for these vulnerable children. Studies show that school food will significantly impact the student's physical and mental health by improving concentration, overall academic performance, and behaviour.

St. Malachy's has made an application previously for funding for a breakfast club. It received funding for a so-called snack club and the provision of hot meals later in the day. The snack club provides pupils with some sliced apple, a rice cake or a similar thing each morning. They get two pieces of whatever is on offer. Breakfast is often said to be the most important meal of the day. For many of the children who go to St. Malachy's, it is an essential meal to start every day of their learning. Who knows when some had a meal at home after school? They might not have had any or it might have been so long since they ate last that whatever they have for breakfast in school might be essential to sustain them for the next few hours.

St. Malachy's does not get any funding for a breakfast club. In the past, the school used any surplus money provided for the snack club and the hot meals programme to provide a basic breakfast for as many children as it could manage. The school completion programme does not provide any funding for staff to run a breakfast club. The individual who puts the breakfast together does so on a voluntary basis. The school has been told that it cannot use funds allocated for the snack club and the hot meals programme to be diverted into providing a breakfast for pupils. It should be the case that schools are the ones in the best position to decide how the children should be fed. It makes no sense that, if there is some surplus money out of the existing funds, it cannot be used to provide the most important meal of the day.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Ellis for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Social Protection.

The objective of the school meals programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement. In the last budget, the hot school meals programme was extended to all remaining primary schools. This means that approximately 3,700 schools and 682,000 children are eligible for school meals. There are 3,200 primary schools participating in the hot school meals programme for the current academic school year. A budget of €286 million has been provided for the scheme in 2026. There are a number of meals clubs available under the school meals programme. The breakfast club is but one of them and was aimed at DEIS schools pre 2022 to ensure that the most disadvantaged children were able to have a breakfast meal before school. To date, 778 schools are receiving the breakfast club. This means that 149,401 children benefit from this club, at an annual cost of €19.4 million.

An evaluation of the schools meal programme was conducted in 2023. The report highlighted the effectiveness of the programme, including improved academic results. Studies show that school meals improve academic performance by increasing the time children spend in school and so provide support for families. The programme saves money and time on food preparation. Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to continue to expand and improve the free hot school meals programme and ensure that suppliers adhere to robust guidelines on the nutritional value of meals, the dietary requirements of students, the reduction of food waste and the use of recycled packaging.

As the rate of payment for a breakfast club and snack club funding are the same, some schools operationally split the snack club funding allocated between breakfast and snack. This does not alter their total allocation. St. Malachy's Mixed National School has been in the school meals programme since 2016 and continues to receive payment for a snack club and hot school meals for 131 pupils. The total funding allocation for this school year is €93,141. When the hot school meals programme was being rolled out to original DEIS schools, they were entitled to retain meal club funding for their snack clubs. St. Malachy's Mixed National School is part of a school completion programme funded by the Department of Education and Youth, with operational responsibility managed by Tusla's education support service and a local management committee. The committee is responsible for the oversight of the project delivery at a local level, including the use of project resources, employment of staff and accountability of public funds. The Department of Social Protection has provided the funding request from St. Malachy's Mixed National School and the local management committee of the school completion programme is considering how best to utilise the funding. If there is anything that we can do to be supportive of the Deputy's efforts and to make sure that this is a school-led initiative, the Minister is more than happy to meet him, perhaps for a deputation meeting, should that be required.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister of State. We are constantly being told that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. To any child in homelessness or in a vulnerable circumstance, it is essential that the morning start with a proper breakfast. It is a credit to St. Malachy's that it has managed to provide a proper breakfast for some of its pupils. Funding for a snack club is simply not good enough. It is totally inadequate. There is also no funding

available to run a breakfast club or for staff to run it. St. Malachy's does fund raising and also uses money left over from the snack club to provide some pupils with a breakfast.

5 o'clock

Funding should be allocated on a more general basis as being for the provision of meals for pupils. The position should be that the schools know best. They are the ones that should allocate the funding as they see fit. It should not be the case that there is some diktat on how funding should be spent on meals in schools such as St. Malachy's. I urge the Government to reconsider the Department's attitude with regard to how money is spent and to provide the necessary funding for breakfast clubs for this DEIS school. The Government constantly talks about DEIS schools. We know the work being done and how important these schools are, but to provide a meal that consists of just a small snack or similar is not good enough. There are a lot of very vulnerable kids in these schools, including in this school. We really need dedicated funding for our breakfast club and for those children to go to school in order that they can learn and are not going there hungry. That is so important. I therefore urge the Government to look at the way this money and this funding are being provided.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy once again for raising this matter and for allowing an opportunity to discuss the school meals programme and, in particular, the breakfast and snack clubs. I assure him that the Ministers for Education and Youth and Social Protection are both very much aware of the importance of children being able to receive a breakfast meal before they start their school day. The breakfast or snack club is a targeted support to those most in need. The Department of Social Protection continues to expand the school meals scheme and has prioritised the rollout of hot school meals to all primary schools.

In relation specifically to the situation in St. Malachy's in Finglas, I discussed the management structure and the operational need. The funding has been provided from the Department. It is up to the committee to decide the best way to allocate it.

I take no issue with the points the Deputy has raised. There is no pushback or opposition from this side of the House. We are all very much trying to achieve the same result in this. That is why I reiterate my invitation to the Deputy and representatives from the school to seek a deputation meeting with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, who is probably the most appropriate, but if not, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on this matter. Whatever I can do in my power as a Minister of State within the Government to help the Deputy to facilitate that, that offer stands. This sort of common-sense use of a Topical Issue is so important to make sure we are all working collectively for the greater good, in this case not only for the children, the families and the community more widely in St. Malachy's but for all those who face these issues. I thank the Deputy once again for raising this issue.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Before we move along, I would like to say a big "hello" and "fáilte" to Dundalk Grammar School, here on the invitation of Deputy Butterly, and to the Deputy's former business teacher, Mr. Brady. You are very welcome to Leinster House. I hope you enjoy yourselves.

Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

This Bill aims to finally end the non-collection of derelict sites levies and to force transparency on the reasons why the levies are not being collected. Since the introduction of the derelict sites levy 35 years ago in 1990, we have heard excuse after excuse as to why the levy is not being collected. In 2023, less than 10% of the levies that were owed were actually collected. This does not go into the number of sites that were not on the derelict sites register or the number of sites to which the levy was not actually applied. This Bill would require every local authority that does not collect 75% or more of the derelict sites levy to produce a report as to why it was not collected and what plans the local authority will put in place to ensure its collection. This Bill also requires the Minister then to engage with those local authorities as to why it is not happening and what needs to be done. Is it resources? Is it supports? This would end the blame game whereby local authorities blame the Minister in the Department and *vice versa*. This puts a requirement on everyone to solve the derelict sites levy and make sure that it is collected.

