



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 28 Aibreán 2026

Tuesday, 28 April 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The credit union consumer sentiment index for April has been published and it lays bare the severity of the cost-of-living pressure on people, especially when it comes to soaring energy costs. It reveals that a third of consumers expect to cut energy use just to get by, while nine out of ten consumers fear that high energy costs will force them to cut back on household spending. The reality is that working people and families are struggling to stay afloat. A record number of households cannot pay their electricity bills, one in four cannot pay their gas bills and now they brace themselves for further electricity price hikes in the coming weeks. Workers and families are really, really worried about the time ahead, yet they see the Government refusing to listen and seemingly incapable of understanding the pressure they are under.

Last October, the Government wanted people to believe that this was all over, and it could not have been more wrong. Since then, the Government's response has been all over the place. It has scrambled around taking a scattered approach, doing a bit here and a bit there but never showing the leadership required to truly grasp this crisis. What was needed from the Government was quick, decisive action to provide people with real relief and to give working households certainty for the time ahead. However, it is only when public anger grows that the Government moves. Twice, the Government has come to the table and twice the Government has got it badly wrong, with half measures each time and never being prepared to go far enough. It has left people to struggle on and to make do. Even when anger boiled into protest, it still failed to understand people's lives.

Workers and families cannot take this any more. They cannot wait for any longer. We need an emergency budget. We have set out clearly what needs to be done, solutions that cut to the heart of the pressure people are under. We need energy credits for households, a €500 payment for people with disabilities and a suite of measures to protect the most vulnerable, and there must be relief for workers. Remember, the budget last October left them worse off. The Taoiseach will remember introducing the USC. It was brought in by Fianna Fáil when it crashed the Irish economy. It is a constant drag on people's wages and even more so during

this cost-of-living crisis, so we propose a permanent USC cut that will put €500 back into workers' pockets. These are practical steps that can be taken right now to make a real difference and to lift some of the pressure people are under to make ends meet.

Caithfidh Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael dúiseacht agus, i ndáiríre, géarchéim an costas maireachtála a thuiscint. Ní leor leath-iarracht.

Tá cáinainéis éigeandála ag teastáil láithreach chun faoiseamh ceart a thabhairt d'oibrithe agus do theaghlaigh. Expecting households to cling on until next year's budget is not only unfair it is downright insulting. This cost-of-living crisis is happening now. The stress is at kitchen tables now and at this time. The Taoiseach needs to do his job and he needs to act to make life more affordable. The Government has a surplus of billions. A fraction of that would make a real difference. Bring forward an emergency budget and finally listen. Give workers and families the proper relief they deserve.

The Taoiseach: I acknowledge that the war in the Middle East, which the Deputy somehow managed not to mention, is a war that has created shocking constraints in oil supply and has led to an increase in fuel prices across the world. Globally people are very concerned about what they see as the biggest shock to the energy sector in many a time. They are saying it is bigger than 1973 and 1979 combined, and even 1973, 1979 and 2022 combined. It is a very serious shock to the energy system that has been brought about, which has dramatically increased prices and will result in a global contraction of fossil fuel supplies with consequential impacts on other products like fertiliser, helium and so on, which in turn could have impacts on jobs and on food production across the world. These are very serious issues we are all facing.

We acknowledge fully that this is creating pressures on families and on households. There is no question about that. There is an uncertainty about it as well because we do not quite know when this is going to end and when the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is going to end, which is key to getting prices down and getting supply reactivated again to a significant degree. The Deputy has not referenced any of that. It is as if it does not exist in the Deputy's world but those are the realities facing every government across the world right now.

Yes, from our perspective, in the budget we majored very heavily on housing, on infrastructure, on disability, with a 20% increase, and on child poverty, with the support payments for children going up substantially by record levels. For children over the age of 12, it is by €16 and for children under the age of 12, it is less than that but still by record levels both ways. We also extended the fuel allowance to bring in those on the working family payment, which brought in an extra 50,000 people. About 26% of people are on the fuel allowance. That measure does help people deal with this, not comprehensively but at least it is a contribution to people to take pressure off them in respect of rising fuel prices.

We announced a package of over €750 million that has brought down the excise duty by about 32 cent on diesel and by about 27 cent on petrol. Those measures affect and help everybody. Today the Government approved two very specific packages for the transport haulier sector, which is much more expanded than was the case during the Ukrainian energy crisis. These very substantial schemes will also help farmers, fishers and contractors. We must remember that about 240,000 workers are involved in the haulage and logistics industry. I know the Deputy described them last week as a sectional thing and that we were only looking

after particular sectors but it is key to everybody and all workers that we can get goods to port and get them exported at an affordable price, and that we can get goods on our supermarket shelves at an affordable price. When we alleviate the pressure on hauliers, logistics and supply, we are alleviating pressures on everybody, and likewise in terms of food production. We are not scattered all over the place, this was strategic to deal with food production. This is a critical period in terms of food. We are a big food-producing country and it is right that we should alleviate the pressures on farmers in particular around food production areas and alleviate the pressures on contractors given the role they play in food production.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There was a cost-of-living crisis before the war in Iran. More than 300,000 households were already in energy arrears. This crisis has very deep roots. The Taoiseach failed to acknowledge that. The budget last October left workers worse off and left people with disabilities worse off. The Taoiseach failed to acknowledge that. Families and workers are really struggling and the Taoiseach has no response for them except to talk down to them and dismiss them. I have asked the Taoiseach to introduce an emergency budget. I have told him the very specific measures that we in Sinn Féin believe need to be taken, namely, energy credits, supports, including a disability payment, and, critically, a permanent cut in the USC. These are the things that need to happen if the Government is to be serious about assisting people in a time of crisis. Is it serious? Is it listening?

The Taoiseach: Tá an Rialtas dáiríre faoin gceist seo agus tá an-chuid déanta againn ó thaobh costas maireachtála. Níl aon amhras faoi sin sa mhéid atá déanta againn sa gheilleagar agus leis an gcáinainneis a bhí againn an bhliain seo caite agus an bhliain roimhe sin. What Deputy McDonald has outlined is something for everybody. It could be €4 billion or €5 billion in terms of what she announced. Sinn Féin did not cost it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is €3 billion.

The Taoiseach: I think it is approximately €3.5 billion-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is costed.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy says that but what is the cost? I would say it is around €5 billion.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not.

An Ceann Comhairle: No interruptions.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is that we have allocated €750 million already-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach cannot count, a Cheann Comhairle. It is very-----

The Taoiseach: -----and there is a budget in October. We need to also bear in mind how best we target the resources we have. We do not have money in the bottom of a drawer like Deputy

McDonald is suggesting. Much of that surplus is in the Future Ireland Fund and the infrastructure and nature-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is not.

The Taoiseach: Unless Deputy McDonald is advocating we take it out of the funds, she needs to clarify this.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is additional money.

The Taoiseach: The money has been put aside-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Taoiseach does not have a clue.

The Taoiseach: -----and a lot of it is being invested in the economy, in jobs and in housing right now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He did not even think the Government had it last week.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: This time last year, households were already labouring under the pressure of grocery price inflation, the housing crisis and Trump's threatened tariffs. Since the outset of Trump's illegal war on Iran and in the Middle East, and with no end in sight to Russia's bombardment of Ukraine, things have got worse. The Taoiseach has rightly just described the situation we are in as a massive global energy shock, but in this shock, struggling households are left wondering when they will get some real reprieve from the Government. PAYE workers are not seeing the benefit of a multimillion euro sectoral support package.

In response to a question from my Labour colleague, Deputy Ged Nash, last week, the Tánaiste ruled out a mini-budget for our communities. Today, we are told that officials are scrambling to design one-off supports, such as retrofit grants and energy tweaks, with all signs pointing to a sort-of mini-budget. As the saying goes, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it might just be a duck. In this case, it is a very lame duck because what we are seeing is not a coherent plan. The Taoiseach talks about a strategic response but where is the strategy in the series of *ad hoc* measures he is formulating? They appear to be cobbled together in response to political pressure. To borrow another animal metaphor, the Government is playing whack-a-mole. It has no clear vision for how to support working families through this deepening cost-of-living and energy crisis. Would it not be more honest to call the response what it is, which is a mini-budget but released in segments? Call it what it is and let people then judge it on its merits.

Families are already stretched to breaking point. The Taoiseach knows that more than 320,000 households are in electricity arrears and 180,000 are behind on gas bills. These are the highest levels on record. Homeless figures are the highest on record. Grocery prices are rising week on week. Insurance, housing and education costs are all up. What has the Government done? It has withdrawn energy credits without putting any cushion in place for households, it has failed to index tax bands, as Labour had sought, and it has left PAYE workers

footing the bill for sectoral pay-offs. With regard to VAT cuts, there is no evidence that they will achieve anything other than costing the Exchequer. Now, as inflation threatens to surge again, the Minister for Finance is kite flying.

People see through this. They see a Government that can find €750 million for sectoral supports while telling households to tighten their belts. They hear the Government's talk of tax breaks on wealth while they struggle to find the money to cover food and heating costs at the end of the month. That is why the Government's approach is so frustrating. If it is doing a mini-budget in all but name, why not bring forward a coherent package?

Why not take the options that we have proposed, such as a windfall tax on excess energy profits of big companies; a renewables revolution to end reliance on fossil fuels; targeted energy credits for working households; and indexation of tax bands? This would be systemic change, not just token measures. Why will the Taoiseach not just introduce a mini-budget and a coherent package that gives supports to struggling households?

The Taoiseach: First of all, we will not be introducing a mini-budget. I will say at the outset that we have taken a strategic approach to this. The most fundamental approach we should take is an understanding of the impacts of this - not just the immediate impacts of this, but the medium-term impacts on our overall economic life in terms of the impact on jobs potentially, the impact on prices and so on. We have announced €750 million. There is general relief in terms of the reductions in excise duty on diesel and petrol, which benefits PAYE workers, all other workers and all workers and everybody who uses their car and so forth. There is a targeted approach in terms of families on low incomes and the extension, as we provided, of the fuel allowance, in terms of everything to do with food production, and also in terms of the broader haulage logistics supply industry, which is critical for all of us. That is being strategic. We are a small exporting island. We export 90% of what we produce, so it is essential that logistics regarding the supply chain and haulage are enabled and assisted for it to do its business in terms of the measures we are bringing in and that were approved by Government today but were announced, as the Deputy knows, as part of the €750 million package. They will mean a lot for hauliers. They will mean a lot for people who transport goods and services. It will also mean a lot for fishers, for example, who need support and help, farmers, contractors and the general public through the reduction in excise duties.

The Deputy must realise that, before the war, way back in February, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, announced a significant overhaul of the retrofitting schemes and an expansion of them, increased grants for attic and cavity wall insulation, an additional attic insulation top-up grant for first-time buyers, attic and cavity wall insulation, a second wall measure, a new grant for energy-efficient windows and doors, an expanded heat pump systems grant now totalling €12,500, and so on. The results of all that is that about 29,000 people have applied in the first quarter alone, which is a substantial increase on last year. There is very good feedback from the Minister's strategic approach to energy saving, insulation and so on, which has been quite significant over the last number of years in terms of the impact it has had on thousands of households across the country. I agree with the Deputy that this is one of the more effective ways to cushion people and help them to bear the brunt of what are very serious increases in energy costs arising out of the war and other events.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I absolutely acknowledge that the energy shock and the particular energy crisis we are now in are, of course, caused by international events, in particular Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war on Iran. We are all conscious of that. The question is how we respond. There are two things. First, the Taoiseach acknowledges that systemic change is needed; I think he did in his response to me. Absolutely, I agree. We need to change the way we work. We need to change the way we do business. We need to change our reliance on fossil fuels. Therefore, we need that renewables revolution. The Taoiseach did not respond on that. Yes, it is welcome to see measures on retrofitting, but the upfront costs of fitting solar panels, for example, or installing heat pumps are massive for households, and there is far too little available. The roll-out of renewables and our capacity to generate energy through onshore and offshore wind is far too slow. We in opposition have supported efforts by the Government to speed up the pace, but we are seeing so little being done on what should be a huge thing for us, that is, the roll-out of offshore and onshore wind generating capacity.

The second thing to say is that there are consequences-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to rolling out a continuous series of support measures.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach will respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: People are not sure what is going on. They lack certainty,-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Bacik. Her time is up. The Taoiseach will respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----they lack clarity and they are really concerned about how to pay for basics-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----in this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I would not agree with the Deputy that it is too slow. Look at the response to the measures that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced in February.

There have been over 1,730 applications for attic insulation, up 81% year on year; over 1,000 applications for cavity wall insulation, up 62%; 350 applications for heat-pump installations, up 95%; 7,000 applications for window and door upgrades - that is a new grant; over 10,000 applications for solar PV, up 65% year on year; and over 1,500 homes at risk of energy poverty upgraded under the warmer homes scheme to the end of March at an average cost per home of €31,000, up 18%; 900 heat pumps installed to the end of March; a new grant for first-time buyers, 225 active applications; and new energy-poor grants for attic and cavity wall, also significant numbers. Essentially, the revamp or overhaul of the scheme has resulted in a very

significant increase in the numbers applying, which means it is responding to the needs out there.

Deputy Holly Cairns: At the outset, I want to acknowledge the passing of Councillor Joe Carroll on Friday. He was exceptionally helpful and supportive towards me when I first entered into politics. That is the kind of person he was, and the kind of person who will be missed, in Skibbereen and beyond. My thoughts are with Sheila, and Linda and Kieran, and Anna.

Eight years ago, Ireland voted to repeal the eighth amendment, to take abortion access out of the Constitution and into the hands of the legislators in this House. It was the culmination of decades of campaigning by committed activists all across the country. Many people across this House, including the Taoiseach, were part of that referendum campaign.

From my experience canvassing in west Cork, I know the stories from women late-on in pregnancy who were forced to travel abroad to have terminations for medical reasons were the stories that stuck in people's minds and hearts the most - women who, in the midst of grief and trauma, chose to speak publicly to share deeply personal experiences. They spoke about receiving devastating diagnoses. They spoke about being told they could not receive care in their country. They spoke about the loneliness of travelling, leaving behind their families, their support networks and their homes at one of the most painful moments in their life, and they spoke about stigma and shame where there should have been compassion and care. They told their stories for a simple reason: so that what happened to them would not happen again. Eight years ago, Ireland listened to those women and voted to repeal the eighth.

Three years ago, the Marie O'Shea report was published - a report which was baked into the initial legislation and commissioned by the Government. This report found that the law is not working as it should. It recommended clear, practical changes, including removing the mandatory three-day waiting period, ending the criminalisation of doctors and providing clarity so that women facing fatal foetal diagnoses can access care here at home, but since then little has changed.

Every year, approximately 240 women are still forced to travel to the UK to access abortion care. Many of those women are travelling because they have received a devastating diagnosis, often after their 20-week scan, such as Denise Whitmore, whose story I raised with the Taoiseach a few weeks ago. We cannot ask women to share their stories over and over again and not take action. We cannot stand over a system that continues to send women abroad at their most vulnerable moment.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Eight years ago, the public voted for a compassionate approach to abortion care.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Three years ago, the report was published.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond, Deputy Cairns. Prepare in time.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Today, I am introducing a Bill to enact the recommendations of the report on this legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Government is committed to ensuring that there is safe and equitable access to termination of pregnancy services. Significant steps have been taken in this regard, including the expansion of hospital services, the introduction of safe access zones and the continuation of the revised model of care for termination in early pregnancy. These measures have substantially reduced barriers and they have increased accessed to services for those who need them. Given that there is a broad spectrum of sincerely held opinion on the issue of legislative change, proposals in this regard require careful consideration.

There was a referendum, as the Deputy said, on the eighth amendment and termination of pregnancy services came into operation on 1 January 2019. As the Deputy says, a review of the Act was completed in 2023.

Significant progress has been made on implementing the operational recommendations arising from the review. Termination services in early pregnancy, up to 12 weeks, are now provided in all 19 maternity hospitals. That was not the position some years ago. There has also been a sustained increase in community providers, which currently stands at 491. Furthermore, the revised model of care introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been approved as the enduring model of care. It is also now possible for one of the two consultations required for termination in early pregnancy to take place remotely. The Deputy will be aware of the safe access zones legislation coming into effect.

Overall, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 is consistent with commitments given to the Irish people prior to the repeal of the eighth amendment. That said, there is a broad range of sincerely held opinion on the issue of legislative changes to that Act. It is important that all voices are heard, that we have a respectful debate and discussion on this and that we listen to one another with a view to achieving the maximum consensus possible before proceeding with change. The Social Democrats' legislation will give an opportunity for that to happen in the House. I have spoken to the Minister about this and she will engage constructively with the legislation the Social Democrats will bring to the House. Ultimately, the legislation calls for ministerial guidelines to arbitrate - that is the wrong word - to guide clinicians in respect of fatal foetal abnormality, which is an issue for some of those who are travelling out of the country to have terminations. It is not all cases. The three-day wait and other issues in the legislation also need to be discussed. If we learned anything from the referendum, it was that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy Cairns will respond.

The Taoiseach: -----there was sustained discussion in the House and at committee level which facilitated the subsequent outcome.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, your time is up.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I appreciate the Taoiseach's engagement on the issue and that of the Minister for Health and that he has spoken to her about this. It sounds like the Government is willing to constructively engage and that is important, given the trauma that many people are still going through.

I appeal to people on all sides of the House to allow the legislation to reach Second Stage, to allow it to at least be debated. An argument is often made in this House and beyond that, because the public voted on particular legislation, it simply cannot be changed. That argument does not stand up to scrutiny. The voting public knows legislation changes and can be improved and it is our job to do that. A review was also baked into the legislation and the public voted on that.

I thank the Taoiseach for his co-operation and ask again whether he will be supporting the passing of the Bill.

The Taoiseach: On this side of the House, as the Deputy will be aware, it is a vote of conscience on matters of this nature. Life or death matters are votes of conscience. We will examine the legislation. There will be debate around the area of fatal foetal abnormality. There was significant debate around it on Committee Stage in advance of the referendum and during the referendum campaign. There is a desire in many people to maintain faith with the amendment and the debate around the changes that occurred, which were debated during the referendum campaign. I think everyone facilitates debate in the House, or at least they should, from First Stage into Second Stage. We should allow people to examine the Bill in detail and come to their positions on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I want straight answers today on the delay and the disorder surrounding the short-term letting and tourism Bill. The general scheme was approved by the Government last April, yet we are here again with no Bill published, no final planning guidance and no clarity for the people whose livelihoods are directly affected. At the same time, tens of thousands of small family-run accommodation providers across the country, many of whom are in the rural and coastal communities we represent, are still being told they must be ready to comply with new rules by 20 May 2026. They are being asked to plan their futures, their homes and their businesses without seeing a single line of the law they are supposed to comply with. That is not good governance. Will the Taoiseach explain to the House why the Bill has still not been published?

I raised this issue numerous times with the Taoiseach and others but the Government still went ahead and rammed through the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2025. I have highlighted over and over again since then that this Bill will destroy smaller rural family businesses across the whole western seaboard. The Government is trying to make criminals of ordinary decent taxpayers. The tourism committee carried out pre-legislative scrutiny in January. I attended and spoke at the meeting and pleaded with the Government to use common sense. The report is still not published. I have asked for a full debate on the issue every week since then at the Business Committee and on the floor of the Dáil but to no avail. Last Tuesday I put down a Topical Issue on the matter but neither the senior Minister nor any of his two

sidekicks could come into the House to debate the issue. Instead, I got a well-worn, stock answer delivered by a random junior Minister who appeared to lack a good grasp of the issue.

Today's newspapers are reporting that the whole scheme is being kicked back to the summer or beyond and yet I cannot get a straight answer here in the House. There are rumblings of backbench division on this issue. If recent history has taught the Taoiseach anything, my advice would be that he sits up and listens on this one, if not to me then to those sitting behind him. The Government must not force families out of business for a foolish notion that it will free up thousands of properties for the rental market. Is it the idea to fleece them for the thousands in compliance fees while flushing a good going element of the rural economy down the toilet?

Will the Taoiseach confirm for the House that the registration deadline of 20 May is dead in the water? Will he also confirm when the legislation will be published and commit to not ramming it through the House without proper debate and consideration of Opposition amendments? Finally, will he consider making the accommodation I have repeatedly asked for, that the established operators are treated with respect and granted a planning exemption in order to comply with Fáilte Ireland registration?

The Taoiseach: First of all, no one is wiping anybody out in rural Ireland. It suits the Deputy to create a storm and to spread rumours saying the Government is going to do this and that. Let us get the background to this. Everyone in this House was agreed that housing was the number one priority, or at least I thought it was the number one priority, facing this Dáil at its commencement. The objective in terms of the short-term lets legislation is actually to get more houses back into the rental market. The policy decision we have taken, of which the Deputy is well aware, is that it relates to towns over 20,000, so that excludes straight away all of the western seaboard and the north western seaboard, all the way along. We are looking at towns and cities above 20,000 people.

Planning law is planning law and the seven-year rule is there. Basically if someone is operating an Airbnb for seven years he or she does not need planning permission. That is my understanding, my lay-person's articulation of it. Essentially, there would be great difficulty in enforcing anything at that stage. I am sure the Deputy would accept that. He is wily enough in terms of planning issues as they affect people so I am sure he will agree that is the position.

There is an EU directive governing this as well and that is governing all of Europe. In the cities we want less of the short-term lets and we want more housing because we need more housing for younger people. People are arguing about the rents being high and we need more supply. There is an issue there and the Deputy should acknowledge that. It is not a foolish idea. There is a logic behind it and there is a rationale behind it. The fundamental objective is to continue to support tourism in those areas where tourism is a key industry and that is all along the western seaboard, the south west, the west, the north west, along the east coast, the south east coast and so on. They are all well below the 20,000 threshold and the idea is to balance the need for long-term housing supply and greater housing availability while also protecting rural and regional tourism and jobs. The national register is to be compiled by Fáilte Éireann for short-term let providers. It is to be established by Fáilte Ireland. The issue is still being examined by Government in terms of the planning statement and so on and how to enable people to adjust to the situation and the policy position we have identified and announced.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. He said that I create a storm but this has been talked about for two years and the Government cannot-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Collins: Sorry. They are ringing me from west Cork.

Deputy Robert Troy: Here is the storm.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: He has been sitting here for a half and hour and his phone did not ring.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Collins: The Taoiseach is talking about creating a storm. This is a serious storm for the people who are facing a crisis at this moment. They are talking about signing up to something on 20 May. It is like signing a blank cheque. Are people going to have to sign up to something on 20 May, like signing a blank cheque? That is what we are asking. All we are asking for are clear guidelines as to what is going ahead. Are people going to have to sign up to something that they do not know what they are signing up to? There is no point in the Taoiseach saying here what way it might be and that this is the way he sees it. I am not in the business but other people see it totally and utterly differently. What they want is clarity. That clarity should have been there months and months prior to this. We should be debating this in the Dáil, agreeing or disagreeing to it and going forward on that basis.

The Taoiseach: When the Government has a final position, there will be plenty of opportunity for debate in the Dáil. We are not rushing anything in and we are not going to ram anything through. The Deputy needs to be clear as well. Long before any of this happened, change of use always required planning. The Deputy knows that. He is pretending the Government has suddenly invented that. We have not. He has been around meetings and is on Facebook every second night at a meeting here and a meeting there-----

Deputy Michael Collins: That is what I am entitled to do. That is what social media is all about Micheál-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you have had your contribution.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Every second night - it is more like twice a night.

The Taoiseach: He is saying the Government is going to bring in this draconian law about change of use. Change of use has always been there.

Deputy Michael Collins: Sure, you cannot bring it in. The Taoiseach does not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you have had your contribution. There is nothing different about you to every other Member. Allow the Taoiseach to make his contribution because you are running down the clock, not him.

Deputy Mary Butler: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: We are very conscious, and have been, of the need to protect regional tourism, rural Ireland and the jobs that go there. That is why we took the population threshold of 20,000. We will be back to the Deputy.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy in Wexford (without debate)
- Motion re Consideration of Estimates by Committees (without debate)
- Statements on the Consultation process of Our Rural Future Policy (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Strengthening Workers' Rights, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Mental Health Bill 2024 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 4 hours)
- International Co-operation (Omagh Bombing Inquiry) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 2 hours)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026 (to conclude within 1 hour and any division demanded to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Family Law Transparency, Child Welfare, and Reform of the In Camera Rule, selected by Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Supports for Hauliers and supply chains (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Peadar Tóibín.

Proposed Arrangements for this week’s business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.; and;

(b) private members business shall be taken on conclusion of the Statements on the Consultation process of Our Rural Future Policy, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy in Wexford shall be taken without debate;

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Consideration of Estimates by Committees shall be taken without debate; and

5. the Statements on the Consultation process of Our Rural Future Policy shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
				Total:	

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time; and

(b) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the weekly division time, which may be taken on the conclusion of the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026;

2. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Mental Health Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 4 hours, and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Health

3. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the International Co-operation (Omagh Bombing Inquiry) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; and

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Fingal and Wexford County Councils) (Parts of Administrative Areas) Order 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

— opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

— speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

— speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

— a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

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

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

(b) the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 6th May, 2026; and

2. the Statements on Supports for Hauliers and supply chains shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
				Total:	

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Tánaiste at the weekend was talking about his Department officials looking at more heat pumps. How out of touch can you be? People need money in their pockets now. We need statements on an emergency mini-budget. Sinn Féin has put forward proposals, including a permanent cut to the USC, a restoration of the energy credit and a cut to fuel and diesel at the pumps. We need this House to represent what people are going through out there. We need a reality check on Government. I am calling for statements on an emergency mini-budget this week.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We are waiting the bones of a decade for the Government to take meaningful action on short-term lets. Where is the Bill? Where are the guidelines? When are we going to see the national planning statement? Will the register be in force for the previous May deadline that was agreed? We need to have a debate on this.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: This Government has been talking about short-term lets since 2022 and the regulations that were required. I may not share the same position as Deputy Collins on it but I do share his concerns about fresh delays arising today out of Cabinet disagreement over it. This is in the context where, in some counties, there are 25 times as many short-term lets as

there are properties available on the private rental market. We need a debate about this issue and it to be resolved and clarity around it immediately.

The Taoiseach: Is the Deputy against Deputy Collins's position?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Some 700 workers at Covalen, a major contractor for Meta, that incidentally made €26 million in profits last year, have been told their jobs are gone. This is on top of 300 jobs before that. They cannot work for six months because of what Meta requires, and the vast majority of them are getting no redundancy. They are looking to meet the Taoiseach and the senior Minister. We need to discuss their plight because their jobs have been replaced by the AI that they trained. More job losses like this are coming. We need to address this as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need a serious discussion in the Dáil about the mental health services in this country. A lot of centres are closing down and buildings are being lost. It is a serious issue that needs discussion. I asked for it some time back and it has not happened. I appreciate that we would have a debate on this week going forward.

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Ceann Comhairle knows, during the Business Committee meeting last Thursday, there were very few issues with the Order of Business. There was a request for additional time. It was facilitated. All issues raised here today can be discussed. I think only Deputy Collins raised the issue of short-term lets last Thursday. In relation to mental health, I will be in the Dáil tomorrow for another four hours. That will bring to 38 hours the amount of time given to discuss the Mental Health Bill over the past few weeks. Deputy Collins is more than welcome to attend. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Order of Business agreed?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staan
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	

Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Daly, Pa.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Devine, Máire.	
Clendennen, John.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Connolly, John.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cooney, Joe.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cummins, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Currie, Emer.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Keogh, Keira.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Lahart, John.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Lawless, James.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lowry, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Martin, Micheál.	Nash, Ged.	
Maxwell, David.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	

O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question declared carried.

Visit of Albanian Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to welcome some people in the Gallery. I welcome the Albanian speaker, Niko Peleshi, and his delegation who have come to Ireland at the request of the speaker. I hope they are enjoying their visit.