As regards the impact of this, it will not solve dereliction overnight. It will not end the blight of dereliction in the towns, the villages and the cities. As to what it will do, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for far too long have been cosyng up to landholders, speculators and developers - their buddies - and allowing them to get away with this. Is there any law that was brought in over 35 years ago that has been so disrespected and abused? The Government that brought it in - because this was brought in by Fianna Fáil - has allowed this to happen. If an ordinary man on the street got a parking ticket or did something wrong and got a fine, the local authority would force him to pay his parking fine. If he did not, the local authority would bring him to court. If, however, you are a landholder or a speculator and you owe hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of euro, what does this Government do? It lets you off. Once again we have here one rule for the rich and the wealthy and another rule for ordinary people. This allows speculators to get away scot-free. Then they sit in these properties that destroy communities and they see the value of their investment go up. Where is the justice? Where is the law? Where is the right for ordinary people? This Government has given an amnesty to speculators not to pay the derelict sites tax. Over €20.5 million is owed in derelict sites levies. If we ever needed proof that this Government was more interested in looking after speculators and issuing nice press statements, we see it with what happened in the budget. We have a housing crisis. This will not solve the housing crisis but it is a small step. This is a solution we are bringing forward. The one thing we hear from the Government all the time is "The Opposition do not bring forward solutions". This is a solution. This is a positive step. Why will the Minister not support it?

This will be a self-reported tax that will be collected by the Revenue, the same as the vacant homes tax, another damp squib the Government brought in.

Just to give an idea, there are between 90,000 and 140,000 vacant homes in the State, depending on whether you look at CSO figures or GeoDirectory. Does the Minister know how many homes the vacant homes tax was paid for? It is less than 2,500, which is 2% of vacant homes. That was the Minister's solution. Some 98% of people get away scot-free and 2% of people are put on the register, which does not charge enough. As if that is not bad enough, the Minister announced the derelict sites tax and then said that, as Minister for housing, he would have a war on dereliction. That is a load of bull because the tax does not come in until 2027.

I am not sure how the Minister's maths work out, but from last year's budget to when the tax comes in will be at least two years. Think of all the derelict site levies that will not be collected, plus the €20 million that is already owed, and then the Minister says it will not come in until 2027. How can he describe that as a war on dereliction? How can he stand over that? Why is that levy not being paid today? It should have been paid since 1 January.

What the Minister has done, instead of having a war on dereliction, is have an amnesty on dereliction. This Bill is only an interim measure that will end that amnesty and put in place plans to collect more and collect the €20 million that is currently owed to the State. If ordinary people owe money to the State, they have to pay it. If people have not paid their local property tax, it comes out of their salary, but if they do not pay hundreds of thousands on derelict properties, they are all right. The Minister tells them he knows them and they are sound. These people are letting billions rot in the heart of communities. I invite the Minister again to walk the streets of any town, village or city with me. If he walks around Dublin today, he will see derelict buildings, dirt, rubbish and antisocial behaviour. How can he stand over that?

In 2024, this Government - Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - and RTÉ brought 5,400 people to court for not paying their TV licence, at a total cost of €864,000. When the ordinary man on the street does not pay the €160 for his TV licence, he will be dragged to court, but when someone owes tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of euro, they get away with an amnesty. When will those people and companies go to court? They should be brought to court for the destruction they are doing to communities. Instead, the Minister is giving them an amnesty.

I am not sure where the Minister comes from or how much dereliction there is in his area, but in the area that I represent, and in the areas of other TDs here, we see first-hand the destruction dereliction causes. Can the Minister imagine people growing up with a house or building next door that is derelict? Can he imagine the negative effects that has on children and the environment they are growing up in? This is about more than finance. This is about quality of life, protecting communities and not letting speculators get away scot-free. If they are not going to use the buildings, they should be the subject of compulsory purchase orders for housing. If that is not the case, they should be used for youth clubs, community centres, boxing clubs, the arts and dance. I was talking about it with a TD here. Youth groups, sporting groups and voluntary organisations that are crying out for buildings see these empty, destroyed buildings in their community, while they have none or are struggling to pay for the buildings they have.

The antisocial behaviour and dumping in the heart of some communities are shocking. In areas that are crying out for housing, decent, hard-working people are going to work every day and looking at derelict buildings. Community groups, local authorities and sporting organisations can be pulled together to turn these derelict buildings into housing or make them suitable for community buildings. There is also the business community. There are probably people who want to start or expand their businesses, but they are looking at a derelict building next to them that is preventing them from taking the opportunity to create more business, hire more people and be a positive impact on the community.

A number of issues are involved here. These buildings are not just derelict. They are an insult to people, because they could be worth more. They could be vibrant places that have a positive impact on communities. They could be an asset but, instead, they are left to rot. There

are currently thousands of homeless children living in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation. How heartbreaking must it be for parents to be in emergency accommodation and, at the same time, have to look at derelict buildings that could be turned into homes?

The Minister said he wants to solve the housing and homelessness crisis. For years, I have taken Ministers at their word, but I have to judge the Minister on his actions. If he is not going to tackle dereliction today and take it on head first, then I cannot believe his words because I look at his actions. People who cannot buy a house, rent a house or get on the social housing list, for different reasons, are looking at these boarded-up, derelict houses. They say to me, "Tommy, how is that right?" It is not just one place. I have met people from Dundalk, Limerick, Cork, Dublin, and all over.

Last year, I went up the west coast, through Sligo, Galway and all the way up to Donegal. I saw cottages empty and derelict, where families could live if they were supported. Behind my office was a building that was derelict. I put it up on Facebook. I was contacted by a lady who was born and reared in the house. Her family was raised there and sold the house. There are now holes in the roof and the windows are broken. The only ones living in the house now are the pigeons of Cork. I am not trying to be smart or make a joke of it. There is a house in the centre of the city that was left to rot. Through his actions, the Minister will continue to allow that to happen. The lady who contacted me was angry and frustrated because she had a great experience growing up in that home and she was hoping the next people to live in it would have the same experience, but they did not. She sent me photographs of her family when they were growing up in this house, which is off Shandon Street, showing the life that they had. The house was immaculate and spotlessly clean. It was a beautiful home that has been left to go to rack and ruin.

This legislation will force local authorities which do not collect 75% of their levies to take action to produce a report about why and when that will happen and it will force the Minister to engage with them to ensure that it does. If the Minister is genuine, I ask him to accept the Bill. For far too long in this country, there has been an old boys' club. It has been a case of not upsetting Johnny because Johnny is sound and one of our own. We have to start upsetting Johnny because there are land hoarders and speculators who do not give a damn about the communities they are in.

The Government has a big job to solve the housing crisis and dereliction. This is a start. We are trying to come up with solutions. It is not just me but all of the Opposition. We will work with the Government but, from what I can see, the Government will not work with us. No matter what solutions we bring forward, the Government is not interested.

We have advocated for years for something along the lines of the new derelict sites tax the Minister will be introducing in 2027. We think such a tax is the right way to bring in revenue.

I will leave the Minister with this. On Tuesday night, I spent 11 hours with a family member in a hospital accident and emergency department in Cork. Nine homeless people were in there, and I got to talking to them. Does the Minister know why they were in the accident and emergency department in Cork on Tuesday night? It was because it was freezing outside. They came in out of the cold to get a bit of heat. This is how bad the homelessness and housing crisis is in Cork. This Bill will not solve the whole problem, but it would be a start in tackling dereliction.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Hear, hear.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputies for the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I am opposing the Bill because the Government's proposals far exceed what is being proposed by the Opposition. We have gone beyond what is in the Bill by bringing in the derelict property tax.