I also welcome Mr. Joseph P. McGill, the honorary consul of Ireland in Detroit, Michigan. He is here with Deputy John Paul O'Shea.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business (Resumed)

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Children with additional needs are being failed by the State. Some 7,860 children will need special class or school places for this September but the Government has planned for only 5,500 places. That leaves at least 2,300 children without appropriate places and takes no account of possibly hundreds more. These are not statistics; these are children being failed by the State. Parents have been left in limbo weeks out from summer and are unsure if their children will have school places. Some parents have received as many as 14 rejection letters. They are doing everything asked of them and still getting no answers. This is an abject failure of political will.

Will the Government act to guarantee sufficient places, special needs assistants and supports for every child come September? Can it guarantee that the additional funding announced last week is new money and will provide an appropriate place for every child?

The Taoiseach: First, 7,860 children who have applied for special placements in our schools. That is more than twice the number who did so ahead of the current school year. Please acknowledge that. It is because of the earlier date being forward. Six thousand are already enrolled in schools-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In appropriate places. They are in the wrong places.

The Taoiseach: -----and a further 1,400 are preschool-age children. To be very clear, the Government is absolutely committed to meeting the needs of every one of those children. The €646 million approved by the Government is additional to the Estimate that was agreed at budget time. This money is largely to cater for the additionality that has arisen as a result of the change in the system that we brought in with the early date in October.

The investment in special education has been enormous, and rightly so. In the context of all that talk about failure, we have doubled and trebled the numbers across any metric to do with special education.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Since the beginning of this year, more than 30 prospective international students have come forward to detail how they were effectively scammed. After having their visa applications refused, they were denied refunds by the English language schools here that they had paid for places they cannot now take up. They have no protection, even though they paid upfront in good faith and followed the process. Some have lost out on thousands of euro in fees and have been left to chase refunds from providers based in different countries. The Irish Council for International Students and my Labour colleague Senator Laura Harmon, who has been working on this, have pointed out that the protective framework, TrustEd Ireland, is toothless. Will the Government act to regulate the English language school sector here in order to ensure that prospective students will be protected rather than being left to foot bills that they should not be liable to pay?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that a new regulation has been introduced by the Minister in respect of this in recent months. It is shocking that this would occur. I presume the matter has been referred to the Garda in terms of any fraudulent activity here, because it is absolutely unacceptable that would occur to any student. The Minister has acted on that, but I am sure he would be willing to engage with the Deputy's representatives in order to provide an update on where we are on it and to take on board any constructive suggestions.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Is mian liom ceist a chur ar an Taoiseach faoi thaighde an Bhainc Ceannais. Research from the Central Bank published today shows that one in three adults has experienced fraud or scams. At the same time, social media companies earned an estimated €32 million last year from scam advertisements aimed at people in Ireland. These social media

giants are turning a blind eye in order that they can profit off the misery of their customers. One couple from north Dublin were preparing for their dream wedding. They booked what they believed was a legitimate villa advertised on Facebook. They paid €2,800 for accommodation that did not exist. These scams are being operated on an industrial scale.

3 o'clock

Why are these social media companies allowed to make millions in advertising fees from these false, fraudulent advertisements? What will the Government do about it?

The Taoiseach: Online fraud is an enormous issue and has been for quite some time. There are regulatory frameworks governing this and obligations governing the companies as well. There is an issue with some of the revenue models of some of the companies in respect of advertising that defames people, for example. There is revenue in that and there is also revenue in the shocking case the Deputy outlined with a young couple being defrauded to the tune of €2,000 in respect of a villa. At both European and national levels, we will keep the legislation under review to make sure this is stamped out.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask about corporate capture of the Government, enabling landlords to build shed-sits with no planning permission, to rent them out with no legal protections, to evict tenants at any time with no right of appeal, no reason and no basis to go to the RTB. Where did this dystopian idea come from? A corporate think-tank set up by the billionaire Collison brothers. Plugging the idea two years ago, Progress Ireland boasted that there could be 350,000 such shed-sits, and it said they could be built based on whether rents were high enough to justify building one. This always had landlords' greasy fingers all over it but the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, claimed that it would only be for family members. He still has a video up on Facebook saying it would give younger people and older people the option to live independently of the family home while retaining support of the family network. He told RTÉ he did not see it as a rental measure. Will the Taoiseach go along with this creation of a second class of renters or will he stop this corporate capture?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy loves creating a narrative about every initiative of Government. It is nothing to do with Progress Ireland or anything like that but it is to do with supply. I will be straight-up.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is its idea.

The Taoiseach: It is not its idea.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is its idea.

The Taoiseach: Deputies all over this House were advocating for this long before Progress Ireland was ever established. There have been cases in rural Ireland where people have had difficulties with extensions and buildings in their back gardens, fields, or whatever they were attached to, including farmhouses and so on. There is a balance here. The Deputy has opposed every single measure to do with supply of housing that we have introduced. You name it. It

includes any of the housing Acts, and everything else. I do not know what Deputy Murphy's agenda is, ultimately. I am not saying this is perfect but it is needed. It can be for family members and will be useful for family members but family members will not be staying forever in a unit out in the back. They will want to move on as well. These are not sheds, by the way.

Deputy Michael Collins: Today, we will receive a report in the audiovisual room from Ireland's US driver licence exchange campaign on an unnecessary barrier faced by the Irish diaspora and returning citizens. I raised this issue many times. In November 2025, I asked the Tánaiste to liaise with the Minister for Transport to direct the RSA and the National Driver Licence Service to recognise previous Irish driving licences without an outdated ten-year time limit. This is a simple, administrative change. It poses no risk to road safety and will immediately support Irish people seeking to return home. This can be done with the stroke of a pen. The Tánaiste acknowledged that this issue is a genuine barrier and linked it to the forthcoming national diaspora strategy. Since then, members of the diaspora have done the work the Government should have done. Their report shows that a pragmatic, risk-based system already used in other EU states is both possible and lawful. My question is straightforward. When will the Government act? Will the Taoiseach instruct the Minister for Transport to remove the barrier without further delay?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is working on this, and is making progress. We recently signed an agreement with Moldova for truck drivers to be able to come and work here automatically. It is needed for the diaspora. There is no question about that. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is making progress on it.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I have been contacted by a number of women in County Offaly who are experiencing significant delays in accessing screening through BreastCheck. I am informed that mobile screening is not due in Offaly for at least six months, meaning that some women are now waiting well beyond the recommended two year interval for a mammogram. This is causing real anxiety and raises serious concerns about equitable access to cancer screening services in the midlands. Will the Taoiseach raise this matter with the Minister for Health and the HSE and seek urgent action to ensure timely BreastCheck screening is restored in County Offaly?

The Taoiseach: I will raise the issue with the Minister for Health. There may be other aspects to this as well. We do not want any anxiety in any location around this. I will talk to the Minister in respect of it.

Deputy William Aird: I want to raise the issue of GP shortages in County Laois. The population of Laois has risen sharply over the past decade but primary care services have not kept pace. I acknowledge the tremendous work of local GPs. They are the backbone of community healthcare. However, the reality is the HSE can assign a GP to a medical card and GP visit card holder, but there are no GPs in the Portlaoise area with capacity and private patients are being left without access to a full-time GP. This is not sustainable for a growing county like Laois. What supports are being put in place to ensure that newly qualified GPs can establish in general practice, especially in counties in which need is acute? The Taoiseach knows that we in County Laois have a quota of houses to build over the next seven years, and

rightly so. In Portlaoise alone, that number is 5,000 houses. I ask the Taoiseach to come up with some plan.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. General practice is one of the cornerstones of our health service. Forty-three percent of the population now has access to free GP care and Government investment has significantly increased. We spend in excess of €1 billion annually on general practice to support patients. There is a strategic review of general practice under way. The Minister for higher education has increased the places for medicine training to have more output and throughput of GPs through the colleges. We will await the strategic review. We increased funding substantially in terms of the 2019 GP agreement and a further €130 million investment under the 2023 GP agreement. We are making it more attractive. On training and recruitment in particular, there were 350 places in 2024 and 2025. That was an increase of two thirds since 2020. Getting those numbers through the colleges is going to be key.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I raise with the Taoiseach the case of Carrabane National School in east Galway. This school is on the priority list for development, and we welcome that, but the prefabs at the school are falling apart. The tenders were received for this building in January 2024. We are now in April 2026 and the Department of education has not yet made a decision on whether it will proceed. Will the Taoiseach please engage with the Department of education to unblock whatever blockages are there and see that this school is built? The people of Carrabane and the surrounding area have waited long enough and they are crying out to see this school built once and for all. I will support the Taoiseach in any way I can to see it delivered but the Minister for education needs to make a decision. She needs to work with the principal officers to make a decision. The tender reports were received in January 2024 and it is now April 2026. We need to see action.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of Carrabane National School. If the tenders were issued in January 2024, it is difficult to comprehend why it did not get the green light soon after that. I certainly will engage with the Department of education on this and more broadly in terms of capital allocation to education. We have invested a lot in school buildings in the last number of years but it is vital to the quality of the learning environment for the children concerned. I will take up the matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Pa Daly. I apologise for missing him earlier.

Deputy Pa Daly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and thank you for the opportunity to raise the issue of the former ecclesiastical site of Rattoo in Ballyduff, north Kerry. It is a national monument and 1,000 years old, and it is the best-preserved round tower in the whole country. It once hosted an abbey, a church, a hospital and even a school of music. It is of immense historical and local significance and huge tourism potential but it has been closed for 15 years while works are being carried out by the national monuments depot works. Most of those works have been completed. Can the Taoiseach give us a date when it will open again, either by taking away the scaffolding or by opening up the gate? Tourists cannot visit.

The Taoiseach: Is that the Office of Public Works, OPW?

Deputy Pa Daly: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, in respect of this fascinating location and site. It is very historic, so obviously we would like to have it reopened, but I will have to get the timeline for the Deputy.

Deputy John Brady: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the imminent sale of a substantial parcel of land in the Wicklow Mountains, including the summit of Lugnaquilla, due to be auctioned off this Friday. The 1,527-acre holding represents a massive opportunity for the State to secure what is essentially a priceless piece of our natural heritage. I do not think land of such environmental, cultural and recreational value should be sold off to the highest bidder, including international interests. It is an opportunity for the State to purchase this land. The land borders the Wicklow Mountains National Park and offers a real opportunity to expand the park and take that land into public ownership. At a time when we have a biodiversity crisis and are under obligations under the EU nature restoration law, not investing in additional public lands such as this would put us under additional financial strain and potentially lead to penalties from the EU.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach to reply.

Deputy John Brady: I have written to the Minister in relation to the sale of this land on Friday. Will the Taoiseach examine this with a view to the State purchasing it?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond now.

The Taoiseach: It has obviously gone on the open market. I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, who has responsibility for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but these are issues it pursues. We do not normally talk about land sales but obviously it is out there. I will see what its position on it is.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Local government is the beating heart of democracy. In July of last year, when replying to a question of mine, the Taoiseach confirmed that the abolition of town councils was a big mistake and that he was a great believer in restoring town councils. He said that many town councils had great visionary district councils in the past. In November of last year, the Taoiseach confirmed that it was an issue that was close to his heart, that he opposed the abolition of town and borough councils and that as a democrat, he believed in fundamental layers of democracy. Has the local government task force reported? Has the report been seen by the Minister? Will the report be published? Has the report gone to Cabinet? Will the Taoiseach confirm that, in line with his previous statements, borough and town councils will be re-established?

The Taoiseach: I applaud the Deputy's very precise and accurate recollection of what I said last year in respect of the-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: It is on the record.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Absolutely, and I repeat and endorse everything I said. As I said at the time, the review has not been brought to Cabinet but it is complete. I would not hold my breath and have some disappointment with the review in terms of its lack of focus on urban councils. There is a focus on municipal area districts. We will examine it and bring it to the House for debate. I believe we need to look at some urban areas to begin the restoration of urban councils. That is a view I have but the system has a different view. We are elected to do what we believe is right. I think it was a mistake to abolish councils for a number of reasons. One reason was that they gave a cohesion and sense of community to given towns and allowed them to create a vision for the town. They also allowed people who wanted to make a contribution to their locality at a certain electoral level to do so.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up. Deputy Kelly is next.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Deputy Robert O'Donoghue and I had a meeting with vets over the past period of time with a view to progressing the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Bill, which was actually brought in by former Fianna Fáil Deputy, Jackie Cahill, and my former constituency colleague. We will have a crisis in veterinary services across Ireland if we do not do something because veterinary practices are being bought up by corporate entities. This is happening continuously. As a result, we are having loss of service, restricted times for services and prices dramatically increasing and we will have animal welfare issues. This is an urban issue as well as a rural issue. It will be across the board. In Britain, they are trying to reverse allowing corporate entities to have veterinary practices. Instead, there should be a veterinary practitioner in charge and in ownership of all of these practices. I understand that every political entity in this House supports this Bill. It is coming back before the agriculture committee. Will the Taoiseach ensure its quick progressions through these Houses so we can protect veterinary services in the country?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach:

We will examine it. Again, obviously, the market has to operate as well. I am just making a general point. We will certainly examine the legislation, constructively and in an engaging way, and we will see if we can-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Your own party supports it.

The Taoiseach: Yes, I know. All right. I cannot arbitrate here in one minute.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Farrelly is next.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It is time for Tusla to undergo a complete and independent review. I have heard from too many social workers in Tusla who are worried about the reforms recently undertaken. We have heard from too many judges who are frustrated at a lack of action regarding court orders and, most recently, we have heard from too many young people who have shared their harrowing experiences of involvement in State care. Does the Taoiseach have full and unreserved confidence in Tusla because I do not? We must be able to trust Tusla's culture, governance and operations. That is why I am asking the Taoiseach, not to listen to me but to the young people who shared their experiences last week. Will the Taoiseach initiate an independent review of Tusla so we can have full confidence in our national Child and Family Agency?

The Taoiseach: First, we need to continue to work with Tusla. It is all great calling for independent reviews, inquiries and everything. That just paralyses organisations. That is the other side of that coin. We have to deal with children now who need care today, tomorrow or the day after. A balance needs to be struck in terms of how we deal with this. There are very serious issues here and all is not well in certain aspects, particularly in terms of special care and particular individuals who need very specialist care. However, if we keep putting every organisation endlessly under a microscope, then where is the space to actually get things done, improve the organisation and build up confidence? There are thousands and thousands of cases. There were 106,000 child protection and welfare referrals. That is enormous. That is an increase of 10% on 2024, and is driven by domestic violence, homelessness, addiction, criminal activity, sexual exploitation and mental health challenges. I think of a lot of the people who work in Tusla too because they are at the coalface of very challenging situations. I fully respect the Deputy's perspective and why he is concerned.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. Deputy Gogarty is next.

The Taoiseach: The easiest thing we can do is call for reviews and have everybody investigating everybody else with everyone too afraid of their shadow to get things done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gogarty is next, Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: That is the other side of this.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I would like to visit the issue of people being able to build modular homes in their gardens and subdivide them because it is a hugely important issue. It is definitely not a panacea for the housing crisis but it will help in certain situations. For example, yesterday I had a gentleman on to me worried that the legislation will not cover an area where the person who has a big enough house and wants to live on the garden and rent out the house. There are a lot of older people who want to live in the ground floor of their houses and then let someone else move into the upstairs of the house because they do not want to leave an area. They are close to their local churches, shops, etc. Where I grew up in the 1980s there were ten shops within a mile from where I lived. Now there is just one. That shows the population has declined. People have grown up and left the area. In line with national density

regulations, we need to improve the density in areas to have a critical mass for services. Will the Taoiseach prioritise this Bill, so it passes through all Stages by the summer?

The Taoiseach: Yes, we can. My understanding is that it is done by regulation but we can. There will be some legislative changes needed. I agree 100% with what the Deputy said. In fact you can now subdivide a house as well under this planning statement. Equally, you can do what the Deputy said in terms of people creating a unit for themselves and renting out the house. There is no question that in many of the older housing estates, the density has gotten very low. Whereas when we grew up, there was five or six people per family - in some cases, there was eight or nine people per family - but all of that has changed dramatically. There is further thinking to be done on how we maximise the capacity of the existing housing stock in our society. I think there is a bit of an iceberg here that we are at the tip of. In my view, we have not really properly explored it. The rent a room scheme does help in regard in terms of incentivising the use of buildings where there might be just one person in a three-bedroom house and so on.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Yes, for families but not investor-landlords.

The Taoiseach: Yes, it is open to families.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies will have to engage further on this issue. Deputy Carrigy is next.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I acknowledge the good work in the area of dementia supports. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has done a huge amount of work over the years, as has the Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

At the weekend, I happened to be watching the London marathon and saw a young guy by the name of Jordan Adams running it with a fridge on his back to signify the weight that he carries, given that he has a gene that means he will develop frontotemporal dementia, FTD, which will shorten his life. His mother was of Irish heritage and 11 members of their family have died from this. Having started in Antrim, he and his brother are running a marathon in all 32 counties in Ireland.

This is particularly personal to me. My mother Eilish passed away from dementia during Covid and I have seen what that did to her and to us as a family in trying to deal with it. I have also seen the support we were given when we went looking for it, particularly from the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, to help us through that. I would ask people across the country, and Members, to look up where the marathon is taking place in their county and support these men who are looking to highlight dementia. On Thursday, 28 May, they will finish in Merrion Square. I ask that Members please be there to support them.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising what is a very important issue and for sharing his personal experience with us about the impact of dementia on family and on individuals. I commend the runners for their initiative to create awareness. The Deputy correctly credited the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who does fantastic work, particularly

in the area of day care centres. There are 60 such centres now across the country. I remember how five or six years ago we had very few. We now have 60. We need to continue to work on this and we need to continue to do more. The advisers are very important. We need to invest more in research to understand it better and to develop greater therapeutics that can stall and delay dementia. There is a lot happening in that world. That is why investment in research, investment in care and investment in supports, above all for families and individuals who have dementia, is critical.

Reproductive Rights (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Holly Cairns: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to enact recommendations of the Marie O'Shea report into the operation of legislation on the termination of pregnancy, providing clarity on terminations for medical reasons, removal of the 3 day waiting period, and ending the criminalisation of doctors.

Next month marks eight years since we voted overwhelmingly to repeal the eighth amendment. It was an incredibly powerful moment for this country but while the eighth amendment is gone, too many of the barriers it created to abortion care remain embedded in our law and our healthcare system. The reality is that women are still travelling, still navigating crisis pregnancies far from home and far from their support networks, and are still being failed by a system that was meant to care for them. That is not what people voted for.

There is an argument often made in this House that we must leave the legislation as it stands because it reflects what was put to the public in the referendum. This argument does not stand up to any kind of scrutiny. Ireland voted to take abortion out of the Constitution and into the hands of legislators in these Houses. No legislation is set in stone and no law is beyond improvement. The public know that. The legislation also explicitly included a mandatory review after three years because, of course, gaps could emerge with the new law and would need to be addressed. The Marie O'Shea report clearly identified those gaps and it is now on us to close them. That is what this Bill aims to do.

When I knocked on doors in Cork South-West during the repeal campaign, people told me over and over again how much the stories of women who had been forced to travel impacted them. The Terminations for Medical Reasons group, TFMR, did extraordinary work during the campaign. Its members told their stories and bared their grief and trauma in the hope it would mean no other woman and no other family would have to go through what they went through.

Eight years ago, people stood in polling booths all across this country and voted with those women in mind, yet every year, approximately 240 women are still forced to travel to the UK to access abortion care. Many of them are travelling because they received a devastating diagnosis, often after the 20-week scan. Currently, doctors must be certain that a foetus will die within 28 days of birth in order to provide abortion care. That certainty is very difficult to achieve and it leaves doctors with no other choice but to force women to travel abroad. There is no clinical justification for it. It is cruel and inhumane. Women deserve dignity, compassion and a healthcare system that addresses their needs rather than directing them to a ferry port.

In the Marie O'Shea report, consultants were very clear on the impact that the continued criminal criminalisation of doctors was having. They have been left to navigate the grey areas of abortion law with the threat of criminal prosecution hanging over them, which results in overly cautious and risk-averse decision making and a tendency towards refusing to provide the care. Doctors are scared, and rightly so. Anyone would be with their licence and livelihood on the line. There is no other area of healthcare where practitioners are exposed to criminal liability if things go wrong, and it is not fair on doctors. It is deeply unfair on the women who are denied care as a result.

One of the most glaring issues in the current legislation is the three-day mandatory waiting period. It pushes women closer to the 12-week limit and puts additional strain on already stretched GP services. No other area of healthcare requires this. It is not grounded in science or any kind of evidence. It is only grounded in a profound mistrust of women. It is paternalistic and patronising and it needs to go. This Bill proposes something far more reasonable, in that the waiting period is optional, not mandatory. At its core, it comes down to a fundamental question: do we trust women or not? Do we trust doctors or not? These changes are not radical. They are reasonable, necessary and long overdue. The public voted for a compassionate evidence-based system of care. We have made progress but we are not there yet.

This proposed legislation is an opportunity to take another step closer to that goal, not by reopening old arguments, but by addressing clear and identified gaps, and not by asking women to speak louder, but by finally listening to what they have already told us. The time for review has passed and now we need to act.

I want to thank my colleague Ellen Casey for her dedicated work on this Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Very good. Thank you Deputy. Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Holly Cairns: I move: "That Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Local Government (Cities) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide that the municipal district area that includes the Local Electoral Area of Drogheda Urban shall be known in the Irish language as *Ceantar Bardasach Chathair Dhroichead Átha* and in the English language as the Municipal District of Drogheda City, and for that purpose to amend the Local

Government Act 2001; to provide that specified towns which comply with the requirements provided for by this Act may be granted city status and for those purposes to amend the Local Government Act 2001; and to provide for related matters.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce to this House my first Bill, the Local Government (Cities) Bill 2026. The purpose of this Bill is to provide that the municipal district area that includes the local electoral area of Drogheda urban be known as the municipal district of Drogheda city and to provide that specified classes of towns that satisfy the requirements provided for by the Bill may be granted city status, and to provide for related matters.

During the submission phases for Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and regional spatial and economic strategy, a massive number of submissions were made advocating for city status for Drogheda. Lobby groups and local citizens did what the Government asked them to do to play their part in our democracy and they articulately and eloquently stated the case for city status. None of those submissions received the due consideration it should have. The city status group met with many Ministers in many different Governments over the years and they presented the case for Drogheda's city status. They outlined various difficulties the town was incurring because different parts of it were run by Louth County Council and Meath County Council, with no overall cohesive plan for the area. We have two councils with no holistic plan for housing, infrastructure, transport, employment, and community and sporting amenities. This has proven to choke progress and stifle the growth of the largest town in the country.

Every elected representative from all parties and none in Drogheda supports the city status campaign, including those from the Government parties. I ask that the Government listen to them. The local democracy task force was established by this Government last year after years of debates and concerns about what went so terribly wrong with the Local Government Act 2014 and other aspects of our weak local democracy. City status, however, is not even being considered. Only a few moments ago, the Taoiseach referred to his own disappointment with the task force's lack of focus on urban councils. The Council of Europe has consistently highlighted this State as having one of the weakest and most centralised systems of local government in Europe. We have to try to do something different.

We in Sinn Féin will not be found wanting in making positive changes to empower local democracy. The Government's local government reforms in 2001 and 2014 have led to a downgrade of local government and more centralisation of powers instead of improving local government and delivering real local democracy. The Minister, Deputy Browne, recently noted that right now there are no formal criteria for awarding city status. Under the Planning and Development Act 2024 a city is defined primarily by its administrative status rather than population size. This is why I am introducing the Bill so that for the first time there will be formal criteria enshrined in law that can be used to award city status, with population size as the main factor for approval. If the Bill receives enough support in the Dáil and Seanad and becomes an Act, Drogheda will become the municipal district of Drogheda city. City status is crucial to ensure that Drogheda and other large towns receive proper investment in infrastructure, services and jobs rather than being treated merely as commuter towns.

I do not claim to have a magic wand that will fix everything we have wanted for years but I believe this mechanism would pave the first step on a pathway to greater things. I stood for election on the platform of elevating city status for Drogheda and I am unapologetic in my

attempts to deliver real change and local democracy for the place I call home. This is why I have spent the first 13 months as a TD working with the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers to produce this legislation. I emphasise that the same criteria contained in the Bill can be used for other large towns throughout the State to apply for city status for their respective areas. These include places such as Navan, Bray, Dundalk, Swords, Ennis, Letterkenny, Sligo, Tralee and many more. When they hit the criteria they too can apply for city status to have local government based locally, making decisions locally, to benefit all of what are now towns but are future cities. This is how we plan for the future.

To enable Drogheda's unique heritage, history and location, and to realise its full potential, we need to advance this legislation. I sincerely hope that years of virtue signalling to Drogheda from various taoisigh and Ministers will transpire into support for the Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Order of the Dáil of 15th April, 2026, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those set down to the Minister for Defence, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Rural and Community Development.

Question put and agreed to.

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy in Wexford: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, in accordance with Article 15.1.3^o of the Constitution, hereby determines that the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy may meet in Wexford Town, County Wexford, on a date in 2026 to be decided by the Committee, in order to hear from community groups, locals and stakeholders on the progress made at Lady's Island Lake; provided that, pursuant to Standing Order 115(4), Members may participate in such meeting from within the parliamentary precincts by means of the videoconferencing platform approved and provided by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Committee Consideration of Estimates: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding the Orders of the Dáil of 3rd day of March, 2026, and 25th day of March, 2026, and pursuant to Standing Order 223(1), the following Committee may complete its consideration of the Estimates for Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2026, standing referred to them pursuant to Standing Order 222(2), later than the eightieth day and not later than the one hundred and sixty-fifth day, being the 31st day of May, 2026, after the Estimates had been so referred:

— the Select Committee on Education and Youth (Vote 26).

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [6014/26]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [6017/26]

3. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [16730/26]

4. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [16731/26]

5. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [16732/26]

6. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [16733/26]

7. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [28286/26]

8. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [28396/26]

9. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [29772/26]

10. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [30330/26]

11. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. [30356/26]

12. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [30491/26]

13. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [30495/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 13, inclusive, together.

I attended the 2026 World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos on 21 and 22 January. My attendance at the forum is a useful opportunity to exchange views on key economic matters at a platform that brings together people from enterprise, politics, academia and media.

During my visit, I met with international and political leaders, including Prime Minister Mustafa of Palestine, who updated me on progress on the comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict and the very difficult situation in Gaza and the West Bank. We also discussed Ireland's support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Middle East and for the de-escalation of violence and military action. I reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to adhering to the UN Charter and international law. We both agreed that the work of the United Nations, particularly UNRWA, together with other humanitarian organisations and non-governmental organisations, is essential to confront the catastrophic humanitarian situation and to deliver life-saving assistance and essential services to the civilian population in Gaza, the occupied Palestinian territory and the wider region.

I also had bilateral meetings with senior representatives of multinational companies with operations in Ireland. These included Joel Kaplan, the chief global affairs officer of Meta;

Apple CEO, Tim Cook; AstraZeneca chair, Michel Demaré; and Microsoft president, Brad Smith. I received updates on the progress of these companies with their respective Irish operations and their future development plans. Throughout those meetings, I reiterated the appeal of Ireland as a country to do business in, noting key initiatives such as our action plan on competitiveness and productivity, our action plan on market diversification, investment in infrastructure and our continued focus on providing an environment for world class research and innovation.

IDA Ireland had a strong presence at the World Economic Forum as part of its continuing work to attract inward investment to Ireland across a range of sectors. I gave a keynote address at the annual IDA Ireland dinner event for business leaders from various sectors, including manufacturing, chemical, technology and finance. This was a useful opportunity to hear directly from leaders about their plans for the period ahead.