The Deputy spent a long time criticising the existing regime, but the only solution he offered is to keep it in place and increase the administrative requirements relating to reporting. That is the height of it. We are getting rid of it because it is totally ineffective. It is not ineffective because of the Government, which brought in the existing scheme; it is ineffective because the local authorities are not applying it.

Every solution the Deputy brings forward always ticks one of a couple of boxes. It is either to write a blank cheque for local authorities or to give them a free pass and ask me to step in and do the job for them. We either trust local government to do its job or we do not. Where it does not do what is required, we either take the power from it or give power to it where it needs to have it. In this case, local authorities have proved totally ineffective. I agree with the Deputy that the levy has not been applied. That is probably because of lobbying at a local level. That is, however, at a local level. We are going to get the Revenue Commissioners to collect this tax. Unlike the Deputy's proposal whereby if 25% or more of revenue is not being collected, a report should be compiled and we should debate it, we are giving responsibility for this matter to the Revenue Commissioners. I do not accept a threshold of 25%. There should be 100% collection of the derelict sites levy. I see dereliction as antisocial behaviour.

As far as I am concerned, rent seekers are responsible for what is happening because they are leaving their properties derelict. Regardless of whether you are a socialist or a capitalist, I am of the view that those properties should not be in the hands of the people to whom I refer. I am sure the socialist view would be that the properties should be taken from them. From a capitalist perspective, they should be forced to bloody sell them to people who would actually make proper use of them. Dereliction does not meet any ideology, and I have been very strong and clear in my comments on the matter. That is why I am opposing the Bill. I understand the intent behind the Deputy's Bill. I agree with that intent, but I think he is taking the wrong mark in pointing at me or the Government, because it is the local authorities that have failed to use the existing legislation, which is strong enough but which is not being used. We are going to bring in new legislation to tackle this problem.

We are doing an awful lot to tackle dereliction. One aspect of that involves strengthening the rules around how we charge people for dereliction and effectively try to compel them to do something with their properties. Ideally, they should fix up their properties or sell them to those who will actually use them. We are also taxing them in relation to their properties. We are also using a lot of carrots. We are supporting people to be able to acquire properties. Tackling dereliction and vacancy, whether in our villages, provincial towns or cities, is the other side of the coin, and it is so important that we tackle both.

In the context of how the new legislation will work, the tax will be legislated for in this year's Finance Bill. This will be followed by a preliminary national register of derelict properties in 2027. Local authorities will still identify and assess derelict sites through their derelict sites registers. Crucially, the tax will be collected by the Revenue Commissioners.

This will provide consistency and effectiveness in tax collection and enforcement. While the final rate of the tax still has to be confirmed, it is anticipated it will certainly be no lower than 7% of a property's market value. I certainly would not like to see any lower than that. By international standards, a rate of 7% is actually very high. The problem, as the Deputy rightly states, is that the levy is not being applied. This is why we are giving its collection to the Revenue Commissioners, which is effective in applying and collecting this type of levy. I recently met the deputy mayor of Paris, who is a member of the Communist Party, who is in awe of our rate of 7%. As I acknowledged when speaking to him, the problem here is that it is not being applied and collected. That is what I want to address.

Importantly, the future collection of the derelict property tax will not be the responsibility of the local authorities. As a result, the amendments proposed in this Private Members' Bill for a new section 23A to be inserted into the Derelict Sites Act 1990, which would require local authorities to report on their levy collective activities, are redundant.

I want to highlight that the derelict property tax forms part of a wider package of measures. I refer here, for example, to the work of the vacant homes officers and town regeneration officers in local authorities, the implementation of the vacant homes action plan, a related resourcing of funding supports, the funding included in call 3 of the urban regeneration development fund and the vacant property refurbishment grant, which provides up to €70,000 in grant support. There has been significant interest in the grant since its launch, with 15,600 applications made to local authorities to date and over €230 million in funding paid out across the country. In December, I announced a new enhanced support package of up to €140,000 to bring vacant above-the-shop properties in our cities, towns and villages back into use. This package will be available from quarter 1. A compulsory purchase order activation programme was launched by my Department in April 2023. I also highlight THRIVE funding, the town centre first heritage and revival scheme, which represents a transformative opportunity, the living city initiative, which is a tax incentive scheme that has been extended in the recent budget, and the recently published national housing action plan, Delivering Homes and Building Communities.

The Deputy and I agree that dereliction is an absolute blight on our society. However, he is misidentifying the cause of the problems relating to application and collection. We are of the view that we need to have a really robust collection method. The amount collected should be 100%, and that is why we are bringing in the amendments I have outlined to tackle dereliction. Dereliction is totally unacceptable and is a form of antisocial behaviour. I have said it before and I say it again - the people who own derelict properties are little more than rent seekers. Under my watch, there will be nowhere for them to hide when it comes to dereliction.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I commend my colleague Deputy Gould on bringing forward this very simple but sensible legislation. Leaving homes derelict in the middle of the deepest housing crisis in the modern history of the State is akin to hoarding food during a famine. This is a comment that I and many other Members of this House have made repeatedly. I note with some interest the language the Minister has started to use with respect to dereliction. He has used it again here by using terms like "antisocial behaviour" and "war on dereliction". In a recent interview, he stated that if he had his way, he would make dereliction a crime.

The problem I have is that I have been on this side of the Chamber for a decade and this is the fourth Minister with responsibility for housing to make these type of promises regarding dereliction. I have learned the hard way not to take those promises at face value and to judge people on the basis of delivery. The difficulty after a decade of having had four Ministers and four housing plans is that the record of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in terms of tackling vacancy and dereliction is, quite frankly, appalling. I do not believe the Minister said anything that is going to make that difference.

Simon Coveney had an entire pillar of his housing plan in 2016 dedicated to vacancy and dereliction. He introduced a plethora of new initiatives, including buy and renew, repair and lease and the rolling Housing Agency fund, all of which were abysmal failures in terms of the promises he made regarding bringing back into use the quantum of vacant and derelict homes. Those initiatives continue to exist and limp on ineffectively. In effect, they have been abject failures.

When Eoghan Murphy became Minister, following a very sensible proposal from former Deputy Fergus O'Dowd, he was asked by Leo Varadkar to investigate the idea of a vacant property tax. He studied the idea and came back with proposals, but he was told by Leo and Paschal that it could not proceed. Again, Eoghan Murphy's record as Minister in bringing back the tens of thousands of vacant and derelict homes that lie idle across the State was an abysmal failure.

Then Darragh O'Brien arrived. Again, the record is very poor. The only major initiative he announced was the vacant property refurbishment grant. It took three years to get up and running. They had to change the rules of the scheme on three separate occasions. Finally, people are now able to draw it down, although significantly, that scheme still excludes huge numbers of people who have applied and have been approved because payments are not made on a stage basis - a key reform of the scheme we have urged the Government to take.

When we eventually got to see the vacant property tax, this actually was not going to be a meaningful tax collected by Revenue on the tens of thousands vacant homes across the State. As Deputy Gould has outlined, the actual number of property owners being charged this tax is tiny and the level of the tax is very low. That is why many of us treat with great scepticism the proposal by the Government to transfer the derelict sites levy to Revenue for derelict sites tax. It is not just that the Minister is delaying it. In fact, I think Deputy Gould is being generous to him. I do not believe a cent of that tax will be collected until 2028 based on previous experience. How many will actually pay it? On the evidence of the mishandling of the vacant property tax, we could have a situation where not only is it delayed for a long period, but many of those who should be paying it do not. In his speech, the Minister listed a whole series of other initiatives - initiatives that have been around for a long period. Sure, they make small incremental changes in some locations, but in terms of tackling vacancy and dereliction with the ambition and the scale that is required, the Minister is simply repeating the same propositions as his predecessors. That is why, on this side of the House, there is such scepticism.

It is pretty disingenuous to dismiss legislation by an Opposition Member because it is not dealing with the totality of vacancy and dereliction. The Minister knows as well as I do that we cannot bring Bills here that place a charge on the State. He also knows, as he does often as Minister, that small, sensible propositions can be very effective while addressing the broader

issues. Let us just look at the broader issues to remind him what Sinn Féin's policy is on the areas beyond Deputy Gould's proposals. First, at the very centre of our alternative approach to tackling dereliction and vacancy is putting tackling it at the very centre of public housing provision. This State should be funding and delivering in the region of 25,000 social, affordable rental and affordable purchase homes each year, more than double what is currently being produced. There should be targets within local authorities for a percentage of those homes to come from vacant and derelict stock. To do that, the Government would have to reform the way in which it funds local authorities to tackle vacancy and dereliction. Currently the Department does not provide funding to a local authority that wants to buy a vacant or derelict property through CPO and refurbish it to bring it back into use. On top of that, the Minister's predecessor and his predecessor before him promised to reform CPO legislation, which is completely unfit for purpose and unable to tackle the issues at hand.

We also need a single vacant and derelict property tax - a punitive vacant and derelict property tax - that is actually applied and collected as a matter of urgency. How can the Minister stand there and expect us to take him seriously when he says he is going to wage a war on dereliction but just not right now, next year or probably not even the year after that? That is the kind of war that anybody who tried to wage it would lose and would lose immediately. Deputy Gould has been very upfront. He has made it clear that this is not going to tackle all of the problems, but in the meantime - during the two or three years while the Minister and his colleagues are dithering and not introducing a Revenue-collected tax - this would at least force local authorities to put on record what the Minister says are their failures, and then allow us to force him to do something about those.

It seems to me what the Minister is saying in respect of the derelict sites tax is, at some point in the future it will be there, but in the meantime, he is accepting the *status quo*. That is what I am hearing on this side of the House. The fact that this is the position the Minister has taken, and he is not even willing to accept and work with my good colleague's Bill, tells me he is not serious about this. The Minister can have all of the nice catchphrases and soundbites he likes, but he is the man in charge. He is the person who can actually bring forward the proposals to dramatically increase and accelerate not just the total output of social and affordable homes, but the number of those homes that are taken from vacant and derelict stock. He is the man who, once and for all, could actually finally reform the vacant property refurbishment grant to make it fully fit for purpose. He is the man who could introduce the CPO reform legislation to make it quicker and more cost effective for local authorities and State agencies to access those properties. Yes, he has some years to go yet in office, but so far, in his first year in office, I see nothing whatsoever from him that is going to address vacancy and dereliction this year.

Again, Deputy Gould quoted figures from geodirectories and the census. For me, one of the most shocking figures from the most recent census is that about 40,000 homes were vacant between the two censuses. Not only have we high levels of vacancy and dereliction, but the length of time they are vacant or derelict is unacceptably long. If the Minister was really serious, if this was a war and he wanted to make it a crime, if he really believed it was antisocial behaviour, there would be a level of urgency and a willingness to work with the Opposition to tackle those issues. We have not heard any of that here today.

Here is my prediction: in two, three or four years' time - whatever amount of time this Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Lowry lackey Government limps on for - somebody standing on this side

of the House will not just be mentioning the failures of Simon Coveney, Eoghan Murphy or Darragh O'Brien in tackling vacancy and dereliction; the name of James Browne will be added to that sad and sorry list of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ministers who talk the right talk, but when it comes to action and delivery, fail. Just as the Minister is presiding over record levels of homelessness, record rents, record house prices and the slowest rate of social and affordable housing delivery in recent times, so too is he going to fail on vacancy and dereliction. Why? Because he is offering nothing new, and nothing different from his predecessors. They failed, and so too will he. Who will be the losers? They will be the very people who my colleague spoke about - those in desperate need of social, affordable or private to purchase homes. Those are the people he is letting down. We will not let up on holding the Minister to account so long as he is in office. We will not stop bringing forward sensible, credible proposals to tackle these problems.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to start by thanking Deputy Gould and his office for bringing forward this legislation and for all of the work they do and continue to do on this serious issue. When people look in at the proceedings of the Dáil, at least they see that some people are interested in taking action on dereliction. They also see the Government and its complete lack of interest in it. I am struggling a little to understand what point the Minister is trying to make. On the one hand he told us that the legislation that exists is good and is fit for purpose. On the other hand he tells us that we all have to wait because the Government is bringing in new legislation.

I am also struggling to understand the reluctance to enact this sensible legislation, which, as has been outlined already, will not fix all of the problems the Government has created and the disaster it has made of housing, but will make a contribution. In truth, if the Minister was interested in solving the problem of dereliction, he would be listening to Deputy Gould and working with Deputy Gould but he is not. His script, as he read it out to us this evening, tells me exactly that. There is a level of arrogance there that I do not think belongs in the mouth of a person who has presided over 17,000 homeless people, 6,000 of whom are children. A little bit of humility might go a long way. I understand that is not necessarily how he wants to be. He should reflect on where we are because he has been in some form of government - confidence and supply and all the rest of it - for ten years. In those ten years, we have seen so many lives destroyed by the Government's housing crisis.

The housing crisis has been created by Government policy. It has not been solved by Government policy and I am sure not even the Minister would be arrogant enough to try to claim that. Of course, it has got worse. Numbers and facts do not lie. The Minister certainly could not come in here and claim to have any achievements in the area of housing while there are 17,000 people in emergency accommodation. The Minister and I both know that is an underestimation of the actual number of people who do not have somewhere secure to live. As we all know, somewhere secure to live is so important. It means that you can build every other aspect of your life. Yet, there are thousands and thousands of people who do not have somewhere secure to live. They cannot start a family. They cannot build their lives. They cannot get their career going. They are stuck. They are stuck in their ma's back bedroom. They are stuck in overcrowded accommodation. They are stuck sofa surfing or they are saving for a one-way ticket to Australia.