As part of the official World Economic Forum programme I participated in a public panel entitled "Europe is Treading Water - How Can it Make Waves?" This discussion focused on European growth and competitiveness, with an exchange of views on economic challenges and opportunities for Europe. I discussed with fellow panellists the need to focus on European competitiveness during these times of geopolitical uncertainty and outlined Ireland's priorities for our forthcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of this year.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Even the multimillionaires are now saying that the inequality in wealth is obscene and that the rich need to be taxed. At the time of Davos, hundreds of multimillionaires, and even one or two billionaires, released an open letter to the Davos delegates saying there should be wealth taxes imposed on them. The inequality in wealth is staggering. The 11 billionaires we have in this country, a number that is growing each year, have the same amount of wealth as two thirds of the population. It is absolutely disgusting. It is corrosive of democracy and it is fuelling conflict all over the world. A small tax on these people could generate billions that could give working people relief from the cost-of-living crisis, as we have long argued. Does the Taoiseach agree, when even the billionaires and the millionaires are saying what we have been saying for many years, which is that we should have a tax on the super rich? This should not be on ordinary workers but on the top 1% who have more in this country than €4.5 million. A small tax to fund a little bit of relief for working people would be justified.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The World Economic Forum is a place where billionaires and multimillionaires gather together with Heads of Government and Ministers. It is a place where the policy interests of the billionaire class are transmitted to their political representatives, the likes of the Taoiseach. In this country, the richest billionaires we have, who obviously are not resident, are the Collison brothers. They, like many of the tech bros, share a libertarian ideology about deregulation of everything, so-called YIMBYism, which has the happy coincidence of also maximising their ability to maximise their profit. The Taoiseach denied earlier that the shed-sit idea has come from the Collison brothers. He might tell me where this idea did come from if not from the Collison brothers. I do not mean these in terms of family members but in terms of the idea of these becoming long-term rentals. It is clear if we check the record that it is coming from Progress Ireland, which is funded by the Collison brothers. Seán Keyes, the

head of Progress Ireland, has claimed this idea, saying it played a role in this coming through, illustrative of the corporate capture of this Government.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I welcome the Taoiseach's report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum, and particularly the discussions he had on AI governance with multinational corporations and a lot of the tech companies. We have seen today the news about the loss of 720 jobs at Covalen, a subcontractor of Meta. As part of the Taoiseach's discussions at Davos, were there discussions about reskilling and retraining for people whose jobs may be replaced by artificial intelligence?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: We should put on the record that the Collison brothers have made an enormous contribution to this country in terms of job creation, and allowing their views to be heard is quite important in the debate on the future of technology. Further to my colleague Deputy Ó Cearúil raising the role of artificial intelligence and the recognition there is a paradigm shift happening with regard to technology and work, the World Economic Forum estimates that while 92 million jobs may be displaced over the next five years as a result of artificial intelligence, there is the potential for the creation of 170 million new jobs. I welcome very much the launch of *aiready.ie* by the Minister, Deputy Lawless, last week and the Government's AI and digitalisation strategy.

In terms of the Taoiseach's discussions, how are we in Ireland preparing to best be able to avail of the opportunities that AI presents and those 170 million new jobs that may be created?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Taoiseach's attendance at the World Economic Forum. It is an important platform for Ireland, particularly as part of the European Union where we benefit from being part of one of the largest and most influential trading blocs in the world. Our EU membership gives Ireland real weight on the global stage. It allows us to engage at forums like Davos, not as a small, isolated economy but as part of a powerful collective with real influence in trade and investment in global policy. In that context, it is important to acknowledge that without the European Union, Ireland would be far more limited in its ability to compete internationally, attract investment and influence global decisions. Given some of the anti-EU sentiment that has emerged in recent times, it is vital that we continue to clearly communicate just how important EU membership has been and continues to be for jobs, trade and economic opportunity. Can the Taoiseach outline how his engagement at Davos has been used to strengthen Ireland's position?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: A key discussion point at Davos this year was energy security and electrification. Were there any discussions in relation to the decoupling of gas from electricity prices? We have seen wholesale electricity prices go up 19% already this month as a direct consequence of the invasion of Iran but we really have not seen the impacts of the invasion of Ukraine being rectified on the electricity market, and gas prices set our electricity prices at the moment. Has the Taoiseach had any discussions, either with President von der Leyen or anyone else, in relation to the decoupling of gas from electricity prices? Is it something he is going to prioritise as part of his Presidency coming up in July?

Deputy John Connolly: We heard earlier the impression some like to portray of the World Economic Forum. I noted that in some of the discussions the Taoiseach attended and some of the engagements he participated in, there was widespread discussion on the whole area of social cohesion. Could he outline today some of what was discussed in terms of developing further cohesion among all nations and across nations? He might extend that into some discussions there may have been around the cost-of-living pressures, including issues of poverty and inequality, with a particular reference to the increased effort Europe is making to increasing competitiveness and productivity, the reforms that are needed in that area and how it is going to make sure living standards are improved through them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is a number of months since the World Economic Forum in Davos. In the past few weeks, however, the Taoiseach has met the German Chancellor and we have had the German foreign minister here in Dublin. We now know that Germany has once again blocked even the most modest EU action to suspend the EU-Israel trade agreement, which grants preferential access to a rogue state that is systematically violating international law, human rights norms and the very terms of that agreement. At the same time, countries like Spain and Italy have taken unilateral steps and shown that action is possible. This Government has done neither. There have been no domestic sanctions, no leadership at EU level and no meaningful consequences from Ireland for Israel's actions, its brazen contraventions of international law and its genocide. I want to ask the Taoiseach directly. Has he challenged Germany's position and role in shielding Israel from accountability? Will he move on the occupied territories Bill? When will this Government finally take even the most basic, moderate steps of introducing real sanctions rather than continuing a policy of delay and inaction?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Recent announcements regarding job cuts at Meta and possibly at one of the outsourcing firms, Covalen, serves as another wake-up call for Government that we need to diversify the economy and build a new economic model to attract new strands of foreign direct investment, FDI. Many of these job cuts have been attributed to AI and automation but the Government cannot allow this to be catalyst for further job losses across the sector. We must ensure that Ireland remains competitive and an attractive destination for FDI. What is the Government doing to build a new economic model and economic resilience that is underpinned by good jobs?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all accept that there has been an underestimation in relation to the cost of globalisation. Many see that their generation is now poorer than the generation before it. This is being exacerbated by artificial intelligence. We have seen the issue in relation to Meta and its subcompanies. We have seen 63 jobs lost in PayPal and, obviously, all that can be done has to be done for those workers. While I am told it does not relate to artificial intelligence, I think anybody who has seen job losses across the sector will accept that is the case. As much as there is hope into the future in relation to jobs that will be created, we need to look after those who need jobs now alongside the fact that the jobs people have do not necessarily have the same spending power they need. This is why we need cost of disability supports.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who have raised issues on this basic question, the first of whom was Deputy Boyd Barrett. Overall, it is interesting that Deputies Boyd Barrett and Murphy look at Davos through a certain prism. In terms of taxing the wealthy, the reality is that one third of tax revenue now is corporate tax. A lot of the companies I met in Davos pay huge amounts in corporate tax to the Irish Exchequer. Those are the realities-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach should see their profits

The Taoiseach: As corporate tax-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Look at their profits.

The Taoiseach: It is one third and it underpins a lot of spending on public services. Deputy Boyd Barrett's view is to attack them. That is his view. He does not really think they have value in the Irish economy even though some of them have been here for 50 years in terms of pharmaceuticals and life sciences. Many of them have been here. Microsoft came in in 1985. I go to Davos, as do the Irish Government and the IDA, to keep identifying and profiling Ireland's proposition and position and also to advocate for Ireland to make sure there are further investments coming to Ireland and to maintain the contacts. A lot of workers in our economy are working in those companies the Deputy would like to tax out of the country. That is the reality, and that is what the Deputy is proposing. Deep down, the Deputy does not really worry too much about the workers in those companies. I have never heard anything from Deputy Boyd Barrett or Murphy in any shape, sense or form that would underpin those workers in those companies.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about the workers today.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I talked about Kilmainham today.

The Taoiseach: I have never seen it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Deputy-----

The Taoiseach: It is a very anti-worker perspective in terms of the Deputies' attitude to the companies I am talking about more generally-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: He has to repeat the Kilmainham workers, though.

The Taoiseach: -----and the industry and the sector.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, I am sorry. One second-----

The Taoiseach: If I could, through the Chair, say that Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of equality. Ireland is more equal than most, actually, because of our progressive taxation

system. In fact, there are a lot of people railing against that now on various platforms and media saying that we are overtaxing but Ireland is a much more equal society than others because of a progressive income tax system.

On Deputy Murphy's remarks, I do not represent any billionaire class. That is just nonsense. It is stupid stuff to be articulating in here. People are really fed up with that. I just represent the country. I represent the working people of this country. I said this to the Deputy before. I remember the 1980s here when we had 17% unemployment. That is what motivates me to participate in these events and to always be hungry for more investment and more jobs in the country. I notice today the Collison brothers are in his target zone. They are his new target. They came through the Young Scientist competition many years ago as young leaving certificate students and one of them won it. They are particularly bright and able. They created a world product that is global in its reach and that is impactful. A lot of people celebrate that, and that is a very good achievement for them. They have brought back some of that investment to Ireland both in terms of the company and employment and in terms of investment in biodiversity and other projects. That is a positive. They do not have to.

There are many authors of the units in the back gardens and so on.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are one of them.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are ten other Deputies who are able to keep their mouths shut.

The Taoiseach: The humble TD has been as proactive about the back garden as the Collison brothers have. I will put it that way to him.

Deputy Paul Murphy: For the family members, not for renters.

The Taoiseach: It is not a new idea.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please. You are not special.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Ó Cearúil raised an issue. I was thinking of Mourinho when the Ceann Comhairle said that.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: Deputy Ó Cearúil described himself to me as the Maradona of Kildare hurling one time but anyway. I should not be betraying private conversations but there you are. Apparently, he was.

On the more serious issue of AI, we have the national AI strategy. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, as Deputy Byrne has raised, is on the skills side. The IMF said we are well positioned from a skills perspective, but AI is coming fast. There was not as big a discussion at Davos, in the events I attended. However, there have been significant discussions, particularly when I was in America in March, and some of the people that we sound out there are saying it will be very impactful, AI will change the nature of work and we need to be ready for that. We need

to work on that very quickly and very effectively. There may be alternative jobs created but we have to ensure that. We have to make sure that we attract AI investments to the country as well, and at all levels, from research to skills, to basic literacy in society and to SME adopting AI. So far, a lot of SMEs are adopting AI. Our AI literacy levels are relatively high. *Per capita*, we have one of the most skilled AI workforces in the world. We are well positioned in many respects.

The problem will be that AI will replace a lot of functions and activities and that will have an impact on employment. We are beginning to see signs of that. We need to be careful that we do not pin everything on AI in terms of some of the job announcements that we have witnessed because we also have positive job announcements. There are some very positive investments still happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are still ten Deputies. The Taoiseach has four and a half minutes.

The Taoiseach: Okay. I was dealing with Deputy Ó Cearúil and Deputy Byrne there as well. In response to Deputy Byrne, the National Economic and Social Council came through Cabinet today. It has a very good report on AI, which we will be publishing imminently and is well worth a read.

In response to Deputy McCormack, I am absolutely clear that EU membership is critical to Ireland, as is the EU Single Market. Parts of the EU Presidency will be deepening the Single Market and moving from a single market to one market is the objective. The competitiveness roadmap has been outlined by the European Council and by the Commission. It will fall to Ireland to implement many of the 17 files that they have identified as critical, from the savings and investment union to the 28th regime to enable SMEs to start up quickly across Europe. We have a lot on the agenda. We will go at it very determinedly in terms of the competitiveness agenda and in doing so, strengthen Ireland's position because we have always benefited ultimately from the Single Market, the Common Market and a one-market approach.

The decoupling of gas from energy prices, to answer Deputy Whitmore, was not discussed at great length at Davos - not at the events I was at - but it is being discussed. It has been discussed over the last five years at the European Union. The Iberian Peninsula, because of the very heavy preponderance of renewables there, was in a position in some instances to decouple. We have put that to the President of the European Commission, Dr. von der Leyen. She has looked at it. It is very complex. It is not simple or straightforward. It is an issue I have raised consistently over the last number of months. Some 50% of our electricity generation is now from renewables. We are making good progress onshore but it will be some time before we get the offshore wind generation through. That is still a work in progress because if you could disconnect gas, it would help in reducing prices more generally.

In response to Deputy Connolly, at these events social cohesion is always an issue, and is always something that is discussed, as is the issue of research and development and competitiveness.

The other issue was the pace of change within Europe itself. There is a general view that Europe is too bureaucratic. For instance, most of the industry people I met felt that Europe

was not as competitive as China, not as competitive as Asia and not as competitive as the US on many fronts, particularly on AI but also in other areas in terms of technology more generally. Some companies say they do not launch technology products in Europe and when they are doing a world launch, they exclude Europe because they feel it would be too difficult. That tells a story that should worry Europe in terms of its competitiveness.

In response to Deputy McGuinness, Ireland has taken steps with Spain. The way the Deputy presents the Ireland position on the Middle East defies what actually has happened. When I met Prime Minister Mustafa, all he said to me was, "Thank you for Ireland's stance." We should listen to the Palestinian representatives and Palestinians generally, who are very appreciative of the efforts of the Irish Government and the Irish people towards their situation. I have engaged with the German Chancellor and others to try to persuade people. Germany has a particular historic perspective in respect of the Middle East and that has governed that country's position in relation to it. However, it is very strong, to be fair to it, on the humanitarian side and probably gives more than most in terms of contributions on that front. There is an issue, however, which I discussed only recently, at the Council last week, in terms of the Israeli behaviour in Gaza, but also in Lebanon.

In response to Deputy Conway-Walsh on the need to diversify, I think I have covered that with Deputy Ó Cearúil. We have to remain competitive. We are attracting more AI investments into the country. There is a race on to be competitive here and there will be impacts. As Deputy Ó Cearúil said to me earlier, re-skilling and re-training will be key to it.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, globalisation is not over. If you were a rural inhabitant of China, you might think globalisation was a good thing. Half a billion people have been lifted out of poverty in China. It is still a work in progress.

Renewable Energy Generation

14. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore energy clearing house. [7890/26]

15. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore energy clearing house. [7891/26]

16. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore energy clearing house. [7909/26]

17. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore energy clearing house. [14278/26]

18. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore energy clearing house. [28397/26]

19. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [29768/26]

20. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [29770/26]

21. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [29773/26]

22. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [30323/26]

23. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [29036/26]

24. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [29039/26]

25. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [30357/26]

26. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [30492/26]

27. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [30496/26]

28. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the work of the Cabinet offshore wind energy clearing house. [30526/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 14 to 28, inclusive, together.

For compelling reasons relating to energy security, energy costs and climate change, the Government is committed to quickly reducing Ireland's reliance on fossil fuels. We are taking the necessary steps now to ensure Ireland's long-term energy security and unlocking opportunities for further economic growth. The development of a vibrant offshore wind sector is an important contributor to this objective. This task requires the collective skills and effort of the public and private sectors, working together, to make the most of this opportunity.

To meet our climate and energy ambitions, Ireland had committed to initially achieving 5 GW of installed offshore wind capacity, and an aim to deliver a total of 20 GW of offshore renewable energy by 2040. The 5 GW target will be met through a combination of those phase 1 projects that succeed in securing development consent, and from future offshore projects that will be developed within the south coast designated maritime area plan. The phase 1 developer-led projects include three successful under the State's first offshore renewable energy support scheme, ORESS 1, in 2023, and an additional two projects which are seeking merchant connections through a corporate power purchase agreement. These projects have all submitted planning proposals that are with An Coimisiún Pleanála.

ORESS 2 saw a shift to plan-led development, with the State's first spatial plan for offshore renewable energy, ORE, development, the south coast designated maritime area plan, DMAP, that identifies four sites off the south coast in which future ORE development will take place.

In 2024, the Government's second offshore wind auction, Tonn Nua, marked another important milestone in the State's offshore renewable energy ambitions. The Tonn Nua project will contribute 900 MW towards the 5 GW installed offshore wind capacity and will save 1.87 million tonnes of CO₂ annually over its anticipated 30-plus years of operation. The national designated maritime area plan for offshore wind approved by Government in 2025 will designate sites around Ireland's entire coast capable of delivering at least 15 GW of offshore wind by 2040, enabling Ireland to meet its 20 GW offshore targets. The plan is part of a programme for Government commitment to fast-track offshore wind development. This will significantly accelerate offshore wind development and will be one of the largest projects of our generation. We aim to adopt this national DMAP by the end of 2027.

Following on from constructive discussions at the Government industry forum on offshore renewable energy that I hosted last July, I established the offshore wind energy clearing house. The offshore wind energy clearing house is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and members include: Secretaries General from the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Climate, Energy and the Environment; Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; and so forth; and representatives from Wind Energy Ireland, Marine Renewables Industry Association, Renewable Energy Ireland and NOW Ireland. Its first meeting was in September last year and we have had a series of meetings since.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Earlier this afternoon, I attended an event down the street organised by Limerick Chamber of Commerce about the scope for developing renewable wind energy along the Shannon Estuary and up along the coastline of Clare. The panel of speakers spoke about the huge opportunities and the bright future for this area but they also dealt with some of the risks that this involves, delays that could be encountered and the non-configuration of some of the ports along the west coast.

4 o'clock

What potential does the Taoiseach see? Are there any timelines for when all this could be advanced? It is a game-changer. For a county that led the way with Moneypoint and Ardnacrusha and that has huge kV lines crossing it, the potential is massive. However, we really want to see it go from being a pipeline aspiration to something tangible that happens. Is there any good news the Taoiseach could give us today?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I welcome the establishment of the offshore wind energy clearing house. This shows how important the Government thinks energy security is and how important it is that we achieve it. As we all know, Ireland is dangerously exposed when it comes to energy. We are still far too reliant on imported fossil fuels, leaving our citizens and the economy at the mercy of global volatility. We have seen the consequences of that in recent weeks with soaring bills, uncertainty and pressure on households and businesses. We must move decisively from volatility to stability. Offshore wind is, as the Taoiseach will be aware, central to the transition, but we must match ambition with delivery. There are huge

opportunities for Ireland to scale up. Will the clearing house be expanded to look at all renewable energy options, including how we can scale up and de-risk renewable energy generation, produce things like green hydrogen, develop biomethane and use alternatives like hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, for transport, which allow us to replace imported fossil fuels across the economy and not just in electricity?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the establishment of the clearing house. We need to develop our offshore energy generation capability as quickly as possible. The only offshore turbines we have are in the territorial waters off the coast of my constituency. They were producing more energy 20 years ago than they are today. They are currently producing none. We know we will not reach our 2030 target, and I am worried about our level of commitment to building energy infrastructure.

I was stunned two weeks ago during oral questions when I asked about the date for the completion of the Celtic interconnector. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle was in the Chair and the Minister of State could not tell me the date the interconnector will be finished. We need to be realistic. We need to set out clearly that we will meet the targets in 2031 or 2032 and indicate how far along the line we are to meeting our targets for 2040 as well.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I will take ownership of the Arklow bank as well. This clearing house was established to identify the impediments and challenges, which the Taoiseach did not refer to at all. There are clear impediments to offshore wind. As Deputy Byrne stated, Arklow bank is no longer producing offshore wind energy. We were producing more 20 years ago than we are now. The interconnector to France is required, not only to export electricity but also in the event we need to import it. We heard recently that it is going to be delayed by two years. Can the Taoiseach tell me why the interconnector is going to be delayed? Does it give rise to concern for the Taoiseach that such a major project, which is necessary for the security of Ireland's energy - it is nearly a whisper in the media - is being delayed by two years? The project is hugely important, so will the Taoiseach tell us exactly why this has happened?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Is the clearing house just looking at projects currently in the planning system or is it looking at upcoming projects in the south coast DMAP area? Is it looking at future DMAPs? How is it approaching its work and what barriers are there? How is the clearing house resourced in the context of staff? Does it have enough people who have enough time available to them? Does it have an international focus? Is it rebuilding confidence of the international supply chain in Ireland as a place to invest? A lot of international confidence has fallen away and there are clear examples of that. Is the clearing house looking at that as well?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I have raised the issue of plug-in solar on many occasions. I would like an update on the terms and conditions relating to the south-west offshore wind auction, including in respect of the Li Ban development area. Has the Department examined whether the grid will be upgraded enough or whether the demand will be there? Right now, investor communities are not sure whether the grid is future-proofed enough and capable of handling the level of generation being planned.

I welcome the private wires Bill development in decentralising the grid in this area. This will allow us to push for long duration energy storage, battery energy storage systems and stuff to contain and reduce curtailment. Has the Government considered a more State-led approach, similar to the Norwegian model, in order that the Irish public will retain a long-term stake in infrastructure and wealth created from our natural resources as opposed to them being leased to private developers?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: There is no question that Ireland and the world have experienced one of the most significant energy shocks in decades. As discussed earlier, there are no fully operational offshore wind farms in Ireland, one of the windiest countries in the world, after decades of underinvestment and deprioritisation by successive Governments, including those the Taoiseach has been involved with. It has been a gross dereliction of duty to Ireland's energy security that offshore wind energy has not been more urgently developed. The Government's approach to wind energy, as it is to everything, is to rely on foreign capital to solve a domestic problem, driving up prices, selling off natural resources to foreign shareholders and, consequently, engaging in years of meetings, reports and discussions such as this, with no progress towards reduced energy prices for the Irish people. Today, Ireland is almost entirely reliant on foreign, unreliable and expensive energy supplies to survive. Will the Government reverse course and chart a path for public ownership and development of the largest untapped domestic energy resource in Europe?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is an absolute disgrace that many of the benefits of offshore wind will be given away to private for-profit companies, most of which are from other countries. Another problem that flows from the policy the Government has pursued in this area is the displacement of fishers. I received correspondence today from fishers in Dublin Bay who have had an injunction taken out against them by EirGrid, which is doing surveys in respect of offshore wind. Of course, a private company will benefit from it. Even though the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, licence it was granted stated it was not to interfere with fishers or their gear, EirGrid is now taking out an injunction against Dublin fishers who fish in Dublin Bay, saying their gear is in the way and the fishers must get their gear out of the way.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is even against EU law to displace one industry with another.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach should get on to EirGrid and tell it to leave the fishers in Dublin Bay alone.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The new cost-of-living crisis underlines the need to get to 100% renewable energy as quickly as possible. For Ireland, that means developing offshore wind. It is quite incredible that for the past 20 years, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments

have been in power and have failed to add any offshore wind energy to the grid. We have less offshore wind energy today than we did 20 years ago, despite all the talk of climate crisis and so on. Why? It is because the Government is relying on the private market and ignoring the lessons of our history, that large-scale energy projects should be publicly owned. It is a point the Minister, Deputy Chambers, made in his budget speech, praising the role of a fledgling State in building Ardnacrusha. We had 80% of our electricity from renewable energy at that point. We had energy security. We had almost zero emissions from our electricity system and we threw that all away to become 80%-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----dependent on fossil fuels. We cannot control what we do not own.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Government change course and switch to a public model?

Deputy Jen Cummins: We are feeling the shock in fossil fuel prices because of what is happening outside the country, and this really has to be the catalyst for us moving to renewables. I was shocked to hear that we used to produce more wind energy than we do now. As I said in this Chamber recently, if people go to the west coast, they will nearly be blown over. Therefore, I am at a loss as to why we do not have more wind energy.

The programme for Government indicates that the Government wants to deliver at least 5 GW of offshore wind energy by 2030, and there are greater ambitions out to 2050. How far along is the Government in the context of reaching that target? How likely is it to reach it? What is the plan for 2050? If there is anything standing in the way, what is it and how can it be removed? As other Deputies have said, it is not just offshore wind energy; it is also solar energy.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: As someone who comes from Erris in County Mayo, I have witnessed the Corrib Gas project and how little we have benefited from it in the local area or in County Mayo and beyond.

We advocated many years ago for that project to be in public ownership and to do it that way instead. We have an opportunity here with wind energy, but we should have progressed it much further by now. We have an opportunity to look at a public ownership model as well. There is an onus and a responsibility on us to do that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Before Christmas, the Government voted against proposed wind turbine guidelines from the Opposition. It did so because it said that the Government's proposal and guidelines would be brought forward early this year.

The Taoiseach: We did not say that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Spring is nearly over. Where are the guidelines? In 2024, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Harris, stated that wind turbine guidelines would be in place before the end of that year. Right across Ireland, companies are submitting applications for significant wind farms. The guidelines allow these companies to bypass local authorities and to build massive turbines very close to people's houses. The people in local and rural areas deserve guidelines. When will those guidelines be put in place?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have all been in here previously talking about the absolute necessity of using wind energy. We need to see major moves as regards offshore wind. Where is the clearing house in relation to where the deficits lie and in terms of Belfast Port being the only port that can facilitate-----

The Taoiseach: There is also Cork.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----the grid infrastructure? I echo what everyone else here has said. It makes absolute sense that there would be public payback. We cannot have a scenario where others make money off what is one of our major resources.

What are our plans for biogas, which Denmark has developed through anaerobic digestion, thereby reducing its carbon footprint by something like 40%?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Crowe opened proceedings with a heartfelt plea for the mid-west in the aftermath of having met with the Limerick Chamber of Commerce. I outlined earlier the progress that we have made in terms of auctions, planning permissions and applications that are in progress. I would be positive about this but, obviously, we have to work on the port there in terms of it being ready and capable and having capacity. A new ports strategy is being developed by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in respect of that. There is a strong infrastructure there, as the Deputy said, in the context of energy in the mid-west. I would be positive. Some Deputies have been overly negative, and deliberately so, for political reasons. We are making progress on offshore wind. One cannot wave a magic wand and just produce it, as some people seem to be suggesting, but a lot of progress has been made.

One of the reasons we set up the clearing house was to remove obstacles and barriers that could get in the way. It is composed of Secretaries General of Departments. Representatives from Eirgrid, the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and An Coimisiún Pleanála have attended meetings. They all have perspectives on this, and the industry has been brought in as well. This is the first time that the systemic issues that the industry might have are being dealt with. We put this into the programme for Government and have implemented it. Industry representatives meet with the Departments and the regulators, but not on specific projects. That is not allowed, so it is more systemic. Are there general issues that are impeding projects? How can we speed up permissions and make sure on that front, while also challenging the private sector as well in terms of making sure it will have its work done in respect of this? I have attended quite a number of the meetings, and a lot of progress is being made. It is also important to pull all of the Government together, including MARA, and make sure that everybody in the system understands that this is a national priority. That is one of the benefits of the clearing house, and the feedback has been very positive. I have to say that. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, chairs

an offshore wind delivery task force. He deals with certain issues at that level and again, he has brought industry in there to make sure we can work to get this over the line. It is extremely important for the future of the country.

Deputy Erin McGreehan mentioned the clearing house. She is absolutely correct that we have to move decisively away from the volatility that fossil fuels create. There has been a crisis almost decade by decade in respect of fossil fuels. A war in the Middle East or a war in Ukraine through the invasion by Russia and we have an energy crisis of one kind or another. I would point out that there are huge opportunities, which we have seen in the context of onshore wind. As I say to all Deputies, close to 50% of all of our electricity is generated by onshore wind. That was good Government policy. It was the policy of successive Fianna Fáil Governments, in the 2000s. Some Deputies decided to have a pop at us, but we created that transformation. We were not in government from 2011 to 2020.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Fianna Fáil has been in government for a very long time.

The Taoiseach: We were not in government for 20 years. We have been in government for the six years since 2020. There has been a significant change since 2020.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Fianna Fáil was in government for a long time before that.

The Taoiseach: I pay tribute to the Green Party's contribution to that as well. The three parties involved in the previous Government all contributed to moving the dial completely in the context of offshore wind. There still are a lot of challenges with offshore wind. Some of these have to do with supply chains, costs and inflation. Someone referenced the fact that the position of the United States in terms of wind energy has impacted on certain companies.

In terms of HVO, I am a believer in that for transport and have discussed it with the Minister. Pepsi in Cork has rooftop solar that helps it meet about 25% of its energy needs, but it also has HVO, which reduces carbon emissions by about 70%, as well as biofuels.

Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned anaerobic digestion, but Deputies on his side of the House and elsewhere will oppose anaerobic digestion.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the Taoiseach's plan for it? He is in government.

The Taoiseach: We are rolling it out. We have a plan. That plan has been published, but, let us be honest, it has met roadblocks from all Opposition Deputies. Politically, these are difficult issues. Onshore wind is a difficult issue, but we are all saying that we have to replace fossil fuels. There are tough political choices to be made, but there is a plan for that. We will continue to work on it.

Deputy Joanna Byrne mentioned the Celtic interconnector. Overall, it is a good story. I can recall signing the contract some years back. I met Eirgrid officials informally at an event in the French embassy and they indicated that there were technical issues. I will ask Eirgrid to brief the House fully in respect of the matter. My understanding was that it would be finished

next year. At the time that I met the officials, about three or four weeks ago, at the French Film Festival in Cork, which Eirgrid sponsored-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: They would be better off working on the interconnector.

The Taoiseach: -----they indicated that there were difficulties of a technical nature which could delay the project somewhat. There was not a single planning objection to the interconnector because of the work that Eirgrid did in terms of meeting with communities and so forth. We will get an update in respect of the matter in order that we are all fully and properly informed in relation to it. I take the Deputy's point.

The other issue on offshore wind will be the supply chain I mentioned. That is what we are testing. We are asking the private sector what its sense of that is, and we have discussed the matter with Prime Minister Starmer. There is a lot happening on the British side. We are assessing whether we can have complementarity on supply chains so that not everybody is chasing the same supplies and creating inflationary impacts and so on.

Deputy O'Rourke also mentioned the clearing house. It is properly resourced, and the feedback has been both good and positive. I outlined earlier who is on it and who attends its meetings. As a result of that, there is renewed confidence now. I am hearing from industry that there is a real sense of confidence, because of the clearing house, that the Government is really driving this and trying to remove the barriers and roadblocks.

In response to Deputy Heneghan, I have spoken to the Minister about plug-in solar. He is aware of the Deputy's interest in this and is very committed to it as well. The grid will be future-proofed. There is massive investment going into Eirgrid. Some €18 billion is being put in to make sure that it is ready for offshore wind.

In reply to Deputy Hayes, there is urgency. He said there is no urgency, but there is. There is a huge desire to get this done.

On the public ownership model, there are huge risks with such a model in terms of expertise, knowledge, know-how and all the rest of it. We might not have offshore wind for the next 20 years. We need to tease this out. That is the reality.

There is enormous risk to the Exchequer in terms of such a model.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Taoiseach, we are well over time.

The Taoiseach: There had been engagement with fishers and the representative organisations. I am not aware of the specifics Deputy Boyd Barrett referenced but I will check out the background to it.

Deputy Murphy raised a point. I do not accept that this model would work at all. There would be a huge risk to the taxpayer. There are issues around the capacity of the public service to do it and so on. Right now, we are on a trajectory where we will have offshore wind developed. We have built up the planning capacity and MARA's capacity and certain new agencies and so on to deal with this.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Conway-Walsh raised the Corrib gas project. The Corrib gas project has been very impactful and very successful, although everyone opposed it at the time. Sinn Féin opposed it - not the Deputy personally-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I wanted it in public ownership.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin always has an excuse to say no to something.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: No, it is not-----

The Taoiseach: The State does not do oil discoveries on its own and never has.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: No, but there has to be-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy Lawless raised a question about the clearing house for offshore wind, not onshore wind.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Taoiseach will end up making the tea for them.

The Taoiseach: That was the question that was tabled. On the onshore guidelines, I think the indication was that they would be produced in the autumn of next year. The Minister has done a number of planning statements on a number of issues to do with housing, which took priority, not least the planning exemptions. He is now looking at rural planning guidelines for housing also.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised Cork port. It will be ready. He is not paying attention, having asked the question. We will leave it at that. He was not paying attention.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Will the Taoiseach respond to Deputy Lawless's question?

The Taoiseach: I just did.

Our Rural Future: Statements

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teach as an deis seo chun labhairt faoi Ár dTodhchaí Thuaithe and the consultation process that is coming to an end in relation to the development of Our Rural Future, the new national development policy. I will provide the House with an update on what we have delivered under the policy over the past five years but I also want to

hear, as we finalise the consultation process on the new Our Rural Future, ideas and thoughts. I thank all who have already submitted to the process.

It is important to state at the outset that my approach and the approach of this Government is founded on a deep commitment to and ambition for rural Ireland. Our vision for rural Ireland clearly puts thriving, vibrant and inclusive rural communities at the very heart of our national development. Without sustained support and investment in our rural areas, we cannot deliver on the economic, social, cultural and environmental development that will underpin the quality of life of all our citizens. As such, rural development remains a key priority for this Government and it is imperative that we ensure that our towns, villages and more remote rural communities are able to maximise their potential now and into the future.

In bringing this commitment to life, Our Rural Future represented a milestone when it was published in 2021. It set out a whole-of-government approach to rural development that has provided significant investment and supports, strengthened local economies and improved the lives of many people in rural communities across Ireland. By drawing together supports and initiatives from across Government, a comprehensive national framework was put in place to deliver clear and tangible benefits to our rural communities over the lifetime of the first Our Rural Future policy.

One of the most high-profile commitments contained in the policy was the delivery of the national broadband plan, which was designed to ensure that rural Ireland would benefit from rapidly evolving developments in digital connectivity. Delivered by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport alongside National Broadband Ireland, the investment in our broadband infrastructure represents one of the most ambitious and forward-thinking initiatives ever undertaken by the State. I am glad to say that we are delivering on this level of ambition and investment. Based on almost €3 billion of public funds, the plan is delivering high-speed broadband to people all across the country, with an average of 4,500 premises per month being connected during 2025. The main infrastructure build is on schedule to be completed at the end of this year on time and under budget. I have no doubt that this kind of investment is making a real difference in the day to day lives of people in rural Ireland.

Similarly, Our Rural Future recognised the importance of issues such as rural transport. More than €700 million has been allocated in 2026 for maintenance and improvements to regional and local roads, while the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan has delivered more than 180 new or enhanced services since its launch in 2022, substantially increasing passenger journeys and access to rural bus services. Such investment is improving connectivity between towns and villages, supporting access to employment, education and healthcare - issues that are absolutely central to quality of life in rural Ireland.

Rural enterprise and support for the development of the rural economy was a further central plank of our approach over the past five years. With this in mind, the policy provided the framework for the delivery of targeted growth and support for regional employment and enterprise growth. Initiatives such as the roll-out of the regional enterprise plans model, the work of LEADER groups in supporting local business, and targeted support from local enterprise offices and enterprise agencies, have collectively supported rural businesses to grow, innovate and attract investment. In addition, there have been major policy initiatives developed over the lifetime of Our Rural Future 2021-2025, including revisions to the national planning framework and national development plan; the launch of Food Vision 2030, which aims to

make Ireland a world leader in sustainable food systems; and the national tourism policy statement, which will work to ensure that every region in Ireland can continue to benefit from growth in tourism.

My own Department has also been at the forefront in ensuring that a robust policy framework underpins our ambition and our investment. I thank all of the officials in my Department for their work and commitment to this mission. For example, we have delivered the first ever national outdoor recreation strategy which allowed us to fully realise the potential that is inherent in the outdoor recreation sector. Expenditure in the economy linked to outdoor recreation amounted to €2.2 billion in 2024. I am determined to ensure that rural areas can continue to derive the economic, social, health and environmental benefits that will arise from our continued investment in this vital sector. I was delighted to be able to launch the outdoor recreational plans for counties Sligo and Mayo over the past weekend.

In 2022, my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, launched the town centre first policy. The town centre first approach is now being implemented in rural towns and villages all across the country, backed up by significant levels of investment from across Government.

Our ambitious national islands policy, Our Living Islands, was also launched under the umbrella of Our Rural Future. I am glad to say that implementation of the actions within that policy is now being progressed. These policy frameworks clearly demonstrate our commitment to rural Ireland, and our desire to support the narrative surrounding rural areas as centres of opportunity, growth and potential. We have continued to prioritise rural investment in the new programme for Government, and in the specific pledge to build on the momentum achieved under Our Rural Future by publishing and implementing the next iteration of the policy from 2026.

While it is vital that these new policy frameworks are in place, it remains crucial that we in government continue to back up our policies with sustained and targeted investment. Within my own Department, for example, the rural development investment programme, which includes schemes such as the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, the outdoor recreation investment scheme, CLÁR, and LEADER, has delivered unprecedented levels of investment in recent years, which I will come back to in more detail shortly.

What is important now is that we build on what we have delivered and achieved under the first Our Rural Future policy.

That is why I have prioritised the development of the new Our Rural Future policy for the period 2026 to 2031. The new policy will be based on a number of central principles that reflect our experience over recent years and also take into account best international practice. The new policy will take a people-centred approach to rural development, placing people who live in rural Ireland at the very centre of our policy development and implementation. It will take a place-based approach that recognises that not all rural areas are the same. It will clearly recognise the interdependence of our urban and rural areas. It is not a matter of rural development or urban development. Both can live together and our approach sees support for rural areas as central to national well-being. The new policy will also continue our focus on a

whole-of-government approach. An integrated approach across all levels of government is essential to realising our ambition.

The development of the new policy has been firmly rooted in consultation. Only by talking to and, more importantly, listening to people in rural Ireland can we fully understand what needs to be done, how to do it and when it should be done. With this in mind, an extensive national stakeholder and public consultation process has been in place for a year now. It was based on three linked stages.

First, an online survey sought responses to more than 40 questions covering the wide range of opportunities and challenges that would face rural communities and economies over the next five years.

Second, informed by the survey results, a series of eight public and stakeholder events, including one *trí Ghaeilge*, were held around the country and online to discuss in more depth issues such as the rural economy, balanced regional development, and the revitalisation of rural places.

Finally, an open, public written consultation was held to seek the views of stakeholders and citizens on a draft policy paper that outlined the key areas of focus for the new policy that have emerged from the earlier engagements. More than 270 responses were received to this call, bringing the total number of participants in the consultation process to well over 2,000. Further bilateral engagements have taken place with key stakeholder organisations. My officials and I have met sporting organisations, including the GAA demographics committee, rural development groups, local authorities, regional assemblies and many others to ensure the widest range of inputs into the policy-making process. It was also vital to ensure that the voices of young people were included in the consultation process. With this in mind, the 2025 edition of the Rural Youth Assembly, itself an initiative born out of the first *Our Rural Future* policy, was focused on exploring the priorities of those growing up in rural Ireland.

It was important that we included some objective analysis of the current rural policy environment. The OECD was commissioned to undertake a review of the Irish context and, over the course of a number of months, it engaged with more than 500 rural stakeholders and Government officials. That review was published in February of this year and has played an important part in informing the new policy. In it, the OECD acknowledges the substantial progress made in Ireland, both under *Our Rural Future* and more broadly since the establishment of my Department. Ireland is recognised as being unique among OECD countries in its whole-of-government approach to rural development and for the high levels of awareness and visibility given to rural needs across Departments. The review also provided a series of recommendations and challenges for consideration, notably on supporting rural enterprise, service delivery and improving the effectiveness and use of rural intelligence and data.

I firmly believe that the extensive time and effort, including today's discussions, that have been invested in the consultation process will ensure a more effective and targeted policy for 2026 to 2031.

So far, throughout our engagements, a number of clear issues have been identified as being of primary concern to people living and working in rural Ireland. These include some of the key strategic priorities that underpin rural development, such as increasing the availability and

affordability of rural housing and the essential infrastructure and services to support population growth in rural towns and villages. We have also heard loud and clear the need to continue to support rural businesses and strengthen the rural economy, particularly tourism, which came through as having rich potential for growth. There were also strong inputs at all stages of the consultation on the need to build strong, resilient and empowered rural communities while also protecting and sustaining our unique natural environment.

Informed by the results of the consultations and the OECD's review, the new Our Rural Future will be based around five policy pillars, focusing on rural places, rural people, rural services, the rural economy and the rural environment. In addition to the policy setting out the key priorities in each pillar, a series of detailed actions is being developed, which will be outlined in an accompanying action plan covering the initial period until the end of 2028. This action plan, as I have said many times, will be a whole-of-government approach and I wish to place on record my sincere thanks to my Government colleagues who have already come forward with impactful and ambitious proposals for inclusion. I once again use this opportunity to challenge them to be more ambitious in their proposals. A second action plan will follow to cover the remainder of the policy from 2029 to 2031, which will allow for the policy to be responsive to any emerging needs over that time.

Of course, the funding and supports delivered by my own Department will have a critical role to play in the implementation of the new Our Rural Future. These programmes are designed to support the delivery of projects in communities right across rural Ireland that will revitalise our rural towns and villages. Investment will help to provide the necessary facilities and infrastructure in communities to assist in attracting people to live, work and invest in rural areas while aiming to ensure that those rural communities can prosper in the years ahead.

In budget 2026, I secured a €611 million allocation for my Department. This is the highest ever budget allocation for our Department, which demonstrates the Government's continuing commitment to investing in rural towns, villages and communities. Within this investment, the rural development investment programme is continuing to provide an unprecedented level of funding for rural Ireland. Indeed, there are a number of funding schemes currently open for applications designed to directly support our rural communities.

In February, I launched a new call for category 1 applications under the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF. This fund supports ambitious large-scale projects designed to regenerate rural areas and has allocated total funding of €440 million to 164 major strategic capital projects since 2020. Only in the last fortnight, I was delighted to be joined by An Taoiseach to officially open the new Campas Íosagáin Digital Hub i mBaile Bhuirne, Contae Chorcaí. With investment of over €3.4 million from the RRDF, we will deliver a state-of-the-art enterprise development, training and research facility and new gTeic hub by restoring the former derelict site of Coláiste Íosagáin. Last week, I opened the heritage-led restoration of Market House and Market Square in Portarlinton in County Laois. Building on the community-owned Portarlinton regeneration strategy, this project will have a transformational impact on the town and bring a strategically placed and historically important building back into use for local people and for local organisations.

Since 2020, over 1,000 projects have been supported by funding allocations of €135 million under my Department's town and village renewal scheme. These projects are significant local investments that are rejuvenating town centres, driving economic growth and town footfall,

combating dereliction and vacancy, and boosting the tourism and heritage potential of our rural areas. I was delighted last Thursday to open the restored Duncannon Fort in Wexford, which was supported by €500,000 in town and village renewal scheme funding. This project involved the renovation of three buildings to provide new public amenities, community buildings and a reception area. This stunning site in an historic location will help deliver on its tourism potential for Wexford and bring tangible benefits to the local community.

Likewise, over 1,500 projects have been allocated total funding of €65 million under the CLÁR programme since 2020. The 2026 edition of CLÁR opened for applications in March, alongside the publication of the review of CLÁR areas committed to in the programme for Government.

That review has resulted in 110 new electoral divisions being designated as eligible for CLÁR funding and brings the total population in areas covered by CLÁR to over 1 million people for the first time.

Earlier this year, I announced an increased allocation of €17.5 million under the local improvement scheme, LIS, to help meet the high level of demand for works on private roads across the country. The €150 million allocated under the LIS since 2020 has funded work on over 3,000 road projects, benefiting over 16,000 people. I have already mentioned our commitment to supporting rural areas as world-class destinations for outdoor recreation. This ambition has been backed up by an investment of over €110 million since 2020 to develop outdoor recreational amenities. I am happy to confirm that I intend to open a new round of funding under this scheme in the coming weeks.

The longest running component of the rural development investment programme is the LEADER programme. Its bottom-up approach to rural development was introduced by Commissioner Ray MacSharry and has now been operating successfully in rural Ireland for over 35 years. I am absolutely sure that everyone in the House will be aware of the vital supports delivered by their local LEADER groups over that time. The LEADER programme forms part of a wider package of EU co-funded supports contained in the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Negotiations in relation to the development of a new multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which will include continued rural development investment, are well under way at EU level. It is a priority for this Government that these negotiations see the continuation of a well-defined and fully funded suite of supports for the CAP from 2028. Our farming community remains at the heart of rural Ireland and we must continue to support the development and viability of the sector in producing world-class food and delivering important environmental benefits. Within this context, I am also prioritising the ongoing funding of the LEADER programme and will continue to advocate strongly at home and at EU level for increased funding for the next round post 2028. I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Martin Heydon, and the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, in this process.

The new Our Rural Future policy will commit to continued investment under the rural development investment programme. We are also listening to our delivery partners and to local communities to ensure that we make improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of these schemes moving forward. In addition to the rural development investment programme, a range of other investment programmes are being administered by my Department that will continue to expand and deliver in the coming years and will directly benefit rural areas. A new round of funding with €25 million under the community centre investment fund, CCIF, focusing on the

refurbishment of community centres at the heart of lives in all of our communities, was opened on 26 March. This will build on the €110 million already allocated to date, ensuring that our community centres are fit for purpose for years to come. I acknowledge the work of the Compass community centre in Portlaoise, which I visited last week and which received funding under this programme. I was struck by the range of local groups making use of the centre, and I am committed to ensuring that such local groups around the country have the modern and safe facilities that they need.

Our rural communities are also being directly supported by programmes such as the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and the community services programme, CSP. Under budget 2026, I was happy to secure increased funding of €4 million for the community services programme, which brings its annual allocation to €59.4 million. Over 400 community organisations now benefit from the increased funding I announced, alongside my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Jerry Buttimer, at the end of last year. We have now opened a new call for applications to this scheme. Budget 2026 also saw funding of €74 million for SICAP and similar social inclusion supports and the inclusion of a new funding stream of €5 million for an urban programme to target particular centres of disadvantage. These developments are helping us to ensure that social inclusion and equality continue to be at the core of the approach to supporting rural communities.

One of the major achievements under the first Our Rural Future was the substantial investment in remote working, particularly the establishment of the connected hubs network. Having achieved the target of 400 hubs on *connectedhubs.ie*, and to further leverage the benefits of hub working, we will continue to develop and expand that network.

Táimid ag leanúint freisin lenár n-infheistíocht sna ceantair Ghaeltachta agus inár n-oileáin amach ón gcósta. Mar shampla, tá obair ar siúl anois ar fhorbairt cé nua €35.7 milliún ar Inis Oírr. Tá an tionscadal seo ar cheann de na príomhghcealltanais a rinneadh faoin phlean forbartha náisiúnta, PFN, agus is í an infheistíocht is mó a rinne mo Roinn féin riamh. Trí infheistíocht straitéiseach, nuálaíocht, agus comhpháirtíochtaí áitiúla sna seacht gceantar Gaeltachta ar fud na tíre, leanfaidh Údarás na Gaeltachta lena n-obair le cinntiú go mbeidh fostaíocht agus deiseanna forbartha ar fáil i gceantair thuaithe imeallacha. I measc na n-infheistíochtaí PFN i dtionscadail Ghaeltachta, tá maoiniú á chur ar fáil i gcomhair Ionad Gaeilge nuálaíoch ar Shráid Fhearchair i mBaile Átha Cliath agus i gcomhair forbairt scoil samhraidh Ionad Oideachais agus Óige Indreabháin i nGaeltacht Chonamara.

I eagerly anticipate the new Our Rural Future policy. There will be an expectation concerning the document and we will continue to try to deliver on the ambitions that come with that expectation. My officials are working intensively with Departments across the Government on the new policy, with a particular focus on meaningful and ambitious commitments in the first action plan, which will cover the period to 2028. The policy and the associated action plan are nearing completion. I will continue to work with colleagues to finalise outstanding issues in this regard before bringing a draft of the policy to Government ahead of the summer.

I conclude by addressing the narrative that rural Ireland is declining or, worse still, dying. This evidence does not support that narrative, nor does the ambition of many of those living in, and working with, rural communities. Last week's publication by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, of the Urban and Rural Life in Ireland 2025 report shows that over one third of our

population is living in a rural area, with the population of highly rural-remote areas increasing by 6.4% between 2016 and 2022. This growth is posing challenges in terms of housing, including in Gaeltacht areas, infrastructure and services, which we in government must address. Employment in rural areas is strong, incomes are rising and for many families, rural Ireland is providing a much better overall quality of life. These findings align with the analysis of the OECD, but I am not comfortable enough nor naive enough not to know there are significant variations within these statistics. There are areas facing particular challenges that we must recognise and act on. Ensuring the sustainability and attractiveness of all rural areas is my key priority, the key priority of the Government and will be the key priority for the development of our new Our Rural Future policy.

I am very proud to be from rural Ireland and very proud to represent rural Ireland. Our rural areas must be and will always be at the centre of who we are as a country. While much has been delivered, my commitment is to ensure that we build on the last five years, continue to invest in our rural communities, continue to engage in our rural communities and continue to ensure a whole-of-government approach to deliver for rural Ireland. I have no doubt that this commitment is shared across the Chamber.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: We are here discussing the consultation process, but if we are being honest about it, rural Ireland does not lack for consultation or for strategies and plans. What it actually lacks is delivery, urgency and alignment across Government policy. This is where the Government has failed.

The Minister is the one tasked with rural-proofing this Government. He is meant to be the voice at the Cabinet table defending rural Ireland, so this is a fair question to ask him. Where was Our Rural Future when the national development plan doubled down on urban concentration and left rural communities fighting for basic investment? Where was the Minister when housing policies stalled again and again and rural housing delivery was effectively frozen in large parts of the country, an Ghaeltacht san áireamh? Where was the Minister when budget decisions reduced investment in rural development, including cuts to LEADER? Where was the Minister when families in rural Ireland were hit first and hardest by the fuel crisis, calls for meaningful support were ignored and workers, farmers, contractors and hauliers were being demonised? Where was the Minister and this policy when fishing communities faced devastating quota cuts? Where was Our Rural Future when post offices were being closed right, left and centre, when GP clinics were being closed, when the, at this stage, annual school transport chaos was unleashed across the State every August and September, when LEADER funding was being cut, when local roads budgets failed to keep pace with construction inflation, when ambulances and gardaí were rarely available on time and when a generation was locked out of home ownership and sent packing to Dublin or Dubai?

Rural residents have seen no evidence of a Minister or indeed a strategy at the Cabinet table successfully arguing its case or actually standing up for communities. The reality is this; there is a growing gap between what Government says about rural Ireland and what it actually does. Last week, former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said the quiet part out loud. In doing so, he belied an approach that has underpinned Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's attitude to rural communities for far too long in this State. The consultation paper published last year contained no targets, timelines, funding commitments or clear delivery mechanisms. It asked communities for their views but did not set out how any of these things will be delivered. That reflects a wider

problem as far as I am concerned. The programme for Government, national planning framework, national development plan and housing plan are not aligned with the stated ambition of the consultation, the last strategy or indeed the Minister's strategy of supporting rural Ireland. In fact, any objective analysis would suggest they are working against it. The OECD report on the old rural policy made this clear. It has identified centralised decision making, weak local delivery capacity and a lack of accountability as structural weaknesses in Ireland's rural policy. It also rightly identifies housing as a central determinant of rural development. That is a core issue that has long been ignored.

Housing is now the defining challenge for rural Ireland. Communities are losing young people, population decline is accelerating, local services, schools and clubs are under pressure, the GAA's own national demographics report confirms that many rural communities are already experiencing decline that is undermining their long-term sustainability, and yet housing delivery remains concentrated in urban areas, insufficient in scale and misaligned with rural needs. Rural Ireland is facing a double burden; too little new supply and often poor existing housing stock. At the same time, infrastructure deficits are holding communities back.

Water and wastewater capacity is preventing development in towns and villages, transport options are limited, road networks are underfunded and digital connectivity remains inconsistent. Without addressing those fundamentals, no rural strategy will succeed. The question is not about consultation; it is about whether Government is willing to change direction. We in Sinn Féin have made our position clear any time we have spoken about this, which has been often. Housing must be central to the next rural strategy. That means annual rural housing delivery targets, a serviced-sites programme that works and a sustained investment in water and wastewater infrastructure. It means aligning housing delivery with employment patterns and regional economic development and ending the contradictions between planning policy and rural sustainability. We have put forward plans for additional gardaí, enhanced plans for primary care and meaningful steps to reduce deprivation and growing energy poverty. We need clear targets, defined timelines, assigned responsibility and annual reporting to the Dáil in the new iteration of the plan. Without that accountability this will simply be another strategy that describes problems rather than solving them. It will be another thing to gather dust on top of the shelf somewhere. This requires an infrastructure-first approach. Investment in water, transport and connectivity must come ahead of and alongside development, and there must be targeted supports for Gaeltacht, island and coastal communities, recognising the unique pressures they face. Rural island does not need another consultation process that leads nowhere, it needs leadership at Cabinet, alignment across Government, delivery and an about-face from this Government.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed rural Ireland. Along with Independents, they pay lip service to these communities but turn their back on them time and again. That is the reality. There is a real anger out there that has been simmering below the surface. It is an anger that boiled up when the Government abandoned people in the face of the fuel crisis. When people screamed out for help, it turned a deaf ear. However, this did not start this month or even this year. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been chipping away at rural life for decades. Rural Ireland is being closed down one basic service at a time: banks, post offices, Garda stations, you name it, the basics any community needs to survive. Pick a way to measure it such as wages, infrastructure or opportunities, whatever way you cut it, people in

counties like my own of Donegal are being left behind. People do not need to look at statistics; they feel it every day. They feel it when they are talking to their child on Zoom who is in Australia, and when they are walking down the village that gets quieter every year.

Last week, the mask clearly slipped last week when the former Fine Gael Taoiseach looked down his nose at rural Ireland, when he accused the hard-working people of rural Ireland of sponging off the State. These are the people who get up in the dark and head out in all weathers to make sure there is food put on his table. Leo Varadkar's comments need to be a turning point where any doubt is cast aside that the decline of rural Ireland is Government policy. However, let me say, policies and Governments can change and the tide can turn. An Ireland of thriving rural communities is possible where people live, work and build their own homes in their own communities, where we value our family farm and contractors and where young people do not feel there is no future but are enabled to live their lives in the communities where they were born, like the generations before them were able to do, where our Gaeltacht and island communities is thriving. This is not about narrowing people's horizons but broadening them. It is about breathing life into the heart and soul of Ireland, the communities that make up our country. Rural communities, just like any other, deserve to survive and thrive.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Everybody in this place knows what a district electoral division, DED, is. A district electoral division is usually half a parish. Everybody in politics knows about them and how they work. When the Central Statistics Office does an analysis it does an analysis of how many people there are per square km. It looks at them in DEDs. In many of the parishes around me, there are approximately 20 people per square km. That is the average. When we look at international statistics, they all tell us that if there are fewer than 35 people in an area per square km, that area is in terminal decline. There are many areas in my part of the world in terminal decline because the people are not there. The reason the people are not there is because the services are not there and there is no emphasis to try and regenerate those communities. Sometimes when you go to a place that is near a town, it has a better population of 35 or 40, but in many of them they are down at the level of 20. When they are down at that level they do not have enough people to keep the pub going at the crossroads, and the post office and the school are going to close. The local football club is in trouble. All of these things need more people, and to have them we need more people living in rural areas, and that means housing in rural areas. Housing is the key thing we need to look at. If we do not put practices in place - in a lot of these places there are no towns and we are talking about one-off rural housing - to allow people to come and live in their community then we have serious problems.

Last week, the Government brought in a notion it was going to allow people to build a little house at the back of the house, in the garden. Many people in rural areas are asking why they are allowed to build a house behind the house to put the auld pair into, but they cannot build a house for themselves in the field next to it. The Government needs to cop on that that is a problem.

We need to recognise that people from rural areas want to come back there. They may go away and get educated and get good jobs and live in the city for a while, but they want to come back and live in their rural area, send their children to the school they went to, and for their children to play with the football club they played for. Policies and opportunity stop them from doing that. If we are going to turn this around the Government has to come up with policies

which will actually deal with those issues. The primary one it needs to come up with are policies that deal with ensuring people can build a home in their own community. I have given the Minister the statistics. Go to the DEDs where there are fewer than 35 people per square kilometre, and those are the areas the Government needs to put the emphasis on to ensure we can do something for people who live in rural areas.