The Minister said himself that dereliction is a form of antisocial behaviour. It causes antisocial behaviour. It causes dumping. If a person is living in an estate where there is a derelict house - I doubt there are too many of them in the leafy suburbs surrounding here but there are plenty in the area that I represent - as sure as night follows day there will be black bags in the front garden. There will be kids messing in it and broken windows. All of those things happen. It is then left there for years. I had a woman in my clinic on Monday who lives in a small three-bedroom house in Balbriggan. It is herself, her husband, her daughter, their four children and two sons, one of whom has a partner and another who has occasional access to his child. That is ten, 11, 12 and sometimes 13 people living in a small modest house. She asked me a fairly simple question as to why there was a boarded-up house down the road from her. She named the number and has been onto the council plenty of times about it. What is the answer? Government policy is that is fine and that there is no urgency to get rid of that boarded-up house. There is no urgency to turn that into a home for her daughter and four children who are in one room, that is, a mam and four kids in one small bedroom. She looked at that derelict house and had a very simple question as to why that house was still derelict. She asked why she had to walk past that when she goes to work every single day when she knows it would be perfect for her daughter and her daughter would keep it well. Her neighbours ask the same questions such as why there are rats running in and out of that house and why that house is derelict in the middle of a housing crisis.

Why is that, when the Minister says he is going to war on dereliction? Going to war, is it? It does not feel like he is going to war. It feels like he is quite all right with dereliction and thinks it is okay because it can wait. The claim he is going to war on dereliction would be funny if it was not so bloody serious. He is not fighting for ordinary people in his war. He is fighting against ordinary people in his war. He is not fighting for people who need somewhere to live in his war. He is fighting against those people but he is prepared to put up a fairly substantial fight to ensure that any levies that are collected will not be collected this year or next year and possibly will not be collected the year after that. All of that can wait. Meanwhile, people who have nowhere to live, are living in overcrowded accommodation, emergency accommodation, hubs or hostels and who cannot start their lives look at vacant and derelict houses and buildings and ask themselves a simple question, "How is that allowed to happen?" It is because the Minister facilitates it. He says he thinks it should be crime. He is in the Government for Jesus's sake. If he wanted it to be a crime, he would be talking to the Minister for justice but he does not. That is just something that he says. He says that he wants it to be crime. It is not. He is in the Government. Any Government that has presided over 17,000 homeless people is clearly not pulling every single lever and is not talking to every single Member of the Opposition and the Government for ideas because clearly, the Minister does not have any. What he has tried has not worked. He could not come in here and claim to be a success story. I am sure he would not. I am sure he is ashamed. I am sure that when he goes home and thinks about those 17,000 people, including 6,000 children, he is a little bit ashamed. However, if he was serious about it, he would be talking to Deputies Gould and Ó Broin and other people on the Opposition benches and on his own benches. He would try everything and anything if he was serious about tackling the scourge of dereliction.

Does the Minister not see how inadequate is his proposal that we wait until 2027 or 2028 until money starts coming in or maybe even after that? Does he not understand? What if a person like that mam was looking in here - I told her that we would be having a debate today

so she might be watching and I certainly will tell her to look back on the debate - was to hear him talking about his war on dereliction? She would ask me what does the war on dereliction mean and when is the war coming to Balbriggan. She would ask me when is the Minister bringing his war on dereliction to the people of Balbriggan. It is possibly 2027 or maybe 2028. Jesus Christ. Regarding the mental ill health that people suffer from living in overcrowded accommodation, imagine listening to the Minister. There is no sense of urgency coming from him at all. He had a few potshots at the Opposition and that is fine. It a bit of ding-dong and back and forth. He did not offer anything that tells me that he believes or understands that there is a crisis now. There are people who are making shed loads of money out of this crisis. The Ministers knows that there are people making shed loads of money and he is okay with that. Shame on him.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I welcome the Bill, have read through it on a number of occasions and thank those who brought the Bill together and assembled it. The Bill tells us quickly, however, and I am sure the Minister will admit it himself that the system is broken. Unfortunately, the Bill does not fix it. It is a good attempt but it needs a little bit of fine tuning. It creates more reporting without guaranteed actions. It risks become a box-ticking exercise. There are no penalties for councils that fail or repeatedly fail. There are no performance targets in the Bill. There are no obligations on the Minister to intervene.

I am happy to work with my colleagues in Sinn Féin to give my thoughts and feed into the Bill as well. What I am saying is not a criticism. At least you are doing something. When we hear people saying that it will be 2027, as my colleague said about "war on dereliction", they are great words. However, they are not much comfort to the people who meet in our constituencies, including the Minister's constituency. He must be meeting the same as us if he is facing the public these days.

When I ask people how I can assist them, they will tell me that their daughter has been on the housing list for ten years in Cork County Council, Cork City Council, Limerick City and County Council, Wexford County Council or wherever. They will say that there are two houses down the end of the street that have been vacant for the past five or seven years and that would be perfect for her. They come along to Cork City Council and ask why this stock is not being turned around. The council will be very honest with people and will say that its allocation from the Government is not enough money to repair the property.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is right.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is being allocated €11,000 or €12,000 per year to bring properties back into property stock. The cost of an average composite door now for a front door of a house is €2,500. That is what a person will pay. Most people have to go to the credit union for a loan to get it if they are in private houses. There are then all the criteria and laws that are there. If a house is made vacant by a local authority or has been handed back to the local authority, the fire marshal goes in and says, "You have to get rid of this, you have to get of that and you have to get rid of the other. You have to take out the kitchen. You have to take out the lovely glass doors. You have to seal up the bannisters in case you get sued. We have to check this, check that and the other." It is bringing thousands of extra euro to the cost of it. I do not know about the rest of my colleagues in here but I do not know how many people have said to

me that were the house given to them as it stands, they had a brother who was an electrician, a cousin who was a plumber and had somebody who would help them out if they were given a small relaxation on the rent over the next two years to bring it up to a standard. The house could be inspected on a regular basis and they ask if the house could be handed over to them. I have gone to the local authorities and they have said they cannot and their hands are tied.

In fairness to Cork City Council, which I served on with my colleague, Deputy Gould, for 18 years, it has the highest rate of levy collection nationally. There has to be great credit. There has been a huge turnaround in a positive way since Valerie O'Sullivan became the chief executive of the council.

I see dereliction everywhere. I see dereliction in Cork City Council and Cork County Council areas, mainly because funding has not come through and big enough funds are not available. Houses are sitting idle and this is horrifying. As the story goes, people see a house they say would be perfect for their daughter. Imagine passing it every day and thinking about family members sleeping on a pop-up bed in their front room while there is an empty house. This is what we are dealing with. I do not know whether the Minister can fathom this or work it out but this is what is going through people's minds. They are wondering why and what is wrong with the system when they hear the Minister say he is at war with dereliction.

Something that was very well brought in was the refurbishment grant. It is a great system but, unfortunately, it is not working to its maximum. The payment structure is wrong. It is very slow to pay out and it is difficult to negotiate and get through. It needs to be sped up and we need to put more investment into it.