Deputy David Cullinane: I acknowledge the consultation process on rural future policy. I raise the delay in funding for vital Local Link services in rural Waterford, particularly affecting Portlaw, Kilmacthomas, Mahon Bridge and Lemybrien. These services were expected under the National Transport Authority's "Connecting Ireland" plan to be properly funded. However, communities in Waterford are now being told they may have to wait until 2027. This is a major setback for rural Waterford and communities which have waited long enough for proper public transport. My colleague, an Teachta Conor McGuinness, spoke earlier about the simmering anger in rural Ireland because of the dependency on the car. We do not have public transport, we have rising fuel costs, a Government that is not doing enough and these types of setbacks with Local Link services not being properly funded. My colleague, Councillor Catherine Burke, has been very clear on this and has described this delay as a major set back for Waterford and the Comeragh district in particular. She is right. This is not a minor inconvenience. It is about whether people can get to work, students can get to education, older people can remain connected and whether those without access to a car can attend medical appointments or reach basic services. I imagine the Minister agrees Local Link is a lifeline. In rural communities, public transport is not simply about convenience. It is about equality, independence, inclusion and ensuring people living in villages and rural communities and areas are not cut off because they do not drive or cannot afford a car, or no longer feel able to drive.

5 o'clock

We cannot speak in this House about balanced regional development, climate action, reducing car dependency and tackling rural isolation while at the same time allowing essential rural transport projects to slip to 2027. Waterford needs these services now. People of Portlaw, Kilmacthomas, Mahon Bridge, Lemybrien and, I imagine, many more rural communities in Waterford, across the south east and across the State deserve certainty and not delay. I support the call of my colleague, Councillor Catherine Burke, for Waterford City and County Council and, indeed, the Comeragh district to write to the National Transport Authority to lobby the Minister for Transport. I am appealing to the Minister to do what he can to raise these issues with the relevant Ministers to make sure those rural communities in Waterford get the Local Link services they deserve.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: There is a certain irony in the Minister launching a consultation on his rural future policy just weeks after we saw widespread protests across rural Ireland and his colleagues in government flatly refused to listen to, or engage with, the very people from struggling rural communities. Communities like mine in south Kilkenny do not need more strategies or consultation processes. We need the Government to start delivering for ordinary people.

Only recently, for example, we got the announcement that a vital bus route connecting rural villages is to be stopped from the beginning of May. After that, Bus Éireann reviewed the route and confirmed it meets the demand requirement but Bus Éireann is still planning to cut this

service despite the review. The Minister's backbench colleague came out and told people there was great news – he had got the bus sorted. That was a load of bull. Rural communities want more than the crappy promises of some backbencher. They want, and they deserve, a commitment from the Minister and Bus Éireann that these services will be continued and protected. This was a service used by workers, students and the elderly. So much for the Minister's talk of enhancing public services in rural Ireland.

We have seen it time and again - big strategies with long lists of action points but little to no follow-through on delivery. Access to housing is the number one issue in rural Ireland. Those with land are being locked out of building because, across Carlow and Kilkenny, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have completely failed to invest in fit-for-purpose water and waste infrastructure. Over the weekend just gone, businesses in Ferrybank had to close shop, and today they are closed again, because of these failures.

People want to live in the community they grew up in. They want to know that their children have access to creche places, school places, a local GP and local sports clubs - a sense of community. I do not think any of those are unrealistic expectations but the reality is that, for so many in rural Ireland, they are. If you live in rural Ireland, all of those - a GP, sports clubs, a school place, especially if your child has additional needs - are limited resources.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputy, time is up.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: The number of parents forced to travel long distances to secure a school place for their child is shocking. It is deeply wrong that children are not provided for in their own community. People in rural Ireland are sick of being left behind by this Government year after year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Now we have the Labour Party slot. Deputy Mark Wall has ten minutes.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the opportunity today to speak on the Our Rural Future policy consultation. Over the last number of years I have been involved in and seen the positive impact that investment in rural places can have on towns, villages and rural communities throughout Kildare South. We are seeing investment in places like Athy, with Emily Square and the Shackleton Experience which the Minister was down to visit himself and which he officially opened. The Athy food hub obviously must be mentioned as well. There are more projects coming up, like the fabric and textiles design hub in Monasterevin. However, there is scope for much more investment to ensure rural communities are thriving and that they are places that people want to stay in and continue to have pride in.

In my own submission on behalf of the Labour Party, I highlighted the need for the Government to continue to provide funding for converting old schools and community buildings into community hubs, public libraries and remote working hubs, given the lack of vital infrastructure in some rural towns in south Kildare. As the Minister will be very much aware, Kildare has one of the fastest-growing populations in the country, yet the infrastructure is simply not enough to meet the demands of the population. Without doubt, utilising old and out-of-use buildings will help address this infrastructure gap. Many of Ireland's community

halls are decades old and in urgent need of modernisation to allow them to continue to be a focal point for communities. The Government should expand community hall grants to include older buildings, and local authorities should carry out an audit on these buildings detailing their current state, use and potential for refurbishment and upgrade. This is something my own local authority, Kildare County Council, has carried out.

A prime example of what needs to happen in rural Kildare is the Clongorey and District Community Association. Yesterday I had a chance to visit this vibrant rural community and meet Sandra and Maureen. The Clongorey and District Community Association is a volunteer-led, not-for-profit organisation that plays a crucial role in bringing people together in their rural community in Clongorey, Newbridge, County Kildare. For over 25 years, the centre has supported a wide range of activities, including sports and fitness through Clongorey FC and local walking and running groups, social and educational activities such as bingo, card games, a history group, book club and many other areas including youth development and introducing children to digital skills and, most importantly, introducing them to community life as well. Its long-running fixtures include a St. Stephen's Day charity walk and run which has operated for over 30 years. However, the reason I was there yesterday is that its current facility, a second-hand Portakabin, is now in serious disrepair and no longer fit for purpose. Their vision is to redevelop the centre into a modern, accessible, and energy-efficient community support centre that will enhance inclusion, promote health and well-being and support lifelong learning and community engagement for all ages. As a key next step, they are seeking to undertake a feasibility study to identify the most effective and sustainable way to deliver this redevelopment and ensure it meets the growing needs of their community. I ask the Minister and the Department to support this desire and allow this great community to future-proof their association, which is replicated throughout south Kildare.

There has been a lot of commentary this evening on the need for rural housing. For many months now, we have been informed a new rural housing policy is to be announced by the Government yet I continue to deal with rural people who have grown up in the area, including farming communities, who are unable to get a one-off house for themselves. The issue of serviced sites has been raised already. Serviced sites could be a solution for many rural communities. They could sustain the schools. Today I dealt with two schools in County Kildare which are unfortunately losing staff because their numbers are decreasing. Even with the population of Kildare, this is what is facing so many rural schools. It is simply not sustainable for these rural communities. The local GAA clubs are suffering, as are the local communities.

A lack of proper infrastructure across rural communities is becoming a major barrier to creating strong and diverse rural communities, particularly in transport, childcare and schools, as we mentioned in our submission. As TD for Kildare South, I have been frequently highlighting the carparks that Ireland's motorways have turned into, particularly along the M9, M7, N7 and M50. The Government must greatly expand, and invest in, rural public transport. I agree with what the Minister said in his opening statement - that rural transport is central to the quality of life in many rural communities. In fact, it is a gamechanger. Some of the rural transport that has been provided in my own area has allowed those in rural Kildare to obtain employment in Kildare Village, for example. However, we have seen that stalling, as others have mentioned. I have been engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, on a number of routes that are not taking off. The route 893 will hopefully service the village of

Suncroft has been promised for almost two years but not yet delivered. Now we are being told it will be a number of months still. This will be a gamechanger for the village of Suncroft. We have to see continued investment in, and no stalling on, these much-needed rural transport services. As the Minister said himself, it is central to the quality of life in those rural communities. There is also an urgent need to look at official bus stops and bus shelters throughout rural communities. These must be addressed. It is simply not good enough for people to be standing on the side of the road, which I see every morning when I come to Dáil Éireann, because of the lack of bus stops.

I welcome that the local and community improvement scheme has seen investment, but it must go further. I previously raised with the Minister the issues with people who have one holding or are funding their own properties for farming. They are not getting the benefit of this grant. I ask the Minister to look at that because I believe that can make a difference to those holdings.

Of course, I have to use the opportunity to tell the Minister about the many people who have been in contact with my office about the childcare crisis across Kildare and areas that are becoming childcare deserts, like Kilcullen, Newbridge and Kildare town. A lack of available childcare places has now become the biggest barrier for parents trying for childcare or after school places. I frequently raise this with Government and the Minister for children. Parents are having to reduce their working hours or give up work entirely. In some cases, parents have raised concerns that they may have to move away to be closer to family due to the lack of childcare. This is a massive issue in rural areas and it can lead to people having less disposable income to spend in the local area and could lead to depopulation of rural towns and villages. The Government is telling us that it is coming up with eight pilot schemes for a public childcare model. I encourage the Minister to talk to the Minister, Deputy Foley, about ensuring that some of those pilot schemes are located in rural areas so we can see people remain where they want to remain in their local communities.

I have also seen the huge benefit of the senior alert scheme, which I want to raise with the Minister again. He has heard me raising that before. These schemes are a must for our older population in rural communities. In County Kildare, we have been involved in two pilot schemes. One was the provision of lights for older people. I ask the community section to look at that nationally. The second was the provision of home alarms for older people to ensure that they are safe in their homes and that children ensure that their parents are safe in their homes too. It has definitely worked in rural south Kildare and I believe it can work nationally too.

The lack of gardaí in rural areas has been mentioned. The unfortunate closing of Garda stations has meant that many rural communities are facing an increase in rural crime. There were pilot schemes relating to CCTV cameras in rural areas, which we should expand again, particularly near motorways, where there is a significant increase in crime rates and has been for a long time.

I am proud to be from rural Ireland and from rural Kildare. One of the biggest issues that I face, day in, day out, and which I faced yesterday, is trying to explain to people the number of grants and sections in the Minister's Department and where they should actually go. I call for an easy to explain dialogue or diary, however the Minister wants to put it, for rural communities, so that they can actually talk to someone in Pobal or the community section about

what grant will suit them. Yesterday, when I spoke to those people from Clongorey, they had already contacted four or five different sections relating to community in Kildare County Council. They were asking me where they should go next. I believe the community section should provide that portal to ensure that when a rural community is looking for investment, they can just bring up one person or look at one website, and get the information they require.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: As the Minister knows, I am proud to be a rural TD and to come from a rural part of Ireland, representing some of the most vibrant, passionate, dedicated and ambitious communities in this country. There are challenges to being from and living in rural Ireland. The Minister knows that better than most in this House, with the many years of service he has given as a public representative representing a rural constituency with large urban bases.

I start by addressing some of the grants and supports available for rural Ireland which the Minister covers in his Department, including CLÁR, LEADER, RRDF, the town and village renewal scheme and the community centre investment fund. The town and village renewal scheme currently has works ongoing in Carrig in the north of my constituency, where a village park is being built. I visited it a number of weeks ago. The Minister, his team and his office were a huge help in getting that project started. The community centre investment fund has been an enormous investment of over €110 million, according to the Minister's speech earlier today. It has seen massive improvements in our community centres, particularly the likes of rural parish halls. It is not just rural funding but is important to that rural parish hall, or to the likes of Ballymackey, which the Minister previously invested in, and Terryglass hall, for which he announced €86,000 last year.

There is a challenge in rural Ireland at the moment when it comes to population, services, and the changes of lifestyle, habits and how people work and live, but that is a challenge that we are facing up to as a Government, not shying from. Earlier, the Minister mentioned the interdependence of rural Ireland and urban Ireland, which is a very important point, because it is not about one being against the other. It is not that, as a rural TD, you only represent rural Ireland. I represent urban towns as well and they have different challenges, but the interdependence of Our Rural Future is important and should be recognised.

I would like to raise a couple of issues where I see challenges and think we can see some improvements over the next years under this Government. I previously raised the first with the Minister in the Chamber and still think it is important. That is funding for our playgrounds, particularly in our rural villages. There are options like CLÁR and LEADER, but there is no specific scheme for playgrounds, which is a challenge for many communities, particularly Cloughjordan and Silvermines in north Tipperary. The price of building a good, fit-for-purpose, modern playground is high and is increasing. While there are some grant supports, we need to look at where we get a purposeful grant for playgrounds. When there is a community and a committee that is really dedicated to getting one in, when the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle is that grant, there is space for us to do a little more.

I again mention to the Minister the community cafés and shops, which he will be very familiar with, through the hard work and dedication of Leonie Maher and Mary Fogarty in Loughmore. To give a synopsis of the community cafés and shops in my constituency, we have Lorrha, Cloughjordan, Moneygall, Loughmore, Moyne, Ballingarry, Annacarty, Freshford and Muckalee. They are not all in my constituency, but they are all very important to the people in

my constituency. They are a vital social and community outlet. I know the Minister has been working hard with that national body and with me. I appreciate the time and attention the Minister has given to them to date.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I welcome the Our Rural Future policy consultation process. It is a further step to re-addressing and rebalancing the regional balance, which is so vital for all of us in this country. It is essential if we are to provide better services and better infrastructure for not just our rural areas but also for our rural villages and towns.

I have listened to comments from the Opposition over the last ten or 15 minutes. They have spoken about how we have failed rural Ireland and let it down, yet Deputy O'Meara pointed to a number of grants that have been available. I can also point to a number of grants and policies that we have established over the last ten years that have ensured that rural Ireland is not dying, is not dead and that we will always have rural Ireland's back. Let us look at the sports capital grants, the rural regeneration and development fund, and at the roll-out of broadband that has really brought remote working to rural towns and rural areas and takes the stress off many families from their daily commutes which now maybe only exist for one or two days. That does not point to a failure in rural Ireland. That points to success.

I refute completely what the Opposition said about our policy and our commitment to rural Ireland, but there is always room for improvement. I look at County Louth and, where it comes to transport, I agree with Deputy Wall. There seems to be a slowdown in the process and roll-out of rural transport. County Louth still does not have any links from east to west of the county. That means the villages of Clogherhead, Dunleer, and Ardee cannot connect with each other except by car. Surely in this day and age, the county which is the second most densely populated in the country should have rural transport which links from east to west.

We have also spoken about housing. I concur with most of my colleagues on rural housing. We have been restrictive about facilitating families, in many cases, to live in the communities where they were born and reared. This is not limited to farming families. I, as the daughter of a farmer, was lucky. I got a site and built my bungalow but many of my friends in the community were refused. They have the same rights as I have. They grew up and wanted to continue to live in Togher parish but were denied by restrictive policies in regard to rural housing. We must re-address that. It is not just about creating a community that will continue and thrive into the future; it is also about keeping that community connected and united. They are the people who service the clubs, offer their time and volunteer. They are also the people who take care of their families. As we know, many families have to row in where we have not been able to provide the supports. There are families providing care to their parents and siblings seven days a week. There is never a Saturday or a Sunday off. They are providing those services where we have not been able to provide them yet. These people are essential to our communities and have a right to build a house in the community in which they have lived. We must re-address that balance.

We must also address how we deal with housing for older people. We must have a policy that is proactive, progressive and very fast. Our population is ageing and we will very shortly - within ten to 15 years - have an ageing population whose housing needs are not being met. We have rural towns and villages and have provided a series of grants to regenerate these towns and villages but we also have to think about reviving our town centres and bringing people to

live there - not just young people but also older people. Would it not be wonderful to go into the village of Dunleer or into Ardee or Castlebellingham and, because of the way we have changed the policy and facilitated it through incentives and central planning, older people could walk out their front door, get the paper and meet the people in their community? Isolation is a fear many older people have. By doing this, we would provide community and services. To walk down to their GP would be a wonderful thing for many older people.

We often hear from our constituents that they are living in houses that have outgrown them. They are tottering about in the houses, they are there on their own and they would like to move but do not want to move out of their communities. We must address that policy in tandem with our rural housing policy. It is not just about the young families who will support their families; it is also about ensuring people live in their homes longer, stay healthier and live better. We must also address that policy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. When I was coming in this morning, I was reflecting on this debate and what someone with an obvious city accent would say to people living in rural Ireland. However, the truth is, when you think about it - and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Clarke, knows something about this as well - there is more that unites us than divides us. The same challenges exist in the town and village as in the city. It is the same failing, tone-deaf, out of touch Government that governs in the village, the town and the city. It is the same refusal to acknowledge the lived reality of people, whether they live in the town, the village, the townland or the city, that is at the root of many issues facing people.

It suits the Government down to the ground to have a manufactured situation where rural dwellers are on one side and urban dwellers are on the other. It would suit the Government all the way to Sunday if that were to be the case and if people were to be taking potshots or squabbling with each other. The truth is the people who live in rural Ireland are being let down, failed and ignored by the Government every bit as much as the people who live in urban Ireland. That is a fact. We saw that on the streets of our capital city and the highways, byways and back roads of our towns and villages in recent weeks, just in case anyone in government was not listening. People were shouting loud enough, I hope, for the Government to hear. In the midst of that crisis, the Government arrived with half-measures for the town, city, townland and village.

When I think about this consultation process and the way in which people have been sidelined and feel they have been ignored, I reflect on the number of reports and strategies that have been done. I put it to the Minister of State that rural Ireland does not lack reports or strategies; it lacks action from a Government that seems to be out of touch and indifferent to the lived reality of ordinary people. If a report, consultation or strategy document could change things, we would not be here. We would not be having this conversation because the change would happen but what will change things is action from the Government.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The consultation on the next phase of Our Rural Future is welcome but the real test is whether this becomes another high-level document full of warm aspiration or actually improves quality of life, economic development, town and village regeneration, inclusivity and protection of our natural and built heritage in rural communities. Rural Ireland needs services, infrastructure, housing, transport and the renovation and repurposing of long

vacant and derelict buildings - in short, serious investment in the everyday foundations of a decent quality of life. If we want to see our rural communities thrive into the future, we have to move beyond the outdated idea that rural policy is essentially one version of agricultural policy with a few community grants attached.

Farming has been central to rural life for generations. It has sustained families, supported local businesses, creameries, marts, butchers, food processors and small businesses, and given many communities their economic and social backbone. One of the strongest pro-farmer arguments we can make is that rural development must diversify and farming must be supported to diversify. Many farmers are under enormous pressure from volatile markets, rising costs, escalating debt, land pressures, weather instability and environmental obligations. We should not pretend ever-greater intensification of agriculture is a sustainable answer for every family farm or rural community. Farmers who remove hedgerows and native trees wholesale from their land often make these decisions within a policy and market framework that has rewarded intensification and treated nature as a nuisance or obstruction, rather than as part of the rich fabric of rural Ireland. Hedgerows, mature trees and wetlands are vital for biodiversity, flood protection, carbon storage, water quality, landscape character and our natural heritage but we also have to understand their destruction in the context of an agricultural policy many farmers are simply locked into. A serious rural policy must support farmers to make a decent living while protecting those habitats and irreplaceable parts of our natural heritage.

There is a false and divisive narrative in some of our public debate on rural Ireland. Some people, including in this House, seek to appropriate rural Ireland as an identity, restrict who is allowed to belong within that identity and portray anyone who cares about, for instance, climate or nature as somehow hostile to rural life. That is nonsense. Rural Ireland is not a monolith; it is made up of farmers, farm workers, carers, teacher, nurses, small businesses, businessowners, artists, tradespeople, young families, older people, disabled people, Travellers, migrants, Irish speakers, people who go to mass, people who do not, people who play GAA and people who never did.

It includes people whose families have lived in the same parish for generations and people who have made their homes there more recently. No one owns rural Ireland. No one has the right to use it as a cudgel against people who do not fit a narrow version of what rural identity is supposed to look or sound like.

I grew up down a bóithrín between two small villages. I spent a fair part of my summers stacking bales of hay and drawing them in on tractors. I also listened to The Smiths and read Sylvia Plath in my more anguished adolescent moments of alienation. I did not play GAA. I found parts of the culture I grew up in quite stifling and insular. Like many people around me, I had mixed feelings of love and hate, and many shades in between about rural Ireland and those feelings have shifted considerably over time. I am just as much a part of rural Ireland, shaped by it and proud to be part of it, as anyone else in this Chamber who invokes the term as a badge of authenticity or moral superiority. Rural Ireland formed me, just as it formed others here, in its strengths, beauty, constraints, complexities and contradictions and that is the point. Rural Ireland is richer, more diverse and more complex than the caricature often presented in political debate.

Caring about hedgerows, rivers, trees, wildlife and soil is not anti-rural Ireland. Wanting rural communities to be more inclusive is not anti-rural Ireland. Gay, lesbian and trans people, migrants, artists, Travellers, and people who simply do not conform to a narrow template of rural identity should feel at home in their own rural communities. A serious rural policy has to start from that plurality. Rural Ireland cannot be reduced to a slogan, a voting block or a lurch into pre-globalisation, anti-science nostalgia. It is a living, changing, diverse set of communities and policy should be designed for the full breadth of those communities, not just for the loudest or most familiar version of them.

Caring deeply about nature is not anti-rural Ireland; it is the opposite. Rural Ireland cannot be defended by degrading the very landscape that sustains it. Our policy must reflect that diversity. Policy must be also rooted in everyday experience: whether people can get to work, college or hospital; access childcare or a GP; rent or buy a home; get broadband or remain in their community as they age.

Transport is one of the clearest examples. In some parts of the country, Local Link has been transformative. It has given older people more independence. It has helped people without cars get to appointments, shops, college, services and to visit friends and family. It has helped local businesses by making towns and villages easier to reach. This is what public transport should do but in other parts of the country, including for much of east Cork, the service simply does not exist in any meaningful way and this is profoundly unfair. We cannot talk about rural opportunity while accepting a situation where one village has a regular bus service and another has a pale shadow of a service; where one older person can get to town independently and another is effectively housebound; or where one young person can access education or work and another is dependent on lifts. This is not a small inconvenience; it is a major quality of life disadvantage. The absence of public transport affects employment, education, health, social participation, family finances, disability access and climate action. If Our Rural Future is serious, it should set out a pathway to universal baseline rural mobility, with regular, accessible and affordable services connecting villages with towns, towns with rail and rural communities with healthcare, education and employment.

Housing is another central issue. Rural communities cannot thrive if the next generation cannot afford to live in them, if workers cannot move into them, if older people have no suitable options to downsize locally or if families are forced out because there are no affordable homes. At the same time, many rural towns and villages are scarred by vacancy and dereliction, with empty upper floors, former houses allowed to decay, commercial buildings lying idle while local groups have no meeting space, and small businesses cannot find suitable premises. Take Ladysbridge in my constituency, where a school with remarkable potential for community use in an expanding village with very few amenities has been left to rot for decades. Dereliction is not just an aesthetic issue; it is State neglect writ large. It speaks of a lack of interest and a lack of concern. Tackling dereliction should be a key part of Our Rural Future, through stronger local authority resourcing, serious use of compulsory purchase orders where necessary and meaningful support to over- the-shop units back into use.

This is particularly important in Gaeltacht communities. The Irish language cannot be sustained by rhetoric alone. It needs living communities behind it, affordable homes for young families, schools, childcare, transport, healthcare, digital infrastructure, local employment and cultural spaces. We cannot celebrate the Gaeltacht as part of our national identity while

allowing housing pressures, lack of services and a lack of opportunities to hollow out the communities that keep the language alive. A social infrastructure strategy to sustain Gaeltacht communities has to be core to a language strategy. Teanga bheo atá i gceist agus ní mhairfidh sí gan phobal beo.

Enterprise policy also needs to fit rural life and enhance it. Rural economies depend not only on export-led companies but on cafés, trades, childcare providers, tourism businesses, small retailers, mechanics, digital workers, food producers, artists, carers and community enterprises. We need to listen to small rural businesses and hear about what is holding them back, such as insurance, energy costs, broadband, housing for staff, transport, water infrastructure, planning delays, access to finance and the decline of footfall in town centres. We need investment in regional employment hubs, technological universities, health and social care, broadband, public transport, water services, childcare, schools and community facilities.

The consultation process for Our Rural Future must be more than a listening exercise. It must lead to a different model of delivery and clear outcomes. It must lead to the decisive improvement in the lives of rural people. Can they get a bus? Can they get a home? Can they access a GP? Can their child get childcare? Can a disabled person live independently in his or her own community? Can a small business survive on the main street? Can young people see a future locally? The next Our Rural Future policy should recognise the diversity of rural Ireland. It should move power and resources closer to communities. It should expand Local Link and other forms of rural transport. It should address vacancy and dereliction in a comprehensive way with leadership from local authorities, not through a patchwork of grants that community groups have to scrap over, over a period of years. It should support farmers by diversifying rural economies. It should invest in public services as the foundation of balanced regional development and protect Gaeltacht areas as living communities, not just symbols of our national heritage.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome this discussion on the future of rural policy and on Our Rural Future. I welcome the opening and consideration of the consultation for same. It is so important people right across this country, whether they are in an urban or rural area, contribute to what they believe the future of rural Ireland should look like and that we reflect on the first phase of this plan in terms of what went right, what went wrong and how we can do better. In this House, and in many parliaments across the world, the question we always have to ask ourselves is: how can we do better? For rural Ireland there are a few key areas I believe we can really improve things and over the coming years use this policy as the document that guides everything we do to improve rural Ireland.

Particularly for Our Rural Future, I want to talk about rural transport because many people love rural Ireland because they can work, live and contribute there and it is vital they have transport to access labour in our towns, cities and in areas of high industrial activity. The way we will do that and make rural Ireland more connected is through an enhancement of investment in rural links and in the Local Link service. In east Galway, we have seen many Local Link services enhanced over the past few years and they have been an absolute game-changer. However, many areas remain without this service and that leaves people isolated and unconnected. People need to have that opportunity to avail of Local Link transport, not just for the sake of transport but for the sake of connection and community. To get rid of rural isolation, we need to make sure our elderly people can access this service as well.

Another thing that needs to be considered is how we are delivering housing in rural Ireland and where there are blockages. A significant issue I see is that young people are not able to build using shared entrances into national roads. That is a Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, problem and it is a roads problem but it is a priority for Our Rural Future because young people are being encouraged to go 6 km or 7 km down the road and build on a bóithrín, only to drive back and forth multiple times per day to tend to the farm at home. To be honest, that is absolute madness. We need to take a common sense, practical approach to our rural planning that allows people to build close to home and beside their parents so that when care needs arise in a home, the family will be there to care for one another. That is something that is really important in rural Ireland as well.

There are so many villages that are never going to be serviced or see a sewerage network, but they should not be choked because of that. They should not be stifled when it comes to development. People should be allowed to build homes in those villages. I welcome what the Minister, Deputy Browne, is doing with the developer-led wastewater treatment systems for projects of up to 40 units. Policies of that nature will allow these villages to thrive and to grow and will encourage people to live in them, which would mean that there could be more services and greater support right across rural Ireland.

Remote working hubs formed part of the previous Our Rural Future policy. Many of these hubs were established but were never given current funding to ensure that they were maintained or that they could employ managers. Every county should have a remote working hub manager who can manage all of the hubs in their county remotely. Those people could ensure that the hubs are kept going and are financially viable.

Deputy John Lahart: Like colleagues, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the consultation process relating to Our Rural Future. While this policy is often spoken about in the context of counties far from Dublin, the truth is that many of the challenges it seeks to address are felt just as strongly in parts of my constituency. Two fifths of Dublin South-West is rural. The constituency stretches out beyond Tallaght towards Brittas and the border with Wicklow on one side and through rural Rathfarnham out the Old Military Road across the Featherbeds, past the Captain Noel Lemass monument and into the county of Wicklow. The foothills of the Dublin Mountains, which I represent, cover Rathfarnham to Tibbradden and Killakee and Glenasmole, Crooksling, Brittas and Bohernabreena on the western side of the mountains.

In recent weeks, the national conversation has been dominated by the fuel protests. These have prompted some to speak about a supposed rural-urban divide. What I hear from people who live in my constituency is very different. Dublin South-West residents understand both sides of the debate because we have both rural and urban areas. Many families in rural south Dublin balance the realities of suburban life, with the rural reality of having the mountains on their doorstep. These communities experience the same day-to-day challenges as any rural parish, with long commutes, limited public transport and infrastructure that has not always kept pace with demand. I would say to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan that far from being a weakness, this blend of rural and urban is one of our great strengths because it gives people in the constituency a unique perspective. They know that rural Ireland is not some distant concept. It begins just a few minutes from the M50. It provides a truly enriching backdrop to suburban life and it is also home to hundreds of families. They know that when we talk about

balanced development, fairness and investment, those principles must apply to every community, including those on the edge of our suburbs.

One of the clearest examples in this regard is broadband. Despite being so close to the city, there are still homes on the Bohernabreena side of the mountains that struggle with unreliable or inadequate connectivity and the consequences associated with that. Parents tell me of their children being unable to complete homework as a result of patchy connections. There are workers who are trying vainly to participate in hybrid work but who find themselves constantly at a disadvantage in that regard.

The same is true of road access, particularly in view of recent and ongoing closures. As a result of subsidence across on the Rathfarnham side of the Dublin Mountains, the Cruagh Road was closed causing significant inconvenience to local residents. People travelling to work, school or medical appointments found themselves facing detours. The feeling is that if this had been a suburban road, the problem would have been addressed much more quickly. As this consultation process moves forward, it is essential that the Department actively captures the experience of communities like those in Dublin South-West. The purpose of this consultation is to listen.

With regard to one-off housing - or the lack of it - on the Bohernabreena west side of the mountain and the Rathfarnham east side of the mountain, barely any planning permission for new homes has been granted by South Dublin County Council in the past ten to 15 years. I could probably count on both hands the number of homes in respect of which permission has been granted during my 27 years as a public representative. What this has done is split families and children from their parents. It means that children who grew up in the mountains now live in the suburbs of Old Bawn and Aylesbury while their parents, some of whom are ageing - a point made by the previous speaker - live in the foothills. This puts things like school numbers under pressure. I have seen the success of the Local Link transport in rural towns and villages in Ireland, but there is no Local Link service in the rural foothills of my constituency. Such a service would be of huge assistance to parents with children attending national school.

Digital connectivity and physical connectivity go hand in hand, and a community cannot thrive if either is unreliable. The consultation process must take account of a number of themes. One-off housing and the issues around this, as mentioned by all previous speakers, apply as much in rural south-west Dublin as they do in any other part of rural Ireland. Our Rural Future is an ambitious policy. The people who live in the rural part of my constituency, including sheep farmers and other farmers and horticulturists, are guardians of the part of the countryside that is closest to the city and its suburbs. We need to ensure that this policy delivers and is seen to deliver for those in Dublin South-West and in parts of rural south Dublin who experience both the fantastic opportunities rural life offers them and the challenges of living in rural Ireland close to a city every day.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Many of our rural villages are being allowed to die on their knees because of Government inaction. They are being strangled due to the obstacles that are put in the way of people who want to develop changes. My journey here today took me through the village of Aughrim, which has not seen any proper development for the past decade and a half. The lack of infrastructure such as wastewater treatment is strangling the development of desperately needed housing in the village, which would keep local people in

the local school and living locally instead of exporting them across the world. Lack of State support is one thing, but that to which I refer is particularly infuriating for the entrepreneurial minded people I met today who want to build small clusters of houses in these villages and those who want to develop facilities for tourism or maybe repurpose an old building or a closed down building. They are, however, met with obstacle after obstacle, bureaucracy over regulation and strangulation due to the lack of wastewater treatment capacity. This is preventing people getting planning permission and is replicated in many other villages I represent, including Camolin, Ferns and others.

I also visited the schools in Camolin and Aughrim. The lack of infrastructure is having a really bad impact because young families cannot build houses and settle down in either village. They cannot live in the area so people are getting exported. I met quite a lot of young people from farms who cannot get permission to build. This is like something out of Stalinist eastern Europe as far as I can see. Local post offices are closing as are local Garda stations. People are finding impossible to access GPs. There is a lack of affordable childcare, affordable housing and reliable public transport in these areas of north Wexford and south Wicklow. In many ways from my memories I see that rural Ireland has been abandoned by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. I see similar stories in villages all the way from Ballindaggin up as far as Barndearg, and from Kilmuckridge up as far as Knockananna.

I read through the document. There is plenty in it about remote working and rural development. Last Saturday, I was in the lovely village of Carnew in south-west Wicklow. A playground there is still closed. There is a lovely building in the middle of the main street on a prime site, the old Bank of Ireland branch that closed in 2021. Along with one in Tinahely and another in Rathdrum, it was allowed to close and they are all still locked up despite groups and enterprises badly needing spaces. Why is that the case?

Ballycanew only got high-speed broadband in mid-2024 thanks to a local group, Whizzy Internet, that stepped in and provided a great service. We all rely on the rural road network but despite all of the damage recently Wicklow is still waiting on €15 million in emergency funding and Wexford is waiting on €20 million. There is not a cent yet. It also still needs €194 million to upgrade the road infrastructure.

There are so many areas I could focus on. Glossy documents are pointless without concrete action and timelines. I want to see proper commitment to delivering infrastructure, wastewater treatment and rural housing in north Wexford and south Wicklow. The document means nothing without action and timelines.

Deputy Charles Ward: I welcome that the Minister undertook public consultation to further inform the development of the next rural development policy. It is important to view our rural communities. What matters most for rural communities is that the people in them are considered. I also welcome the fact that the consultation was done online. The latter is very important in order that everybody in the communities can have their say, particularly those with disabilities. It is important that their voices are heard, that the voices of young people are heard and that there is Government collaboration on this. I hope that many more consultations will be done in this way. That is very important because it will provide a great opportunity to inform future decisions relating to rural Ireland.

As someone who lives in rural Ireland, it is evident to me that the Government has fallen significantly short in providing the infrastructure resources and investment needed to support and develop our communities. As a result, those who live in these communities are unfairly left to pay the price for Government neglect. The lack of significant investment is reflected in many aspects of our daily lives, from limited public transport to poor broadband. There are towns in Donegal that only received access to fibre broadband as recently as yesterday. We are informed about this all the time, and we are so far behind everyone else. We are a decade behind Dublin.

As well as inadequate access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities are limited. These structural disadvantages have led to a severe population decline in our rural communities. Stagnation in growth is part of this. We wonder why people in rural communities are forced to take to the streets when there is something like a price hike in fuel. It comes down to the fact that it is their source of heating. If they have to pay double what they had to pay a few months ago, they will protest.

People are forced to travel long distances to access essential such as healthcare, work and school. There are fewer employment opportunities and most of them are lower paid in nature. Rural areas in Donegal have the second lowest disposable income per person in the country, at €24,686. That is 18% lower than the national average.

Our Rural Future seems to do very little to address any of these issues, which are absolutely massive. That there is nothing more in the Government policy document feels like a hollow, empty promise. There needs to be some form of implementation of these policies. I hope that future documents will be more realistic and more reflective of areas such as Donegal. Without meaningful sustainable investment, the gap between rural areas and others will widen. The Government must act and implement fairer policies.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government has failed rural Ireland. What we have is a lot of talk and not enough delivery. There is a housing crisis, a cost-of-living crisis and a disability crisis in rural Ireland. There are other issues that people in rural Ireland face on a daily basis, such as those relating to a lack of water due to burst water mains, outages, treatment plant malfunctions and boil water notices. Irish Water has contempt for customers. It should never have been established and should be abolished. Tipperary town public water supply has been on a boil water notice since 12 February 2026. The supply serves a town of more than 5,000 people. The only and most recent information on the Irish Water website is dated 12 February 2026. There has been no further information. It is absolutely outrageous. Half of the town of Clonmel was out of water on Friday and Saturday with no notice. There were homes without water and businesses had to close. The town of Fethard was similarly without water at the weekend. The town of Carrick-on-Suir and west Waterford have ongoing outages and boil water notices. That is completely unacceptable.

Vacancy and dereliction in the main streets of our towns are very serious issues. I hope towns will be supported by means of the regeneration programmes for towns with populations under and over 10,000 people. In particular, Clonmel town centre requires consider refurbishment, having been hit by changes in retail trends and a resulting closure of businesses, including long-standing family businesses. Tipperary County Council is submitting a significant town centre upgrading project this week, under the towns and cities regeneration

investment fund. Approval of this project is of vital importance for the consolidation and development of the town. It is a shovel-ready project, with Part 8 consultation complete. The town has an excellent record of completing schemes such as this on time and under budget. These include schemes such as Kickham Plaza and the sports hub. Early approval of this project is essential.

Other very serious issues affecting rural Ireland include security and the level of policing. Throughout Tipperary, Garda numbers are completely inadequate. Gardaí on the beat are almost non-existent now. I must say that seeing on RTÉ news recently a successful Garda beat in Dublin city centre was very difficult to take, seeing as we have been looking for this type of operation for quite some time. Transport is another issue.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome this discussion on rural policy. The biggest issues relate to housing and services in rural areas. Often, people in rural areas do not have anything. Sustainable housing is the key in this regard. For that type of housing, we need infrastructure. Those engaged in agriculture, forestry and other rural employment must continue to be allowed to build one-off houses on family land or in appropriate locations. There also needs to be housing for a whole lot of people and their families who live in rural areas and who are engaged in other activities. We have to come up with a practical solution to this. Given the stricter regulations on one-off housing and environmental concerns, and the fact that not everybody owns land, one part of this has to be serviced sites in villages and on the edge of villages. These should not be half a mile up the road; they should be where they can be serviced. They should be provided by the local council. Laois County Council is already working on a small number of these but I ask that the Government and the Department get behind them. Serviced sites on the edge of villages could be one quarter of an acre where people build their own houses. These would be in walking distance of the local shops, school, church and sports field, with connected water, sewerage, Internet and electricity. There are some good examples of where this is happening. This requires upgrading sewerage treatment plants and water supply networks.

In Laois, villages such as Ballybrittas, Ballyroan, Ballinakill, Ballylinan, Borris-in-Ossory, Ballycolla and Timahoe could all be developed further if water and wastewater infrastructure were upgraded. Ballybrittas, Timahoe and Ballycolla do not even have a sewerage treatment plant but they are ideal locations for serviced sites. Ballybrittas is right beside the N7 motorway and the local railway station in Monasterevin is within a five-minute drive. The pumping station there has sewerage capacity for another 150 homes but Uisce Éireann is refusing to allow this to go ahead. It refuses to connect the existing houses in the village. It is trying to pass it back to the council, saying it is up to the council, but the council cannot do it because it is not its responsibility any longer. It needs a sewerage connection network to the existing houses and to allow for new developments in the village, which is in the commuter belt.

One of the interesting things about Ballybrittas is that it is included in Uisce Éireann's small towns and villages programme. It is in the programme, but it will not do it. The Department needs to push this. It is located beside the N7 and is five minutes from a railway station. The Department needs to be told to get on with this. We need to have these services to provide sustainable rural housing in County Laois.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will share time with Deputy Brennan. I welcome the debate. It is timely, particularly in light of the outcome of the various protests we have had in recent weeks. I want to put on the record that the people I met on the protests were decent individuals.

6 o'clock

They were farmers, families and children. They gave no problems in relation to the stewarding of the protest itself and they were anxious to make a point. Whatever is being said nationally about those who were on the protest, I think it has angered and insulted the ordinary decent men, women and families who I met. They were out there because of the frustration they were experiencing and because they believed that they were being neglected. They believed that their ambitions were not being fulfilled and that they were not being supported by the Government. The farmers were there complaining about the fuel costs, and rightly so. They are understandably getting their package today. However, we need to deal with other issues we hear about in rural Ireland in relation to the cost of living and the cost of home heating oil. I would hope that the Government will continue to monitor the situation and ensure that those who are marginalised and elderly, in particular, have a package of some sort to take them through to the budget and beyond. We need to focus our policies, actions and budgets on people. It needs to be people centred and we need to support communities and families.

I listened to Deputy Quaide's contribution and I have to say that I cannot disagree with anything he said, or at least most of what he said, in that he highlighted the problems facing businesses in rural Ireland. They are probably the same issues and problems that face small businesses all over the place. I am referring, however, to small family businesses that have been put out of business or are struggling because of insurance costs, the general cost of doing business, and red tape and bureaucracy. I will cite one such family, Paudie and Catherine Neill from Thomastown, who had to close their business. I raised it in the Dáil previously. They are a hard-working family. Now, a big part of that street in Thomastown is vacant and left without a great existence because the mainstay is gone. Direct intervention is required in situations like that.

The over-the-shop funding needs to be looked at in the context of what is happening in rural Ireland and the closures that are affecting the shop downstairs and living accommodation upstairs. People have made their contribution and paid their taxes and now they are suffering because of Government policy or misplaced policy. I would like their voices to be heard. Likewise, Inistioge is a beautiful part of County Kilkenny. People there are being deprived of their development and future because they do not have the infrastructure in terms of water and sewage treatment. They have been up and down on the list. They have been second, third and fourth and no one gives them an explanation. No one engages with them about a plan that will allow development to take place. Due to that, small businesses there, like the local pub and local shop, are under threat. They are reliant on business to come seasonally, but that is often not enough to take them through the harsh reality of business today.

I want to refer to route 4, a service that was withdrawn from rural Ireland that served as a connection to Dublin and Waterford. It was to be finished in May. The misinformation that is out there has not been addressed by the transport authority. Part of that route is being put out for public consultation, but we do not know if the full route is being retained for the people who travel there for hospital appointments, college, school and social occasions. Nobody knows what is happening. I ask the Minister to please ask the authority to issue a

comprehensive statement on exactly where we are going with that. Schools in Kilkenny city are often full and as a result of that, people go to Scoil Aireagail and other schools around the county. However, Bus Éireann told them today that there would be no service. That is shocking. There is no service when there is a bus link and other services there. Bus Éireann needs to look at this again. It is not good enough just to raise it here. I hope that a note will be taken on what needs to be done and that we will hear from the Minister.

Tamara Whelan in Windgap attended the School of the Holy Spirit. For her future education through the National Learning Network, she needs a bus connection from Windgap. There is a bus service and transport from Tullaghought and Kilmoganny, but it needs to stop at Windgap. The bureaucracy and red tape attached to making that decision around a seven-minute trip is absolutely horrendous. If we are serious about connecting those who require further education to the centre, then we have to consider that.

Kilkenny corporation and Kilkenny borough council were abolished and taken into Kilkenny County Council. It was the wrong decision, and it is still the wrong decision. If we are talking about developing urban centres and democracy, we need to bring democracy back to those centres like Kilkenny city and ensure that they have their corporation and county council and that people can engage with them at the lowest level in the pecking order, which is at community level and through their local corporation. It has been promised for years that we would review it. There was a Bill before the House today. I hope that the Government will see the error of its ways and provide that structure for democracy and for the people I represent.

Will the Minister please tell the Minister for education to release the schools that deserve to be released into the construction phase?

Deputy Brian Brennan: I note that, in the programme from 2021 to 2025, there was a clear call to reverse the flow of young people moving to the city. People living and working in their own towns and villages is what we should be working for. I welcome the billions of euro that will probably be spent on our new development plan. I welcome the engagement tonight. When we see young people spending 26 hours per week in a car driving from the south east to Dublin, however, that is frustrating. It is hitting their mental health. There is a cost to it, and it leaves a carbon footprint. I therefore encourage and welcome the proposals going forward.

I ask the Minister to please look at the towns and villages that have not been supported previously. I can give him the example of the town of Arklow. I know that there are five or six towns like Arklow in Ireland - towns and villages that were simply ignored. Arklow was the home of Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI. It was the home of a great port. It was the home of Arklow Pottery. Then, over 30 years, due to lack of investment, it slowly declined. Now, however, Arklow is on the crest of a wave. There is a €3.6 billion data centre planned. There are approximately 50 offshore windmills planned. Arklow is in line for a greenway, which we discussed in this room before. There is continual investment. We are expecting thousands of houses. What we need to see, however, is investment in the social infrastructure of that town. That town has no theatre. If people want a concert in Arklow tonight, they either go to the hotel, a church or the school. It has no community centre. I have visited tiny villages in counties Wexford and Wicklow and seen fabulous community centres but for whatever reason, a town of 14,500 people still does not have a community centre. There is a building there that is waiting to be taken on. It just needs work and investment. Arklow has no town park. It is

the home of Ronnie Delaney, where he was born, Lord have mercy on him, and Mary Hickey, the only woman to run around Ireland. Both were born and reared in Arklow, and it has not got a town park to show for it. I call for the social infrastructure and capital infrastructure, such as bridges and roads, to be matched with this expected boom in the town. It needs the support. As I said, Arklow is not on its own. There are plenty of towns like it out there that have been ignored for decades.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am going to focus my comments on the challenge in our coastal communities and, to be quite frank, the neglect of our coastal communities.

Today, in the fisheries committee, we dealt with seaweed harvesting and the applications that are coming in from major corporations. I asked a question of the traditional seaweed harvesters. I asked whether anybody from Government agencies had engaged with them directly to establish and vindicate their rights that have been there for generations and the answer was "No." We had Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, which deal with the licensing, Bord Iascaigh Mhara and the Department of the marine in and every one of them confirmed that none had proactively engaged, even though the Attorney General ruled on this years ago. It is complete neglect of the potential of that issue.

Ireland, obviously, is an island nation. The Faroe Islands, which has a population not much more than the Inishowen Peninsula where I am from in the north of Donegal, has a bigger aquaculture industry than Ireland. There has been an utter failure to deal with the planning logjams that have bedevilled the potential of the industry. Everybody has a right to object but you have to make decisions in a timely fashion and it has dragged on and on.

Years ago when I engaged with inshore fishermen - I had policy responsibility for this in Sinn Féin - I asked them whether they be interested in a financial support scheme similar to what farmers had and, indeed, what artists rightly have now. Their response instinctively was that they did not, that they wanted to fish and that they did not want hand outs and they did not want financial supports. That was understandable and admirable but now they are making it clear that they need financial supports to stay in their communities. We really need to understand the history of neglect and wilful failure by Departments where there was not a dedicated Minister for the marine for a long time. There is one now. I will acknowledge that he is engaging and he is trying but we need to sort this out.

We are an island nation. I have just given three examples of the potential. I could go on about the Common Fisheries Policy and the fact that we have utterly failed and allowed our industry and production to fall apart. For example, Norway is a country with the same population as the Republic of Ireland and it has a seafood industry multiples the size of ours.

I offer that to the Minister. We have to turn this around. We have to reset the culture of the Department of the marine. We have to have a Minister who drives forward, works with the industry, cuts out the logjams and brings wealth and prosperity to coastal communities.

Deputy Michael Collins: I beg the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's indulgence for a few seconds. I offer my sincere sympathy to the family of Councillor Joe Carroll, who died in west Cork, I suppose, suddenly enough. It is a huge blow. It is fitting that we are talking about Our Rural Future because he was a man who fought for the rural people. I was on the council with him

for two years. I found him to be a gentleman. We might have fought inside it but we were best friends outside it like everybody else. I extend my sympathies to Sheila, Linda and Kieran and to the Carroll family and to the people of west Cork and to his colleagues who are brokenhearted because he was a joyful character to be with and to work with.

I am a long time fighting for our rural future policy. I have looked at closures and the damage they do to rural communities. If you look at the closure of a post office, you see the damage that does to the whole town. I know it because I live in a community - Goleen - where we have lost our post office. That meant the local butcher shop went. It had a knock-on effect straightaway because everybody moved to the next town to do business. The bank closed in Schull a number of years ago. That led to the loss of a supermarket there within approximately a year. It has a massive knock-on effect.

The supports need to be there. The understanding needs to be there. There are no great supports for the post offices. I was trying to save the Durras post office recently, and I might as well have been talking to the bloody pole because An Post did not care. It did not give a damn. It told me it was doing its best. Then I found out somebody who was trying their best to reopen it was not getting any assistance and was only being bluffed off the same as I was. If there is a real intent on rural-proofing all these sort of things, there is where the Minister needs to start.

We solved the problem with the Garda stations. However, the problem we have with Garda stations now is that they are no longer closing but there is nobody in them. It is a clever backdoor system of closing them. In Drimoleague and in a few in west Cork, there is no garda working in them because no gardaí are appointed. If you do not appoint them, they cannot be in them. That also has a knock-on effect in the local community. The pub and the shops are closed and it drains the life out of them. In my own village, I see people coming back from all over the world trying to spend money and trying to rejuvenate the community. It needs the State to make sure they do not lose the likes of the post offices and banks because if they do, this is where you are going to end up.

If we look at the fuel protest, there is talk about a division between rural and urban. I do not like the talk about it but statements from a former leader, Leo Varadkar, are not helpful at all. They widened the gap there but we should be bridging that gap. The people of rural Ireland take the hit. That is the bottom line here. If the Government increases the carbon tax in the morning, those who will be hit most are the people who have to drive. They have to use that car. With Local Link, a lot of new services were promised to the people of west Cork, around the Grange area and Timoleague. People do not have any transport services in places, such as Kealkill and Corthna. They have no choice but to get into the car to go shopping, to take their children to school and to go to work in the morning, and they are the people who are hit hardest with fuel increases. The Government is quite happy to slap it on. It is being watched closely now but it usually slaps it on very easily, without thinking of the consequences for certain areas. Certainly, rural Ireland gets a terrible beating with any fuel increase because we have to drive. We have to use our vehicles.

There was also a discussion about the wastewater treatment plants. We want towns and villages to grow but the county development plans are a farce. That is what I call them. They are gone. They no longer engage with the people. The councillors no longer have a say as to what goes into a county development plan. It was drifting in in 2014 to 2016, when I was a

councillor. Councillors were having to "Yes" to officials and to play along with it. That is where we are today.

We even had village nuclei between 2014 and 2016 in west Cork and they removed them the next year. The village nucleus was where there was a shop, a church, a creamery or a pub. You give a certain amount of area around that for building to give people a chance to come and live in that community and to build up that community. Sadly, the council, the Cork one anyway, as I can only talk about that one, ran a mile from that. It is like as if it is scared. It has every kind of policy to block you from getting planning. All the young people begging for planning are finding it almost impossible to get it. They are spending fortunes when they should not be doing that. They should be encouraged. These are the people who will turn things around and who will keep the local community alive. We need that to be understood but, unfortunately, that is not happening.

We see the confusion now with the short-term lets. Lord God Almighty, it is as simple as one, two, three. On what the short-term lets are doing for rural communities, people will buy a little drink, they will stay overnight, they will drive around and they will buy food. That is what keeps rural communities alive but I cannot get that into the minds of the Government. They feel short-term lets are enemy of the State but they are not. These short-term lets should not be attacked by local government.

We were in the audiovisual room a while ago for a presentation on driving licences and reciprocal licences. People come back from America who had licences in Ireland. They are driving in New York one day but are not allowed to drive in Skibbereen the next day. It is insane. A report has been drafted and put forward and, in fairness, it is a good report. I would appreciate the Government might spend time on that. I could spend a day talking about these issues because they are close to my heart.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I have major concerns about small family businesses right across Mayo and the west. They are in massive difficulty. During the recent protests, I spoke to a number of people, not from the haulage, construction and farming sectors but from small family-run businesses that were really struggling. They are struggling with the cost of business. They are struggling with rates. They are struggling with insurance and with increases in terms of labour force and auto-enrolment. All of these things are really crippling businesses. If we lose businesses from the centre of a town, it will be extremely difficult to replace them.

When one building becomes vacant and the next one becomes vacant, there is almost a contagion effect. Therefore, I urge the Minister to support small family-run businesses during this difficult time of energy cost increases because, if we do not, we will need more grants down the line for refurbishments of derelict commercial buildings. We need to keep the businesses in operation and protect them. The Minister's remit - rural development - is not exactly enterprise, but it is important that we protect businesses in regional towns.

I attended the fisheries committee discussion of seaweed today and it is clear that any consideration of seaweed applications should be halted because native seaweed harvesters will potentially be trampled on. MARA and the wider State effectively do not know what is happening and do not have certainty about the rights in local areas in Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Donegal. This is a major issue for rural and coastal communities in Mayo. I am therefore asking for the Minister's intervention to make sure, in the midst of this wave of applications

from large commercial seaweed harvesters, that we protect the native seaweed harvesters. The changes coming down the line for these harvesters and this industry will suit and favour the big players. From 2028, there will be an obligation on native seaweed harvesters to register and that will come with a fee of €2,000 and a litany of additional reports that will cost significant money.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: My fear is that we will push these people off the radar and pave the way for large seaweed harvesters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless should conclude.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I ask the Minister to intervene.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will raise a broad range of issues affecting rural Ireland. I will start with one close to my heart, that of rural planning. This is an important component of dealing with the housing challenge. I have worked through four county development plans in Wicklow and made many changes to help with rural planning. There are currently many aspects of it that make it difficult and we must make changes. First, social and economic need must trump views and prospects in planning decisions. Second, we need to allow people to downsize from one rural area to another. This is especially important for elderly people who live in unsuitable accommodation. Third, we need to identify hamlets to allow clustering of houses in rural areas and broaden the qualification for building in hamlets to include nearby villages and towns. Fourth, housing need criteria should not be applied if people own a house in an urban area and want to move back to their rural area. I could make a range of other points, but I do not have time this evening to go through all of them.

On housing in villages, we need investment in villages, including in water and wastewater schemes. This would reduce the pressure on rural planning and help to make villages vibrant. The residential zoned land tax, RZLT, is suitable for cities but is not appropriate in rural Ireland and should be abolished outside the main cities. It mitigates against housing development in rural areas because sometimes it is economically viable, but a lot of the time it is not economically viable to build because build costs often exceed the selling price. Therefore, land should be left zoned until it becomes economically viable rather than be dezoned.

Airbnb is another important issue in rural Ireland. It should be encouraged in rural areas and villages and no development levy should be applied where a unit is being changed to an Airbnb. Current operators should be exempt from planning. They bring tourists to parts of Ireland that would otherwise never have tourists. I live in a small village in west Wicklow where a number of Airbnbs operate. They bring tourists to that village. Otherwise, it would never see tourists. These properties are not a solution to the housing challenge, which will, please God, dissipate in the next few years. We should not sacrifice the wonderful service Airbnb is to tourism and the funding of small operators in rural Ireland on the altar of an over-reaction, thinking it will lead to long-term lets. More than 90% of them, according to various surveys, will not lead to long-term lets, so they are not a significant solution to the housing crisis. They should be left to operate.

The RRDF is a great fund and I have seen it work well, but I have also seen it not work so well. It needs to come with funding for a dedicated person to oversee it in the councils. In my experience, no one in the council takes responsibility and nothing gets done. Money is not being spent and it loses value over years because of inflation. It is incredibly frustrating. I have seen it in a town in west Wicklow where the money was allocated in 2019 and there still is no shovel in the ground. Consultancy fees have been clocked up but nothing has changed.

LEADER funding has helped many rural projects from employment to playgrounds and is a really successful operation.

I will focus on the reliability of public transport. We need more of it, but we first need to get the reliability right. For example, the 132 bus from west Wicklow to Dublin is not reliable. People will not use an unreliable service. There is an extraordinarily poor service on the Wicklow to Rosslare line. There have been no improvements in 40 years in the train down the east coast to Rosslare. This train is the Cinderella of train services in Ireland. Wicklow town and towns further south have all increased hugely in population in that time.

On school transport, some secondary schools' feeder primary schools are a longer distance away from them than other primary schools. This means that when children are in a feeder school that is further away than another school, they are not allowed tickets and have to rely on concessionary tickets. That anomaly needs to be resolved.