I want to speak about the residential zoned land tax. It is important to mention this in the debate. Some people love to say developers and builders are the worst in the world and that they are trína chéile with this fellow, that fellow and the other fellow but not every developer is a bad guy, a bad agent or a bad actor. I know of somebody in Blarney with residential zoned land who went to Cork City Council for planning permission. Planning permission was granted by the council for the site and for a supermarket in Blarney, which would be ideal because it needs an additional supermarket to cover the area from Tower to Blarney. There was one objector, the lord of the manor next door, and now the person has to pay the residential zoned land tax because it is a derelict site. This is despite planning permission being granted on the site and the person having to go to An Coimisiún Pleanála and judicial review. Surely the developer, who is anxious to break ground on the site and who has entered competitive dialogue with the local authority regarding affordable housing to help us and the Government bring up our housing stock and reduce our housing crisis, should be exempt from this tax. The developer is actively pursuing it and is trying to do the right things to have property built and services put on the site. Surely there should be an exemption for this type of person.

We are tinkering around with this. I do not want to be offensive to anyone because great credit is due to people who write Bills in the House, in particular those in the Opposition, but we are tinkering around with this. We know at this stage that the present rules and systems that are there for dereliction are not fit for purpose. The legislation the Minister is promising to bring in in 2027 or 2028 is not fit for purpose either. We need to have a system whereby we can go in and say someone has sat on a pile of bricks for the past 20, 15 or ten years, has done nothing with it and there are no planning applications involved. We need to be able to purchase it through CPO at much less than market value. They should be punished for it. It should be

taken from them for a minuscule amount of money. This would teach them a lesson. I imagine we would see a lot of people putting up "for sale" signs very quickly on their derelict sites if they knew the value of the site was worth nothing all of a sudden because the Government or local authority would move in and say it is taking it from them, they are not doing anything with it, they are a menace to society, and they are causing serious problems to their neighbours. It is true.

There is a house in Blackpool, and Deputy Gould would know it quite well also, which has gone in for planning permission 23 times and has been turned down. It has been a derelict site for the past 30 or 40 years. The developer is looking for an extra floor. The developer needs to build an extra floor to make it profitable. Nobody from the local authority has picked up the phone and said there is something wrong and they are getting it wrong, and asked them to come in to have a preplanning meeting to see how to get it over the line. There is no incentive to get these people in. It does not matter a damn to the officials. This is the reality of it. I am speaking about local authority officials and not the Minister's officials.

There is a situation here whereby we need to look at the entire process and say this has not worked. The State is more than 100 years old now and this has not worked. What we need to do is look at the standards and best practices throughout the world and throughout mainland Europe. In a lot of countries and a lot of places, and in certain counties and states in the United States in particular which have introduced their own state law, a property is taken from someone if it is not maintained. People are fined for not having a property up to a proper standard. Some places, and I do not overly agree with this, will tell people how to paint a property, what to paint it and what the painting scheme can be. I do not endorse this by any means but at least they are taking a proactive approach in their cities and towns. They are ensuring dereliction is not there, it is not a dumping ground, it is not a breeding ground for antisocial behaviour, and that there are no rodent infestations. If we were serious about having a war on dereliction I would be only too happy to join the Minister but come up with a plan.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Bogfaimid ar aghaidh go dtí an Teachta Rory Ahern.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is Rory Hearne, thank you.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Rory Hearne. Tá brón orm.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Just to clarify, I am no relation of the former Taoiseach.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Tá brón orm.

Deputy George Lawlor: What about Deputy Ciarán Ahern?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): An Teachta Hearne, go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Go raibh míle maith agat. We have tens of thousands of vacant and derelict homes up and down the country. It is one of the biggest scandals and failures of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. Government after Government has failed to tackle this issue. Buildings up and down the country are rotting, falling apart, dangerous and left vacant while we have thousands of children and families in homelessness. In Finglas in my constituency families are being made homeless while a massive building, the Drake Inn, has been left derelict for years. Trees are growing up out of it. How hard must it be for these children and families, and for a generation locked out of a home, to walk past these empty derelict buildings? They have no home and here are these buildings that could be homes left idle because of policy failure.

The Minister says he is going to war on dereliction. I have to say that from my perspective, the only war he is waging on dereliction is one in his own head. The new dereliction sites tax will not come into place until 2028. Why will the Minister not implement the tax this year? There is a fundamental flaw in his derelict sites tax. It is designed to fail, just like the vacant homes tax. It is a self-assessment tax. We have 166,000 vacant homes identified by the CSO. It is a self-assessment tax but how many of those liable self-declared for the tax? The figure is 2,300. Less than 2% of the total vacant homes are liable for the vacant homes tax. It will be the same for the derelict sites tax.

Local authorities are responsible for identifying the sites. At present there is huge underidentification and under-registration of these derelict sites by local authorities. What will change with this tax? Around 2,000 sites are currently identified but GeoDirectory states there are 19,000 derelict properties. If the Minister wanted to wage war on dereliction he would fund local authorities properly to compulsorily purchase derelict and vacant buildings and do them up to be used as affordable housing. He would introduce compulsory sales orders to force owners to sell buildings that are rotting and falling apart. He would introduce a vacant property tax that would actually tax the vacant homes throughout the country. He would introduce the derelict tax this year and make it compulsory. He would fund councils to be able to renovate their properties to ensure they are not leaving thousands of council properties vacant.

The most reprehensible and nasty politics has emerged from the Government in recent months from the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach. This is the shift to blame immigrants and migrants for the housing crisis. It is absolutely disgusting. I read the Tánaiste's Substack where he outlined again the false claim that people in emergency accommodation do not have a legitimate right to housing. I ask the Minister to respond to this. Do people in emergency accommodation have a legitimate right to housing? We know that of course they do. What is being done by the Government is a deflection of responsibility. It is a dangerous move and it is stoking the social divisions the Tánaiste claims he is concerned about.

6 o'clock

Nowhere is there an acceptance of responsibility for the cause of the housing crisis being decades of failure in policy by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. If we look at it in terms of dereliction and vacancy, we have seen failure of Government after Government to tackle this issue. The Minister says he is waging war on it, but where is the evidence? Will we see a derelict property tax? Why will it not come into force this year?

What we are seeing is words. We are not seeing action on dereliction and vacancy. It is deeply frustrating because when we look at these claims and what the Government is doing, it is fomenting and adding to the Ireland-is-full nonsense. Ireland is not full. Ireland is full of vacant and derelict buildings that Government after Government have failed to tackle and have allowed property owners to sit on while thousands of people are homeless. Again, I ask the Minister to withdraw the comments from this Government that are blaming immigrants for the housing crisis because they are literally stoking fires and attacks on people which we see happening. The housing crisis being blamed is absolutely disgraceful.

Regarding policies that could be pursued, I have outlined them in terms of actually introducing a derelict sites tax. I also want to talk about Dublin City Council and its attempts to deal with dereliction. We look across Dublin and see derelict site after derelict site. Our capital city is full of them. The Minister is probably aware that Dublin City Council has developed a plan, a proposal, a policy to set up an arms-length company, which it is doing, to purchase derelict properties and renovate them. This is an excellent idea. It was developed by our own councillor, Cian Farrell, with Dublin City Council. The problem is the scale of what is being proposed and the timeframe of it. They cannot deal with it on any level that could be considered a reasonable timescale because Dublin City Council is capped in terms of its borrowing. Also, the Government is not giving Dublin City Council sufficient funding. We have a budget that will end up giving over €1 billion in VAT cuts to developers and fast food giants and yet our capital city's council does not have enough funding to meaningfully go after derelict properties and compulsory-purchase them.