Turning to tourism, in February last year, I proposed the development of an American Presidents trail to develop the sites that the ancestors of 23 American Presidents hailed from. I am pleased to say it has been approved by the Cabinet. Such projects increase tourism in many parts of the island and they need to be developed all over rural island, especially using the shared island fund.

With the cost of business in rural areas,-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: To conclude, Deputy.

Deputy Edward Timmins: -----it is important that non-agricultural contractors are recognised-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Roche.

Deputy Edward Timmins: -----in the Government's response to the fuel challenge.

Deputy Peter Roche: I welcome the debate we are having today and look forward to two or three years' time when we can say what benefits accrued from it. The real measure will be in the action.

Like previous speakers, before I came into the Chamber, I was listening to a lot of the contributions. They were almost identical right across the line. Rural planning was one area raised, housing was another and funding for councils was also referenced. In my case, in County Galway, underfunding is a critical issue.

I feel blessed in many ways. I come from a small village in east Galway, Abbeyknockmoy, where we have a good, thriving community. That is because we have business people who try hard and work hard. However, like other contributors have said, one of the things those business people are dogged with is the ever-increasing cost of insurance. Rates are a real issue. The My Future Fund was the most recent additional burden and all of those things add pressure to businesses.

I take my hat off to all the volunteers around the country who continue to make applications for funding to the different rural schemes. Often, it is not businesses that do it, but rural volunteers, people who make up the community councils and development companies. They continuously strive to have a better place to live for people locally.

One of the things I am always challenged by is when I hear of young couples who have issues obtaining planning permission from the local authority. In some instances, cop-on is absent. In all of this debate, urban areas need the rural economy to be good, because the rural supports the urban. That is just the way it works. Connectivity is an issue we have all spoken about today. I will speak about it in terms of public transport and access to services like GP and dental care.

There is a whole host of things that really need to be improved. Fundamentally communities need their young people to stay local and to build locally because they need them to support the local football and hurling team. It is about stimulating that growth and that movement within communities. That is fundamentally important to a lot of those people who are really trying hard.

I commend the Minister on the number of times he has appeared before the social protection committee. I can see the passion that he has for promoting and supporting rural communities. Reference was made earlier to the RRDF, CCIF, and sports capital funding and all of the funding that goes across the different streams through which communities can obtain finance to enhance, support and promote services. It is that very stimulation and growth that encourages young people. It means that they like what they see in a village and they decide to build their first home there. Where there are small towns and villages on the periphery, and I am speaking for East Galway in this instance, I wonder and worry about the future for some of those communities in terms of having the numbers of people to be able to make a successful application for any of the funding streams that I just mentioned. We need to be mindful of the towns and villages on the periphery of cities and major towns. We need to help and support them and to be mindful of their needs.

One issue that we need to consider carefully is that of additional burdens on businesses in local villages, including filling stations, take aways, pubs, restaurants and others that are struggling in many regards. Any decision of future governments must ask if it is sustainable and if businesses can afford it and if not, let us not do it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have just left the audiovisual room where the Irish-US driver licence campaign gave a presentation. That campaign is led by Mr. Ciarán Staunton and Ms Karen McHugh. They presented a report by Mr. Damian Green and Mr. Laurence Donnelly. There was much conversation in relation to the lack of public transport in an awful lot of rural Ireland and the necessity of the car. They spoke about the huge issue that we have all dealt with as constituency TDs, namely the fact that a lot of the diaspora want to come home to

where they are from and a lot of the time, that is rural Ireland but we have not made it easy for them. This State and this Government has not delivered a licence exchange agreement. Even worse, and what was probably more disconcerting for the Government TDs in the room, was the fact that the campaign has requested meetings with the Minister, the RSA and the Taoiseach but have not received a response. That is absolutely necessary. I accept the Government will talk about this policy it is following in relation to an agreement with New York but the campaign refutes the argument that this is the correct way. The Minister should put some pressure on his colleagues, a meeting should happen and we should come up with a policy that actually delivers this.

Recently we had fuel protests involving farm contractors, hauliers, bus and coach operators, farmers as well as fishermen, taxi drivers and many other workers. I never saw so much support for something that was absolutely discommoding. That was based on an acceptance of the cost-of-living and cost-of-fuel disaster we are going through. It goes without saying that many are not happy with what the Government was forced to do through these protests. If we are talking about rural Ireland and farming, this is not the only issue. Farmers are obviously in fear in relation to Mercosur and its provisional application. We do not know what is going to happen as regards the cost and supply of fertiliser or what will happen with the CAP. We keep talking about streamlining the system in relation to how farmers deal with the Department and other agencies but they are not necessarily facilitated. Rural Ireland in particular is suffering from the fact that home heating oil is something that the Government has failed to address. We know the issues in relation to poverty. I would need a lot more time to be able to deal with the wastewater inadequacies, the failure to deliver on housing, particularly in Gaeltacht areas, and the rural planning guidelines. We have been hearing about a report that was checked by the Attorney General. There is talk about hearing about this later in 2026 but we need to see it now. We know the issue for young people, which is that they cannot build houses where they are from and in the Gaeltacht there are particular issues for Irish speakers.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Meath is a rural county under very strong urban influence to that end and juggling those parameters, I commend the great work of the LEO, Meath Partnership, the council and the community and voluntary groups. We are very grateful for RSS, LEADER and RRDF funding to date and would welcome much more in future, if possible. At this important time of Our Rural Future II policy formation, I note the recent OECD rural policy review of Ireland, particularly pages 16 to 51 containing the analyses and key actions. I hope that a lot of those, along with the extensive public consultation, will be incorporated. One of the key actions relevant to County Meath is enhanced provision of modern, safe and accessible public transport. In particular, I would suggest extending Dublin Bus to zone 1 areas and enabling Bus Éireann and Local Link to expand their services. Access to education is also important, particularly further education. The single phase development of Dunboyne College of Further Education will actually increase inbound commuting. Another key action is the land use review and the RSES, strengthening coordinated housing, employment and infrastructure such as adequate water supplies for Dunshaughlin and Skreen. The revitalisation and regeneration of towns such as Dunshaughlin to better serve the vast rural hinterland of south east Meath is also key. Similar to Austria, France and Japan, pairing workforce and housing support with transport and SME zone planning is important. Expanding the remit of the LEO to include non-exporting enterprises, including care and retail businesses, would be most welcome.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive opening statement agus go n'eirí an tadh leis.

Deputy Carol Nolan: This risks being yet another exercise in performative consultation while rural Ireland continues to pay the price for the previous Government's failure to deliver. Launched in March 2021, the last rural development policy was full of grand promises of a thriving countryside, digital connectivity for all, revitalised towns and villages, enhanced public services and active support for a vibrant, sustainable agricultural sector. The policy has, instead, presided over a period of managed decline. High speed broadband remains patchy in far too many rural areas. Housing provision in rural communities has been strangled by planning restrictions. Only last night I attended a cost-of-living meeting in Cloghan which took place after the fuel protests. We heard at that meeting of the case of a couple who had to abandon their hopes and dreams of building a home due to excessive costs. They only got as far as digging out a foundation. That is very wrong. That is failing rural people. We need to see action here.

The comments of the former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on rural Ireland were disgraceful. He should really hang his head in shame and so should Fine Gael.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Like many others, I resent the comments by the former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, more or less saying that rural Ireland is a burden to the State. That was dreadful. Each and every one of us needs to demonstrate to the people of rural Ireland that we appreciate them here in Dáil Éireann. In Kerry we have a unique situation whereby there are 575 roads on the waiting list for the local improvement scheme, LIS. They are not private roads. They are public roads that were never taken in charge by the county council. There could be ten to 20 houses on each of these roads.

We only got €1.2 million again this year.

I raise the issue of planning in Kerry for people to build a one-off house for themselves. These people want nothing else but planning. They will do the rest of it themselves. They are being denied that day in, day out for year after year. It is very sad. The other thing that is very important in rural Kerry and in our small villages and towns is the LEADER programme. As we approach the new CAP, having already been told that there will be a 28% reduction in the CAP, I worry that LEADER funding will get squeezed, as well as the farmers who are trying to survive.

I know the Minister is attentive, and I appreciate that, but we need to address these urgent issues for the people who are trying to survive. There was one thing in the package that did not include people with diggers, cranes and any kind of machinery involved in construction. They got nothing toward the exorbitant cost of the green diesel.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí go léir tráthnóna inniu. Cé nach bhfuilimid ar aon intinn ar gach rud, is léir nach bhfuil ach dea-rún ag gach duine anseo i leith thodhchaí níos dóchasaí a chruthú do cheantair agus do mhuintir thuaithe na hÉireann. Is ceart - agus tá sé soiléir - go bhfuil bród ag gach duine as a gceantair thuaithe, as ár n-oidhreacht thuaithe agus

go háirithe as ár bpobal tuaithe. Is cuid lárnach iad dár ndúchas mar thír, agus tá ár bhforbairt náisiúnta amuigh anseo fite fuaite lenár bhforbairt thuaithe ansin.

I thank every Deputy. While we may disagree on many of the items, there was passion and pride in the debate today. I join Deputy Michael Collins and Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony in paying tribute to the late Councillor Joe Carroll. There have been many tributes to him for his passion. Deputy Collins summed him up wonderfully. He was a joyful character. He brought passion to politics and to people. I extend my deepest sympathies to his wife, Sheila, and his family, on his very untimely passing.

A number of key issues were raised around infrastructure and services. I will touch on some of them. Many people raised post offices. Through Our Rural Future, we have provided the funds to the Department of communications for rural post offices in particular to assist them. It is one of the challenges, as we invest in the national broadband scheme - which is rolling out ahead of schedule - that we are giving people more access to online services. That means we have to ensure that subsidies are available for services such as post offices. Many Deputies spoke about the withdrawal of post offices, Garda stations and banks, for instance. That is something that we need to look at to ensure that there are facilities within rural villages and towns to get that footfall.

There has been a lot of talk about housing, particularly the proposal by Deputies Wall and Timmins around serviced sites in rural areas and rural communities. Deputy Martin Kenny raised a point about DEDs and the population of DEDs. It is something I will reflect on, combined with the proposals in relation to serviced sites in areas. The Minister, Deputy Browne, is committed to rural housing guidelines. Many of the issues that have been discussed across the House are shared in terms of people who need access to rural areas, families who want to return. Deputy Timmins made the comment about families wanting to come back into rural areas and it being held against them that they may have property in urban areas. I am committed to working with the Minister, Deputy Browne, on that.

Deputy McGuinness called for targeted supports for the Gaeltacht and our islands. I have introduced that. I have introduced extra supports in terms of RRDF, town and village renewal and CLÁR, specifically for Gaeltacht areas, but also for islands. We would have been at the Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann AGM last week - it was postponed, unfortunately - to try to address the challenges that we face there. I also want to see skills, particularly on our islands, to ensure that we have the services on the islands. That is why we have worked with technology in relation to healthcare. I commend the work under way in the University of Galway around that space. It is about how we can bring remote healthcare to islands by using technology. There is some very good work there.

Both Deputies McGuinness and Mac Lochlainn have spoken about rural fishing communities. I have asked Deputy Mac Lochlainn to provide me with the information in relation to the Faroe Islands. I certainly want to see how we can do in that. I will come back to the Deputies. A number of Deputies, including Deputy Conway-Walsh, raised seaweed harvesting. It is a traditional industry that we need to respect and regard.

Many Deputies have raised challenges in relation to Rural Link and Local Link. Equally, we have to acknowledge the massive transformation that has been made on Local Link in the last number of years. We have seen that in Mayo, led by Sarah Togher and her fantastic board.

There has been a transformation of the service. Yes, we need to continue to investment and a number of areas have been challenged around that.

My colleague, Deputy Ryan O'Meara, raised community cafés and community services. That is something I will seek to support in the new Our Rural Future. The community café model is fantastic and it shows.

Many Deputies have spoken today about volunteers. The point I always make is that parents, young parents in particular, get very busy doing the runs and being in ten places at the one time for the same training, but could you imagine if there were no trainers? Imagine there was no local committee to do the training. Imagine there was nobody to give the drama classes. Life would be a lot more complicated then if people had to entertain the kids themselves. That volunteer spirit is what keeps rural Ireland going. Deputy Roche and a number of other Deputies referred to what we call the bureaucracy burden that we unintentionally place on volunteers. That is something I am committed to addressing. We have made changes to CCIF. LEADER is one of the programmes that comes back a lot as having a major bureaucracy element to it, and it does because it is cofunded. We have to make sure that the form filling and the necessary information is not frightening people off. That is something we are committed to.

A lot of issues were raised regarding businesses in rural areas. We face a major challenge. As we go online and become more online, we have to try to protect businesses and base businesses in rural areas. I am certainly open to ideas and proposals on how we can do that. If we can do that, while there is a generation who may never walk into a shop, we have to give them a reason to use and go to a town and a village, be it for schools, community events, sport or the activities I referred to earlier. That is why we invest in infrastructure. That is why we invest in community infrastructure in order to do that.

I thank all the Deputies for their contributions, including the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. We have taken that on board and we will incorporate it into Our Rural Future. Equally, we all have a job to drive this debate on within our groups and parties, but also to actually deliver changes that support rural communities. That is something that we want to lead on. Many Deputies have referred to this. There is no need to divide our country. At a time of such division internationally, there is no need to divide this country between urban and rural. Urban areas need rural communities and *vice versa*.

The west coast of Ireland is providing some leading healthcare, pharmaceutical and health technology. It is providing services and treatments around the world from rural brains and a rural sense of enterprise. It is a kind of enterprise or *meitheal*. I speak of this all over the country. *Meitheal* must be a Mayo thing. I am struck by the fact that people do not seem to realise the work that volunteers to do in coming together in common purpose is *meitheal*. It happens everywhere in the country, but that is driven from within rural communities. It is driven from the passion of rural communities - a passion that was in evidence in the Chamber today.

Gabhaim míle buíochas le gach duine as páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo inniu. Bhí sé úsáideach. Táimid chun an polasaí nua a fhoilsiú i gceann cúpla seachtain. Táim ag tnúth go mór leis an bpolasaí sin a chur i bhfeidhm. I am looking to the new draft, but, most importantly, the policy will not be the important thing. It is the action plan that will go with it. It will

include measurable, ambitious actions that I will have no difficulty, as long as I am Minister in this Department, reporting back on. I will conclude by thanking all of the officials in my Department who work incredibly hard in this space. I especially thank each and every person across rural Ireland who volunteers in any format, in any organisation and in any club to make our rural communities stronger, more vibrant, more welcoming and more active.

Strengthening Workers' Rights: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that the ongoing cost-of-living crisis is putting significant pressure on workers and their families as inflation continues to increase, eroding living standards and affordability for workers;

notes that:

— overall employment figures mask that one quarter of jobs in Ireland are considered "poor quality", characterised by low pay, insecurity, and poor working conditions;

— the findings of the 2026 Ireland Thinks poll, commissioned by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), found that 52 per cent of workers do not believe they are paid fairly for the work that they do, and the figure is higher for women and people on lower incomes; and

— according to the Working In Ireland Survey 2026, 44 per cent of workers in Ireland that are not currently in a union would like to join one;

further notes that Ireland is an outlier in the European Union (EU), in not providing workers a statutory right to collective bargaining, and lags behind other EU member states in respect of paid statutory annual leave;

acknowledges:

— the ICTU "Quality Employment and Good Jobs: The first steps to a new economic model" policy document; and

— that the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy, Caoimhe Archibald MLA, is currently proposing a good jobs Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which represents the most significant piece of workers' rights legislation since devolution, and the European Commission is proposing a quality jobs roadmap;

affirms that trade union membership and collective bargaining have been shown to increase pay, productivity and employee retention, as well as having positive macroeconomic benefits;

condemns that, despite strong economic growth, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Government Independents have rowed back on previous pledges to increase the statutory sick pay, and has delayed the move to a living wage until 2029; and

calls on the Government to:

- provide a legal right to collective bargaining through a union;
- provide unions with legal access to the workplace;
- bring the minimum wage into line with the living wage, and reverse the decision to delay its introduction until 2029; and
- increase access to flexible and remote working arrangements for employees.

I welcome the opportunity this evening during Trade Union Week to bring forward Sinn Féin's motion on strengthening workers' rights. I was delighted to work alongside colleagues from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on this motion and to host their representatives in the audiovisual room earlier today for a briefing on their quality employment and good jobs policy document. That was Owen Reidy, Neil McGowan from SIPTU, and John Regan, the chair of the Meath Council of Trade Unions, along with my former Seanad colleague, Paul Gavan.

I want to welcome members from the trade union movement to the Public Gallery to follow tonight's debate. I acknowledge all the great work that has been done in that area, including to create a new, sustainable, economic model that meets many of the challenges we are facing today and that will bring us to a better future.

The purpose of this motion is twofold: to support workers through this cost-of-living crisis and to increase collective bargaining coverage across Ireland. The reality facing workers is becoming increasingly difficult. Workers have never worked so hard and struggled so much. Across the country, people are doing everything right: working long hours, contributing to their communities and keeping our economy moving yet still finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. Despite strong economic growth and the prospect of even larger budget surpluses this year, far too many workers are being left behind. Wages are being steadily eroded by soaring fuel costs, rising energy bills and everyday expenses that continue to climb.

The cost-of-living crisis has not gone away. It is persistent and placing enormous pressure on working people and their families. Workers are putting in more effort than ever before yet many feel undervalued and underpaid, and they are right. The Government's decision to delay the introduction of the living wage until 2029 sends an entirely wrong signal to workers. It tells them that their struggles can wait, but workers cannot wait and their families cannot wait. Relief is needed now, not years down the line. The delay is simply not acceptable.

We must look beyond headline employment figures. While employment levels may appear strong, they mask a deeper and more troubling reality. One in four jobs in Ireland is considered low-quality, characterised by low pay, insecurity and poor conditions. This is not good enough. Unions will tell you how poor job quality leads to burnout, ill-health and lower productivity. Fair pay, progression options, predictable hours, training opportunities, a voice in the workplace and a strong work-life balance all lead to greater productivity and improve competitiveness. Workers must be paid fairly, young and old, and across every sector. The evidence is clear. The 2026 Ireland Thinks poll commissioned by ICTU found that 52% of workers did not believe they were paid fairly for the work they did. That figure cannot be ignored.

Ireland continues to lag behind much of the European Union when it comes to workers' rights, particularly in relation to collective bargaining coverage. Only around one third of workers are currently covered, leaving far too many without a meaningful voice in their

workplace. Recent announcements of potential job cuts at Facebook and Covalen serve as a stark reminder of how vulnerable workers can be without strong union protections. Strengthening collective bargaining is not just about fairness, but also delivering better pay, better conditions and a stronger, more productive economy.

That is why Sinn Féin is bringing forward this motion. The motion calls on the Government to reverse the delay of the national living wage, to legislate for a legal right to collective bargaining through trade unions and, above all, to ensure that unions have legal access to workplaces. I am sick and tired of workers telling me that they have to meet in cafés and places where they will not be known to discuss their workers' rights with unions. The motion also calls for the expansion of access to flexible and remote working arrangements, supporting a better work-life balance and reducing costs for workers. These are practical and achievable measures that would make a real difference in people's lives. This motion reflects the growing frustration among workers but also reflects a clear and constructive path forward.

Today was an opportunity for us in this House to listen to unions and act on behalf of workers. Instead, the Government has produced an amendment that ignores all our calls, points the finger of blame elsewhere and will fail to deliver meaningful improvements to collective bargaining coverage across this country.

I commend my colleague in the North, Caoimhe Archibald, for the good jobs Bill. We need to have uniformity across the island for what we are trying to achieve here.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I welcome all the unions in the Gallery today and thank them for their ongoing work in standing up for workers' rights. I acknowledge the Northern Ireland Minister for the economy, Sinn Féin's Caoimhe Archibald MLA, who is currently proposing a good jobs Bill in the North of Ireland, which represents the most significant workers' rights legislation.

As we approach May Day, we are reminded that this is not just a moment of reflection, but a call to action and a time to reaffirm our commitment to securing workers' rights fit for the 21st century. Workers are the backbone of our society, yet here we are in 2026 when the State is awash with money but thousands of workers feel undervalued, underpaid and overlooked. They are working harder than ever but struggling more than ever as the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite in housing, groceries, childcare and healthcare. We believe it is essential to legislate to give workers and the trade unions the legal right to organise and to deliver a legal right to collective bargaining. The Government needs to provide that right to collective bargaining through a union and provide unions with legal access to the workplace. A figure of 52% of Government TDs supported a pledge for collective bargaining before the last general election, including the Minister, Deputy Burke. It reminds me of Pat Rabbitte saying that that is what you do during elections, namely, make promises.

While we are talking about workers' rights, we need to look at the rights of workers here in Leinster House, such as the Oireachtas broadcast workers and how unfairly they are being treated while being denied employment protections. I have previously highlighted the poor conditions under which Oireachtas broadcasting staff operate. They are paid a pittance, denied employment protections and forced to rely on social welfare when the Oireachtas is not sitting. They must go from the Dáil to the dole when the House is in recess.

If this debate is truly about fairness, dignity and workers' rights, then we must also address the complete neglect of young workers. I want to acknowledge the concerns raised by the National Youth Council of Ireland. It has made it clear that young people are being left behind. Young workers starting off face the same cost-of-living pressure such as rent, insecure jobs, and higher insurance costs, hitting over €2,000 in a lot of cases. This is another cost that the Government has failed to get on top of.

We have seen good, decent people protest recently to stand up against the cost of living during the fuel protests. Instead of being on the side of workers - the very people who keep this country running - threats were issued by Ministers who chose escalation over talks. We need the minimum wage in line with the living wage. Further delays until 2029 should be scrapped and it should happen now.

A figure of 52% of workers do not believe they are fairly paid for the work they do, and the figure is higher for women and people on lower incomes. Workers deserve fair pay for the work they do and safe working conditions. They deserve protections so that if they highlight health and safety issues, they will not be penalised and lose their jobs. Just today, one worker contacted our office and stated how many workers in the workplace were afraid to join their union, SIPTU, for fear of losing their jobs.

It is time this Government stood up for all workers in Ireland and supported this legislation, which will enhance workers' rights.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleagues, Deputies Conway-Walsh and Guirke, for bringing forward this motion this evening. I also want to welcome some of my former colleagues, friends of mine and, indeed, brothers and sisters in the Public Gallery. I will take this opportunity to wish the Leas Ceann Comhairle, everyone here and beyond a happy May Day for next Friday.

Next Friday, I will join my dad, who was a union official, and we will march in the Dublin Council of Trade Unions' May Day march, as we have done every May Day. I do not think I have ever missed one and I highly doubt my dad has missed one either. As we march, we will remember my mam, who was a very dedicated and committed trade unionist for all of her life. She believed in the power of the unions. She understood the power of collective effort. She understood that we were stronger together, stronger against this anti-worker Government.

7 o'clock

We all know the best way for workers to protect or enhance their terms and conditions of employment is not just to join their trade union but to be active in their trade union. It is not our job as legislators to organise workers, that job falls to the people in the Gallery, but it is our job as legislators to create those conditions and that is exactly what this motion attempts to do. The Government's countermotion is shameless and the Minister knows it is. He is shameless to come in here and try to propose it, but sure, of course, that is what he does.

There is a reason Covalen does not recognise the Communication Workers Union, CWU. The main reason is because it does not have to. The fact that the company does not puts its workers at a disadvantage. When workers look around and wonder who is in their corner, their union is in their corner, the ICTU is in their corner and Sinn Féin is in their corner, but the

Government is on the opposite side. There is a reason those workers cannot get recognition and that is because the Government simply will not act.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: As we move towards May Day, we recognise the proud tradition of the trade union movement and all those women and men who have served, joined and organised. As working-class people, we know that every time our class, the workers, has made an advance and a gain, it is because they struggled, fought for it and stood up and were counted.

I am very proud to come from Waterford, a county and a city imbued with a strong trade union tradition. I have been a member of a trade union since I was a teenager. It was Mandate first and then the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, ATGWU, now UNITE the Union. I am still very proud to be a member of the Dungarvan branch of UNITE the Union.

Workers today are under sustained pressure from a deepening cost of living crisis and, in that context, it is even worse that the Government is trying to delay, prevaricate and hold back progress on workers' rights, so that trade unions, those people who workers select and elect to stand up for them in the workplace, are not even allowed to get into the workplace to make representations on their behalf and to meet workers to increase union density. This is the Government taking a side. It is taking the side it has always taken, that is, the side of the bosses. We have seen it when it comes to the Debenhams workers in Waterford and across the State. We have seen it when it comes to workers in all types of sectors, whether they are working in retail, in an abattoir, on a factory floor, as a winch operator on a search-and-rescue aircraft serving this State or as a special needs assistant, SNA, it does not really matter. The Government seems to have the approach that it is always about holding them back, holding back progress and frustrating the trade union movement and its ability to do its work and to stand up for workers.

It has already been said, but the counter-motion put forward by the Government is shameful. Sadly, though, it is not shocking and not surprising. At the end of this week, on May Day, as workers reflect on who has their backs, they know it is their trade union and us Sinn Féin members and others in the Opposition. They know it quite clearly because they see both sides of the equation. They see the increasing costs and increasingly difficult nature of life and getting by, for workers and families. They also see the other side of things, where going to work is becoming more and more difficult for those who want to have dignity and fairness in the workplace. This situation is being made more difficult by the Minister and his Government.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I never imagined that I, as a first-time TD, would still need to speak about workers' rights, rates of pay and fairness in employment. The phrase, "a decent day's pay for an honest day's work", should have been long retired before 2026. This debate, which should not even be a debate, has been around since before I was born and before my parents and grandparents were born. The points being raised here are the same points raised for decades, with just a few modern adjustments, such as the right to remote work.

However, we have to remember who has been in Government all that time. It is crazy to think that the Government parties have commemorated the 1913 Dublin Lockout and lauded the bravery of the workers taking on the big businesses, but 113 years later, it is still denying the workers trade union rights. This is why this motion has been brought in co-ordination with

the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, reflecting Sinn Féin's ongoing engagement with the trade union movement and as part of Sinn Féin's broader campaign to tackle the cost-of-living crisis and to strengthen workers' rights and collective bargaining.

There are a lot of jobs, but one in four jobs is low paid, insecure or lacking in decent conditions. The fear these workers have - and I ask the Minister to get it into his head that they are workers - is not a feeling that anyone in this State should be experiencing in this supposedly wealthy country in 2026. It is easy to have a budget surplus if money is not spent adequately and efficiently to resolve the problems in the country.

Workers deserve fair pay, secure jobs and a stronger voice in the workplace. I doubt that even the do-nothing Government's spokespeople could have a counter-argument for that point. To support workers to organise and facilitate greater trade union membership, Sinn Féin and the trade unions are calling on the Government to provide a legal right to collective bargaining through a union and to introduce a right for trade unions to access workplaces. The counter-motion is an absolute insult to every worker right around this nation and I urge the Minister to listen to the contributions tonight, reflect on them and withdraw it.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The cost-of-living crisis is putting significant pressure on workers and families. Bills are rising, rents are soaring and wages are simply not keeping pace. While employment figures are often hailed as good news, they only tell part of the story, because behind those headline numbers is a reality this Government refuses to face. One quarter of jobs in Ireland are considered poor quality, characterised by low pay, insecurity and poor working conditions. That is not a success; that is a failure of political choices, and workers know that. That is why 44% of workers in Ireland who are not currently in a union say they would like to join one. They understand that collective strength is the only real protection against exploitation. Trade union membership has for many years been proven to deliver better pay, better conditions and dignity at work.

Let me bring this beyond statistics, though, to what it means for real lives. I have been contacted by carers in County Clare struggling with the cost of living. County Clare is predominantly rural, so one carer, Jean, travels 44 km between one client and the next. She has no choice but to put fuel in her car, or her clients will be without care. Yet Jean is now at the point where she can barely afford to go to work, never mind work, and she is living pay cheque to pay cheque. Others have told me they are having to borrow money during the week just to make it to their next payday. This is not just difficult; it is completely unsustainable. It means that if something goes wrong, such as a much-needed car breaks down or medical issues arise, there is no safety net, no contingency fund, and this is the reality for far too many workers.