I mentioned my constituency of Finglas. I invite the Minister to Finglas Village to see the level of dereliction there. These are communities where people feel excluded and left behind. They go into their village centre and see derelict building after derelict building. What does it tell them about what the Government thinks about them and how it cares for them? They feel completely abandoned. I have proposed that Dublin City Council should be compulsory-purchasing buildings like the Drake Inn and converting them into affordable housing like that proposal being done, but it does not have the funding.

I ask the Minister to engage with Dublin City Council and ensure it has the funding so we can have this war on dereliction he is talking about. I ask he introduce the compulsory sales orders as well and let us actually genuinely go after them and give new buildings and new homes to communities that have been excluded and tackle that issue of dereliction and vacancy which is absolutely disgraceful and needs to be tackled properly.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Dereliction makes our towns look worse, damages local pride, drives footfall away from businesses and sends the message that neglect is tolerated. At a time of such acute public infrastructure needs, this is simply unacceptable. This Bill does not create a new tax. It asks only that the existing law be taken seriously and enforced properly.

In my constituency of Dublin-Fingal West they deserve better than boarded-up streets and wasted land when solutions are sitting in plain sight. The constituency of Dublin-Fingal West, and particularly Rush, is being visibly and needlessly ruined by dereliction. Anyone who has walked down Rush Main Street in the last 20 years can see how the town centre has had the heart ripped out of it. This is at a time when we are living through an unprecedented housing

crisis. Because we are in the north county and because we are one of the fastest growing places in Ireland, if not the fastest and one of the youngest, this is critical.

Across our towns and villages sites are laying idle year after year. Empty buildings, boarded up premises, brownfield land where families cannot find homes, young people are forced to leave their town and local services are under severe pressure. The dereliction is not just an eyesore, it actively blocks delivery of housing, large GP services, early education facilities, school-age childcare facilities and the basic infrastructure our communities urgently need.

These sites should be contributing to vibrant town centres and sustainable development, not decay and stagnation. We already have a tool to deal with this in the derelict sites levy but the reality is stark. It is not being enforced. Local authorities are applying the levy in some cases but collecting almost none of it. Millions of euro remain outstanding and nobody is being held accountable for that failure. This Bill introduces the basic and essential principle of accountability. If the local authority is failing to collect the levy it must explain why. It must set out how it intends to fix that failure and the Minister must respond, ensuring that local and national governments and not operating in silos while dereliction worsens on the ground.

Dereliction and vacancy are a scandal that require robust State intervention moving beyond grants to direct action and reform of local government powers to bring empty buildings back into use.

Deputy George Lawlor: The scourge of dereliction in the time of a housing crisis is, as was said, antisocial at best and a scandal. Many of the problems we face today predate the Minister's tenure as Minister for housing. I have served with the Minister on Wexford County Council. In my experience councils are afraid of their lives to go anywhere near derelict sites.

Every time we bring proposals for remediating a particular property or doing something with a derelict site there always seems to be a problem. There always seems to be a difficulty. There always seems to be some stumbling block that a council cannot get over. One of the things the Minister needs to do in his Department is surround himself with problem solvers because in my experience over the years there are too many problem finders all across sectors of our Government, be it local or national.

I will give an example of a site on Clonard Road in Wexford. The Minister will be familiar with the area. A derelict site notice was put up on 10 February 2025. Five minutes ago I texted the person who brought it to my attention. Nothing has been done. I draw it back to my belief that councils are afraid to engage in any way, shape or form in resolving the problem of dereliction.

In many respects, when we look at some State agencies it is no wonder people leave properties derelict. Another property the Minister will be familiar with is Wexford General Hospital. It is one of the worst derelict sites in County Wexford. The HSE has sat idly by and let a wonderful property that has a history to it go completely derelict, so much so that it is now on the Abandoned Ireland website. There has been no intervention whatsoever by Government over years. Do not ask me why because it is a complete eyesore rotting in the heart of Wexford Town. What could be done with it now I do not know. There is a preservation order on it that has served nothing but to make it derelict because the HSE was not going to spend the extra money needed on a preserved building.

Let me give an example of some of the stumbling blocks I am talking about. I submitted a question to the Minister for public expenditure and reform on 19 March 2025 in relation to Hookless Village in Wexford - a completely derelict leisure centre, bar and swimming pool.

The Minister has probably seen photographs of it. I asked if anything could be done and part of the response I got was that the company that owned it had been dissolved since 19 October 2007 but could be restored to the company register up to 20 years after that date. If restored, any property it held would revert to the company as if it had never been dissolved. In law, a derelict site that belonged to a company that was dissolved in 2007 can lie derelict for 20 years for fear the company may somehow be reinvigorated, at which point it will revert back to the company's ownership. That is ludicrous. Legislation that this Chamber has introduced will allow a property to lie derelict - a dangerous property that children are breaking into, a swimming pool full of stagnant water, chairs, tables and "Space Invader" machines. We facilitate that by letting it lie there for 20 years in case the defunct business comes back into being. That is ludicrous and indefensible. Local authorities are afraid for their lives of derelict properties. I am more than a little disappointed to hear it will be 2027 before the derelict properties tax comes into place. We need immediate action.

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann came to Wexford town and I was involved in its executive committee. There were a number of derelict buildings along Wexford's main street. Anthony Bailey, our manager, looked at these and said we could not have 8,000 people coming to Wexford. We CPOed a number of the buildings. We did so because our town centre needed to look its best as the nation and world descended on it. It was action by a proactive member of Wexford's local authority that brought that about. We need to get the problem-solvers into the system.

I agree with Deputy Hearne that we need the compulsory sales order. It is a no-brainer. We cannot continue with CPOs. We need to inflict - I deliberately use the word "inflict" - compulsory sale orders on these blights and eyesores on our community. The housing problem is a huge and important issue and the thrust of Deputy Gould's Bill, but it is only one part of it. If we are sending the signal to our authorities they can have a derelict hospital or a derelict building left there for 20 years, what are the other guys who own derelict sites thinking? They are asking why they should get rid of their derelict sites if other such sites are lying there. We need to go hard to send the signal to every sector that dereliction and blights on our landscape and on our housing lists, seen by people walking by derelict houses every day of the week, will not be tolerated any more.

The Minister has received some criticism here today but I have known him for a long time and hope he is the Minister to ensure these blights on our housing lists and our communities are removed once and for all and we can stand in this Chamber and say we are achieving something for the betterment of this nation and its people.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I agree with Deputy Lawlor that these are a blight on our communities. There should be nowhere to hide for people who have properties they are letting go into dereliction. Not only that but there are areas, as the Deputy highlighted, where the law is overcomplicating the matter. Those areas need to be addressed one by one. It is unacceptable. It is antisocial behaviour. I am declaring

a war on derelict sites. We are tackling it. The implementation of a new derelict property tax will help significantly address dereliction.

I understand Deputy Gould's proposals with this legislation but we are going way beyond that. I do not think increasing administration and reporting will be effective. As a number of Deputies pointed out, whatever the reason may be, local authorities have not been able to implement the existing legislation. The existing legislation is strong enough but they have not been able to do it. Bringing in the Revenue Commissioners with their power to tackle dereliction is the correct way to go about it, while providing significant carrots for people to purchase vacant and derelict properties and turn them back into homes, bringing life back to our town, village and city centres. We want people back living in our communities and that will be done by other positive measures we are bringing in or have brought in, such as the town centre first programme and the various grants - the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, and the town and village renewal scheme. We are putting money behind those positive projects and can see them in my county. Look at the transformation of New Ross town in recent years using all the grants approved by the Government through Government policy. We have seen it in many towns across the country. We are tackling it.

Deputy O'Reilly gets up every time with personalisation of politics - no substance, again and again and again. The usual from you, Deputy. Engage with the substance of the issues for once.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: And it is the same from the Minister. There is rising homelessness, the same as every month. If he was doing his job, we would not have anything to-----

Deputy James Browne: And she resorts to the usual when I am making my comments, by trying to shout me down. We are well used to it. For those interested in trying to tackle the issues affecting our society, I have heard many good comments from across the floor. I will take them into account as I continue to develop policies. Taking on dereliction is a fundamental part of my role as I see it. That is why we are bringing in positive elements to support people in transforming their village, town and city centres while taking on those who are leaving properties derelict.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank my staff, especially my PA, who have done a tremendous amount of work on this legislation. I also thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, which has assisted me in bringing in this legislation. The Minister might criticise it but it is right and has gone through the whole process. As a back bench TD, I am limited in the legislation I can bring forward. I would love to go much further. I would love to work with the Minister on it but he comes in here and criticises the proposals I have made. He just said he was having a war on dereliction. What he did not say was it was not starting for another two years. He comes in here and criticises local authorities and councils but he has given local authorities the job of pulling the derelict sites register together. They have had that job for 35 years. The Minister is telling me they could not get it right for 35 years and is blaming them for not collecting the levy, but he is still leaving them in charge of putting the list together. The Minister cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

I spoke earlier about being in the Mercy hospital on Tuesday night, a freezing cold night. It was jammed out the door, with trolleys everywhere. I was 11 hours in there with a family member. People told me they came into A and E to get out of the cold. I do not know whether the Minister knows where the Mercy hospital is in Cork. Within minutes' walking distance of the hospital are derelict buildings. Around the corner from the hospital are buildings that are rotting. The Minister should be bringing in this legislation now. I know that when his Bill is enacted, my Bill will fall, but at least until the Minister's Bill comes in, this Bill will be working away.

The Minister commented twice but he never once mentioned the €20 million owed by speculators to whom he is giving an amnesty. Those are the facts. He also never discussed why the 2024 figures on dereliction have not been released. They are normally released every March. The Minister is hiding the figures. I got them from every other Minister but I cannot get them off Deputy Browne. Why is he hiding and covering up the dereliction and the landholders and speculators who have derelict sites all over the State? The Minister says he wants a war on dereliction. Give us the figures. Release them. Why will the Minister not release them? It is because they will show how bad things are.

Other Members have made comments about different towns and cities. Does the Minister know how hard it is for people living in overcrowded accommodation with two or three generations in the one house when there is a derelict site around the corner? Does he know how hard it is for people in emergency accommodation to bring their children across the city to school, passing a dozen properties that could be their home?

The Minister talks about his Government. Why is he not doing this now? He should be tackling dereliction today. This Government has been in place for more than a year. Why is it not doing its job? It is because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are up to their tonsils in vested interests, the landholders and speculators who are only interested in making money. If the Minister wants us to take him at face value, he needs to tackle this now. People want action. They do not want the Minister to be talking about this next year or the year after. They want action now. People are leaving this country to go to Australia because they cannot find somewhere to rent. There are people leaving because they cannot find a house to buy. There are people who are stuck because they cannot get social housing but cannot afford rent.

I am not sure about the Minister's pride in his responsibility. I am genuinely not trying to insult him but these are the facts as we stand in the Dáil today. We have the highest rents, the highest house prices and the highest homelessness figures in the history of the State and Deputy Browne is the Minister. He can blame us in the Opposition but I am trying to fix something. This Bill will not fix everything but it would be a start. It would send a message to those the Minister has called criminals, those involved in the antisocial behaviour of destroying communities through dereliction. It would send a message that this will not be tolerated any more. It would also send a message to people who are struggling and who are looking for a light at the end of the tunnel. It would tell them that this Government will do something.

This Government has done nothing on dereliction for 35 years. Does the Minister know the joke about this? Does he know who brought in the original dereliction legislation? In 1990, Charles Haughey was the Taoiseach and Pádraig Flynn was the Minister. Those two individuals thought it was bad 35 years ago. Governments have done nothing for 35 years. Charles

Haughey, the former Taoiseach, owned an island. Those two men knew back then that this was wrong.

I am here today trying to work with the Government but it will not work with us. It will not work with the Opposition and it definitely will not work with Sinn Féin. We propose having Revenue collect this levy. That should have started on 1 January. The Minister could give local authorities funding and staff to compulsorily purchase buildings. He could give local authorities support to take on the developers who are sitting on these sites and not developing them. There are people out there who want to buy these properties to turn them into businesses, homes, community centres and sports facilities but the Minister is letting them rot. There are buildings rotting in this country. Who is responsible? Who is going to do anything about it? Deputy Browne is the Minister. We could walk out the door here and see building after building that is derelict but the Minister is coming in here and asking us to wait until 2027, when we might get to it. With no disrespect, I do not believe the Government will get to it in 2027. Enough is enough. The Minister said he was not going to tolerate this but what is he doing? He can make these statements but the proof is in the pudding. The proof is in his actions and his actions are not delivering.

This Government, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister have brass necks to tell us they are going to solve the housing crisis and the homelessness crisis and that they are going to stop people emigrating because they need homes. I know people who have left. Does the Minister know what they are hoping for? They are hoping there is going to be another financial crash here so they can come home and buy a house. They are telling me they will never be able to come home with the price of houses and rents here and that their only hope is another financial crash. They do not believe the Government is interested in them. They do not believe it wants to support them. Every day, I talk to genuine hardworking people who are trying to build lives for themselves and their families. All they are looking for is a safe and affordable home so they can live their lives. Is that too much to ask? Over the last few days, I have been listening to different Ministers talking about all the people who are working and how well the country is going. For a lot of people, it is going well. However, if you do not have a house, a home and a roof over your head and your children's heads to call your home, where are you going? Where is this Government going? It is not good enough.

I brought forward legislation to work with the Government. I would have amended it. We could have amended it down the road. We could all have worked together. We still can because the vote on this is not until next Wednesday night. I ask the Minister to think about it. Perhaps he could pull the Opposition together with his own backbenchers. Those backbenchers are telling him the same. We could still work together and make a difference. At the end of the day, it is about helping people and providing housing for people to make a difference. It is about stopping dereliction and the speculators.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): The division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.28 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 20 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.28 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 20 January 2026.