In fact, workers are worse off today than they were at the start of 2022, and were forgotten about in the last budget by the Minister's Government. We see the same pattern when we look at apprentices. We are being told by apprentices themselves that the supports available to them are not fit for purpose. I have met many apprentices and through our work on the relevant committee we have heard consistently that being paid well below the minimum wage acts as a barrier to participation. It pushes people out. Apprentices are leaving their training to take up better-paid jobs just to survive, or they are leaving the country, their home, altogether for a better life elsewhere. At the very same time, we are told we need more apprentices in

construction. The situation simply does not add up. The Connect trade union has rightly described the situation as poverty pay.

I am asking whose side the Government is on. Sinn Féin stands firmly on the side of workers. In case the Minister asks about the North, Caoimhe Archibald is introducing a good jobs employment rights Bill to significantly enhance workers' rights. We believe work must pay and that nobody who goes out to earn a living should be forced into hardship. Workers built this economy and sustain it every day. It is time they are treated with the respect and protection they deserve.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I too want to welcome our union representatives in the Gallery and commend them for the work they do, day in and day out, representing workers across the country.

Workers are tired. They are tired of hearing that the economy is thriving while they struggle from week to week. The Government boasts about growth in exports and record employment, but workers cannot pay sky-high bills or meet the rising fuel costs with GDP figures, and nor can they buy groceries with headlines about surpluses.

The reality is that for the last number of weeks, the Government has fallen over itself to tell the good and great that the fuel allowance has been extended to over 50,000 working families who rely on the working family payment. If work paid properly, however, then families would not need the State to top up their wages. Inequality is not spread evenly. In Longford-Westmeath, disposable income is between 15% and 25% below average. This means that workers in my area, which is also the Minister's area, are being asked to cope on lower incomes while they face the same rising costs for food, energy, childcare and housing as everybody else.

When this Government delays the living wage until 2029, who does the Government think is carrying that burden? It is not those at the top; it is the workers in counties like Longford and Westmeath and families already stretched to the limit. Over half of workers say they are not paid fairly. One in four jobs is classed as poor quality. Nearly half of non-union workers say they would join a union if they could. Workers should have the legal right to collective bargaining, union access to workplaces, a living wage and stronger rights to flexible and remote working. The Government should stop pretending that national growth figures mean everybody is prospering; they are not. They certainly are not in Longford and they certainly are not in Westmeath and nor are any of those 50,000 families relying on State wage supports.

If the Government truly believes in rewarding work, it is time to prove it. I ask the Minister to withdraw his amendment and support this motion, workers, and fair pay.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"recognises that:

— Ireland has experienced significant global inflationary pressures arising from international shocks, including energy price volatility, supply chain disruption and geopolitical instability, which have increased pressures on households and businesses; and

— protecting jobs, sustaining economic competitiveness, and supporting living standards must be progressed in a balanced and sustainable manner;

notes that:

— Ireland continues to maintain near full employment, with historically high labour force participation and rising average earnings across the economy;

— the Government has introduced a comprehensive and record series of cost of living supports in recent years, targeted at workers on low and middle incomes, including reductions in Income Tax, increases in tax credits, and enhanced social protections;

— while some countries awaited the outcome of proceedings before the Court of Justice of the European Union on the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment remained committed to progressing and delivering the Action Plan to Promote Collective Bargaining 2026-2030 (the Plan), irrespective of the Court's decision, and fulfilled that commitment;

— implementation of the Plan in Ireland is well underway, with 22 actions to be delivered over the duration 2026–2030, a technical sub-group of Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, consisting of Department officials and social partners are overseeing the implementation process, with a robust monitoring framework in place, including a mid-term review scheduled for 2028, this phased and responsive approach will ensure the continued relevance of the Plan in the context of evolving labour market conditions and the collective bargaining landscape;

— Ireland has a robust suite of employment rights protections which have been significantly enhanced in recent years, including through the introduction of statutory sick pay, the right to request remote and flexible work, a new public holiday, protections for tips and gratuities, enhanced parental and carers' leave, and regular increases to the national minimum wage; and

— the statutory minimum wage has increased consistently under successive Governments and is set according to the transparent and evidence-based recommendations of the Low Pay Commission;

acknowledges that:

— social dialogue remains the cornerstone of Ireland's industrial relations framework;

— trade unions, employers and the State all have an important role to play in maintaining constructive industrial relations, promoting productivity, and supporting sustainable wage growth;

— ongoing consultation at European Union (EU) level, including discussions on a Quality Jobs Roadmap, provides an opportunity to share best practice and learn from other member states;

— a strong economy is essential to funding public services, sustaining employment, and enabling continued improvements in workers' rights and living standards; and

— changes to employment law must be carefully calibrated to protect workers while avoiding unintended consequences for small and medium sized enterprises, competitiveness, and job creation; and

reaffirms our commitment to:

— advancing measures to strengthen collective bargaining participation in line with EU obligations, while respecting Ireland's voluntary industrial relations tradition;

— supporting flexible and remote working through existing legislative frameworks and guidance, balancing employee needs with operational requirements of employers;

— engaging with trade unions, employers and stakeholders including through LEEF, the Workplace Relations Commission and Labour Court to promote high quality, secure and productive employment; and

— keep the adequacy of the minimum wage under ongoing review through the Low Pay Commission, with the objective of improving living standards while safeguarding jobs.".

Recent action by this Government has resulted in improved conditions for workers, and we have driven many positive and progressive changes over the past few years. I wish to take the opportunity to speak about some of these this evening.

First, I must point out that there is no constitutional or legal impediment which prevents parties who wish to exercise their right to collectively bargain from freely doing so in Ireland. There is an extensive range of statutory provisions designed to back up the voluntary bargaining process. Ireland's action plan to promote collective bargaining, launched in November 2025, demonstrates the Government's clear commitment to strengthening the industrial relations framework and improving the quality of working life. Implementation of the action plan is well under way and is overseen by a technical subgroup of LEEF, consisting of officials from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and the social partners. The subgroup meets on a regular basis to provide structured oversight, monitor progress and ensure the phased implementation of actions in a manner that remains responsive to emerging issues and stakeholder feedback. This governance arrangement supports effective delivery of the action plan while maintaining flexibility to adapt to evolving labour market and policy priorities.

At the heart of the plan are 22 targeted actions across five strategic pillars. These focus on strengthening the evidence-base for collective bargaining, building capacity and awareness, promoting good collective bargaining practices, protecting existing rights and reinforcing the key institutions which support our industrial relations system. A mid-term review in 2028 will allow us to assess progress and ensure the action plan remains responsive to a changing and dynamic labour market. Officials in my Department have initiated discussions with the Office of Government Procurement to determine practical steps for implementing a pilot project, which would examine the incorporation of collectively bargained agreements as a weighting factor in public procurement processes. Progress is also under way to identify and reward best-practices by employers in the space of collective bargaining.

There has been a significant and lasting shift in attitudes towards remote working in recent years. Central Statistics Office data shows that almost 1 million people were working from home, either usually or sometimes, in the fourth quarter of 2025. That figure has remained broadly stable since the pandemic. Recognising the changing dynamics of the workplace, the

Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 provided all workers the right to request remote working in March 2024. Ireland was among the first in the EU to introduce a right to request remote working. The legislation is accompanied by a code of practice which provides guidance for employers and employees on how to comply with this legislation.

My Department just recently concluded a statutory review of the operation of the right to request remote working legislation and a report of the review was laid before the Houses on 5 March this year. The findings of the review were informed by a nationally representative survey; a public consultation which received more than 8,000 responses; and engagement with the Workplace Relations Commission, employer and employee representatives and the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. The review found that when used, the legislation works effectively. Some 94% of requests are approved either fully or partially, demonstrating that the legislation can facilitate compromise. The reported level of administrative burden is also low.

However, a key finding is that the challenge is awareness, with fewer than half of employees being aware of their right to request remote working. To address this finding and others identified by the review, the Department will implement recommendations from it, including a national information campaign to drive awareness and encourage increased use of the legislation. We will also request the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, to revise the code of practice to support use of the legislation. These actions complement the range of measures the Government is undertaking to facilitate and encourage uptake of remote and flexible working, including the code of practice and the right to disconnect, the tax deduction for home working, which was placed on a statutory basis in January 2022, the national hub network, which has been underpinned by significant Government investment, and the completion of the installation of high-speed fibre broadband. These measures are accompanied by supports for flexible working, including the revised code of practice on access to part-time working, which was signed into law in January this year. The revised code was prepared by the WRC in consultation with the social partners. The updated code provides practical guidance to help employers and employees agree part-time arrangements which support flexible and modern workplaces.

Irish employment rights legislation has also been progressive in terms of prohibiting zero-hour contracts in most cases and the provision of banded hours to enable workers to obtain more secure and predictable working hours. These provisions were introduced in 2018 through the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, amending the Organisation of Working Time Act. Under the Act, zero-hour contracts are largely prohibited, except for genuine casual or emergency work. Where zero-hour contracts are permitted, employees are entitled to compensation if required to be available but not given work. The Act also provides for a right for an employee whose contract of employment does not reflect the reality of the hours they normally work. An employee who believes their contract does not reflect the hours they have consistently worked over the previous 12 months of service may request to be placed on a band of hours that better reflects the hours they have worked regularly. These provisions significantly improve the predictability and security of working hours for employees.

The introduction of statutory sick leave in January 2023, marked a key policy development for Ireland. For the first time, employees received a statutory right to employer-paid sick leave. It gives workers an income protection for up to five days in the calendar year should they be

unfit for work, paid at 70% of gross earnings, up to a daily cap of €110. That provides a crucial safety net to workers who become ill. It again underscores the Government's commitment to progressive employment law and the protection, welfare, and well-being of Ireland's workforce. Originally three days, the entitlement was increased to five days in 2024. Since the introduction of the Sick Leave Act in 2023 and the subsequent increase in entitlement to sick leave to five days in 2024, business owners and representative organisations, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, have consistently raised concerns about the cumulative impact of such regulatory measures in the light of rising labour, input and energy costs. Research conducted by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, along with officials in this Department show that firms in the retail, accommodation and food services sectors would likely to have been more affected if the statutory sick leave entitlement increased from five days to seven days. The research was published on the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment website on Monday, 14 April. On the basis of this research, I made the decision that five days sick leave strikes the right balance. It gives workers income protection for five days, after which illness benefit is there to support them.

Turning to the introduction of the living wage, I wish to make clear at the outset that the Government remains fully committed to ensuring fair wages for low-paid workers in our economy, and I also highlight the real progress we have made in raising the national minimum wage in recent years, by way of substantial increases.

Since 2020, the national minimum wage has increased by 40%, from €10.10 to today's rate of €14.15 an hour. This includes a 12% increase in 2024, a further increase of more than 6% in 2025, and an additional rise of almost 5% at the start of this year. These increases were well ahead of inflation and have delivered substantial, real-wage growth for the lowest-paid workers in our economy. The Government is committed to the progression to a living wage, set at 60% of the median hourly wages during its lifetime, and to promoting positive working conditions across the economy. However, it is also important to maintain a regulatory environment that allows businesses to remain viable, and to continue to provide quality jobs. It was in that context that last year, as part of measures designed to bolster resilience and support competitiveness, the Government agreed to adjust the timeline for the progression until 2029. This decision should be considered in the context of the recent significant increases in the minimum wage, as I have already outlined, and the progress achieved in reaching a living wage.

The Low Pay Commission, using CSO earnings data, has estimated that the 2025 national minimum wage represented just under 60% of median hourly earnings, and approximately 56% using labour force survey data, underlining the significant progress already achieved. The Government, therefore, believes that any further increases in the national minimum wage must continue to be managed in a sustainable way, and one that does not threaten employment or competitiveness.

This is particularly important for sectors such as hospitality, food services and retail, where employers continue to face significant cost pressures in respect of labour, regulatory costs and energy costs. The Government's objective is to support low-paid workers while protecting the viability of the businesses that employ them.

The Government carefully considers the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission when determining the appropriate national minimum wage. The commission, when making its recommendation for the minimum wage, has a statutory obligation to have regard-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Peter Burke: I can put the rest on the record of the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please do. I call Deputy Devine.

Deputy Máire Devine: With paltry sick leave and a living wage kicked to touch, in his contribution, the Minister did not do an awful lot to instil confidence. His first point was that "nothing prevents parties who wish to exercise their right to collectively bargain". He can tell that to the 700 workers in Covalen. I do not think they would find that very comforting at all. Trade unions are the only organisations that protect the rights and interests of workers, yet in our country, which has a long history of struggle and union activism, is an outlier in Europe. Workers have no right to collective bargaining. Employers holds the cards – their veto – and can refuse to engage with unions, which happens. That creates a chilling effect for workers in the context of job security and the quality of their well-being.

The voluntary system is unfair, one-sided and very short-sighted. It flies in the face of our obligations under international human rights law. It is counterproductive for thriving, successful enterprises and services. In fact, collective bargaining secures industrial peace and economic stability. It respects workers and employers and establishes mature dialogue and has been shown to prevent much industrial action. All other European states legislate for this, and most avoid strikes and stoppages. They reap the rewards of rewarding workers for productivity, innovation and ownership. Those rewards support industrial peace, economic stability and success. Workers have a democratic right to be collectively represented by trade unions.

This Government, including the Minister, made a pledge. It should honour that now. The counter-motion is an embarrassment. The Minister made a pre-election pledge, and now he comes along with this. It is time to step up to the plate and deliver.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am proud member of a trade union, SIPTU, and have been for almost 20 years. When I lived in America, I was a member of the services union 32B/32J. I was delighted to see the positive impact that the support from that union had on the election last year of Mayor Zohran Mamdani in New York city.

A survey from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has found that more than half of workers believe their pay does not match their skills and effort. Figures published by the European Commission in 2025 show that one in five employees in Ireland is classified as a low-wage earner. The proportion of Irish workers deemed low-wage earners has effectively remained unchanged since a similar study on earnings was conducted in 2018. The Minister can spin it whatever way he wants, but the Governments of which he has been a member have not addressed the issue of low pay.

As a minimum, we need to start with the introduction of a statutory living wage. The latter has been pushed back to January 2029. This needs to be delivered now and not in three years' time. The 200,000 workers impacted cannot wait; the rising cost of necessities dictates that

they cannot afford to wait. Our plan for a living wage includes safeguards for SMEs that may struggle to meet the cost involved and offers exemptions for financially vulnerable businesses. A living wage is necessary to stop the epidemic of low-paid and often precarious work in Ireland. At the same time, we need to help workers and their families to address the rising cost of living, particularly as it relates to rent, transport, and energy.

We also need to legislate for the right to collective bargaining and guaranteed union access to workplaces. The way to drive productivity is to invest in people and improve employment protections. Trade unions deliver better pay and conditions and a stronger and more productive economy, so why is there no urgency to deliver collective bargaining? As usual, when there is a choice to be made Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will always side with employers as opposed to the workers because they know when there is collective bargaining, their rights are stronger, with better pay and better conditions.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I commend the union leaders who are here. I also commend union leaders for the work they have done. Maybe more robust action will be needed in the future. We saw the fuel protests, which involved workers at the end of their tethers who had been given no choice. We see the huge impact of increases in the cost of fuel, which were caused by madness abroad - we accept that and it should be called out – but as much as we have insanity abroad, we need to see sanity here. Those in power need to deliver for workers who are under severe pressure. We hear that the price of wholesale electricity rose by 19.2% in February and March. Then there is kerosene. The Government might not have done enough in relation to green diesel, petrol or diesel, but it has done nothing for those who need to heat their homes. That is an absolute disgrace.

What are we talking about here? We are talking about fair pay and that delivery on the promises made in relation to the minimum wage will not be delayed. We are still talking about a right to collective bargaining and a right of access to the workplace. It is hard to believe that we are still having these conversations in 2026. What have we heard in the news? We have heard about Meta contractor Covalen and the possibility of 700 workers here losing their jobs. In PayPal, 63 jobs have been lost. As much as people tell me that this does not relate to AI, I am afraid that a considerable amount of it is displacement. I know there is no collective bargaining there. That is workers having to set themselves up with incredibly resourced managerial operations. It is not fair in any way, shape or form. We need to see delivery. What we have seen from the Minister in his contribution this evening is continued failure in relation to workers.

Deputy Seán Crowe: One quarter of jobs in this State are classified as involving low pay, insecurity and poor working conditions. The best way to increase pay, productivity and employee retention is through trade unions and collective bargaining. This is especially true at a time when rising inflation and external shocks are having a deep impact on living standards and affordability for workers and their families. I have been a member of a trade union, the ITGWU and SIPTU, long before I ever became a TD.

One third of workers under 20 years are making less than the minimum wage. Why does an 18-year-old hold less value than a 21-year-old? It is simply a licence for businesses to exploit the labour of the young. They face the same cost-of-living crisis as other workers, fuel prices and rent costs among them. The Government is condemning another generation of

young workers to live with their parents, denying them a start of life of their own until they are in their 30s or 40s. It will not come as a shock or surprise that this Government has kicked the can down the road on abolishing sub-minimum rates of pay for young people until 2029. If only it were so simple to defer the cost-of-living crisis.

Equal pay for equal work was a radical concept more than 100 years ago. It should be the norm for men and women in the 21st century. All workers deserve fairness, dignity and respect for their rights, regardless of their age or gender. We must not only bring the minimum wage into line with the living wage but also reverse the decision to delay its introduction until 2029.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I also wish to welcome the trade unionists who are in the Gallery tonight. I thank Deputies Conway-Walsh and Guirke and the Sinn Féin team for bringing forward this motion. It is a very apt and important motion as we approach 1 May, which is workers' day around the world, and celebrate trade union week. It is a time when we remind ourselves of the working class struggle when citizens were treated no better than slaves, working themselves to the bone for a few scraps from the rich man's table to feed their families.

In our country, we have working-class heroes such as Connolly and Larkin, to name but two. They knew the true value and power of workers standing together to achieve decent conditions and decent wages. When we fast forward to today, we find that 75% of companies in Ireland will not indulge in collective bargaining with trade unions. In fact, the practice of union busting is rampant. The irony is those same companies often receive public contracts and grants funded by taxpaying workers to the tune of millions. Successive Governments have stood idly by. For years, they played a salient role in denying and voting against legislation to allow workers the right to collective bargaining year after year. Eighty-nine TDs signed a pledge to support collective bargaining, but they are complicit in accepting companies banning access to union representatives to workplaces and the exploitation of 200,000 low-paid workers.

The Government's action plan is a knee-jerk response to the European Union directive to increase collective bargaining to 80%. One has to ask why any Government would stall until 2026 to put together a so-called action plan to accept collective bargaining as a right of working people to protect their jobs and conditions. Workers deserve to be treated better. It is they who provide the skills. It is they who keep the wheels of industry turning. The Minister can legislate for the right to collective bargaining now. He can include in any Government contract the right of trade union representatives to access the working place now. He can deliver a living wage now. He can expand remote working rights now. Then again, as Connolly would have said, whose side is the Minister really on?

I urge all TDs to support this motion.

Deputy George Lawlor: We in the Labour Party are pleased to support this motion. I am pleased to move the amendment in my name and those of my Labour Party colleagues. This debate goes to the heart of what kind of economy we want-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Lawlor cannot move the amendment yet.

Deputy George Lawlor: Okay. I am still learning.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: So am I.

Deputy George Lawlor: This debate goes to the heart of what kind of economy and society we want, and what value we place on the people whose work keeps this country running every single day. We are living through a cost-of-living crisis that has not eased and shows no sign of easing in any way, any time soon, for ordinary households. Inflation may fluctuate on paper but its impact is felt in every weekly shopping bill, every rent payment, and every energy bill. Workers are doing everything. They are working hard, contributing to the economy and paying their taxes, yet too many workers still find themselves struggling to get by, week in, week out. This weekly struggle is not inevitable. It is the result of political choices.

I listened with interest to this afternoon's Taoiseach's Questions, where An Taoiseach spoke about how he represented workers and not billionaires. The simple fact is that this Government is one of the most anti-worker Governments to govern in this Chamber. While this Government often points to record unemployment levels, those headline figures mask a deeper problem. As has been said already, one quarter of all jobs in Ireland are classified as poor quality, low paid, insecure, and absolutely lacking basic protections. This is not a small minority. It is a major issue in our labour market. Workers are telling us this. The 2026 Ireland Thinks poll, commissioned by ICTU, found that 52% of workers did not believe that they were paid fairly for the work they did. That figure was even higher for women and those on lower incomes. The working in Ireland survey shows that 44% of workers who are not currently in a union would join one if they had the opportunity. That is a powerful indication of a demand for collective representation, yet Ireland remains an outlier in the European Union. We still do not provide a statutory right to collective bargaining. We lag behind other EU member states on paid annual leave, and while other jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland, are moving forward with ambitious, good jobs legislation, this Government has stalled, delayed and diluted its commitments.

The evidence is clear for all to see. Trade union membership and collective bargaining raise pay, improve productivity and reduce staff turnover. They strengthen the economy as a whole but instead of embracing these benefits, the Government has rolled back on statutory sick pay commitments and delayed the introduction of a living wage until 2029. That delay leaves low-paid workers exposed for years to come. This is why this motion calls for a legal right to collective bargaining, for workplace access for unions, for aligning the minimum wage with the living wage, and for expanding access to flexible and remote work.

Motions and Bills that the Labour Party has brought forward in this Chamber have been vehemently opposed by this Government. They are not even being facilitated to go to Second Stage for fear of upsetting big business and the friends in high places. These are not radical demands. They are basic standards in many European countries. Imagine us having the audacity to demand that employers attend joint labour committee, JLC, talks. Upstairs downstairs is alive and well in the bastions of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We must call out the Government's recent decisions that have repeatedly undermined workers' rights and living standards. That is why the amendment we propose is necessary. Our amendment notes that in budget 2026, the Government provided a VAT reduction to the hospitality sector costing €232 million in 2026 and €681 million in 2027, with no requirement that employers engage with trade unions or participate in joint labour committees. This is a sector where low pay and

precarious work are widespread, yet the Government attaches no conditions to ensure that workers would benefit.

The Government failed to index income tax bands and credits in line with the wage code for PAYE and self-employed workers. At the same time, it introduced an improved diesel rebate scheme backdated to January 2026, and other sectoral fuel supports. Once again, ordinary workers were left behind while selective reliefs were prioritised. Since the general election, the Government has repeatedly voted down Labour Party legislation designed to strengthen workers' rights, including Bills to end age-based pay discrimination by abolishing subminimum rates for young people and ensuring that apprentices and interns receive at least the minimum wage, Bills to strengthen sectoral wage-setting through JLCs by ending the employer's veto, a Bill to provide a real right to remote and flexible work, not merely a right to request it, and the introduction of statutory paid medical leave for cancer screening. The Government is on course to miss the mandatory deadline of 7 June 2026 for transposing the EU pay transparency directive, a directive designed to close the gender pay gap and empower workers with information that they are entitled to. These are not isolated oversights. They form a pattern of choices that consistently favour employers over employees and short-term political convenience over long-term fairness.

Our amendment will call on the Government to take the actions that workers urgently need, including the introduction of a cost-of-living mini-budget to index income tax bands and credits in 2026, backdated to January just like the others, alongside targeted energy credits and other supports funded by a levy on windfall energy profits and reversing the hospitality VAT cut. It calls on the Government to commit to ending age-based pay discrimination and the poverty wages imposed on young workers, to increase statutory sick leave to ten days as originally promised when the legislation was introduced during the pandemic, and to bring forward legislation before the summer recess to fully implement the pay transparency directive.

This motion, which would be strengthened by the Labour Party amendment, is about fairness, dignity and economic justice. It is about ensuring that work pays and that the prosperity of this country is shared by those who create it, day in, day out. Workers are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for a fair deal. They are asking for a Government that listens, acts and recognises that a strong economy is built on strong rights, strong protections and strong collective bargaining. I look forward to attending the May Day celebrations at the Lock-out Gate, commemorating the 1911 Wexford lock-out, next Friday evening. I urge anybody who is available to attend those.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am pleased to speak in support of the motion. I commend colleagues in Sinn Féin for deciding to use their weekly Private Member's time to advance the argument for a fairer deal for working people in this country with the support of ICTU colleagues. Many trade union friends and colleagues are in the Gallery this evening and watching online. We rightly spend a lot of time in this House making the case for emergency financial support for working people who are struggling to pay the bills, keep food on the table, and merely keep the lights on. It is partly why the Labour amendment questions the decision to continue with a massive wealth transfer to growing hospitality businesses, money that ought to have been used instead to allow working people to pay a little less income tax this year. It is why we have also said, in the amendment referred to by my colleague, Deputy Lawlor, that young workers must

be paid at least the same legal minimum wage rate as the adult colleagues who work alongside them.

We spend less time in this Chamber and elsewhere asking ourselves why people who work hard for a living are seeing their living standards slip and their hope for a better future disappear, no matter the shifts that they put in. We rarely ask ourselves what structural problems we are experiencing in this country and what detailed legislative, administrative, regulatory and policy changes we need to introduce to consign that problem, in this rich country, to history.

This timely motion goes to the heart of the problem. The Irish exceptionalism on full collective bargaining rights, the norm across the European Union, simply needs to end. We are European when it suits us and Atlanticists when it does not. If I hear one more time from the Minister or any of his colleagues that the voluntarist model of industrial relations is working, I will scream. It is a sham and a scam. It is intellectually and politically dishonest. It is an observable fact the world over that economies with industrial strategies that embed strong legislative frameworks and cultural norms of trade union access and collective bargaining rights are the best, most productive and most innovative economies on the planet.

It is why Denmark, Finland, Germany and Sweden are well ahead of us. It is why they will continue to be ahead of us and to be more competitive. The voluntarist model has not served working people well. Why? One in five working people is low paid. A plethora of economic sectors are addicted to low pay, subsidised by the State. There is a broken social contract and rising welfare supports for the working poor, rather than the alternative. What is the alternative? Better legal collective bargaining arrangements backed by the State to more fairly distribute the fruits of the labour of PAYE workers. Neither has the voluntarist model served the interests of our economy, if we are to be honest with one another.

Collective bargaining gives certainty to business and the economy. Change is negotiated. Skills are enhanced. Innovation happens in a planned way. True competitiveness is maintained, rather than a race to the bottom for short-term profit over long-term sustainability.

The evidence for collective bargaining is there but it is now clear, despite the Minister's claims to the contrary, that this is a Government with an ideological opposition to collective bargaining. It is on the wrong side of history. I am intrigued by the claim in the countermotion about the action plan on collective bargaining. It is very interesting. Yes, some actions have been delivered - the low-hanging fruit, not the difficult, challenging parts. The Minister is part of a jammy Government - a Government that is presiding over the fruits of an economic surplus and of unparalleled and uninterrupted growth. It is nothing to do with the genius of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. It has fallen into their lap but they do not know how to make this rich country that feels so poor better for the majority of us. Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves as a country, we simply do not recognise. Any of us who cares about our country can and should be proud of our economic success but it is what is done with that success that matters. I looked at the Government countermotion and it confounds me as a representative of working people. Why would a Government in a rich country renege on a solemn promise made before the election to introduce modest extended sick pay schemes and put a commitment made to the lowest paid for a real living wage on the never-never? It is proof, if needed, that were it not for the Labour Party establishing the Low Pay Commission 11 years ago, we would not have seen annual rises in the national minimum wage each year since 2015.

I commend our colleagues on introducing this motion. We support it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I wish everybody in this House a happy May Day this Friday. I particularly extend that to the staff in Leinster House who work so hard to allow us as representatives to do our jobs and work so hard. Of course, many of the staff here are union members.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, which succinctly captures the four key issues we need to address and strengthen workers' rights in this country: recognising collective bargaining, giving unions access to the workplace so they can recruit and organise, matching the minimum wage with the living wage, and finally dealing with remote and flexible working in a way that works, not in a way that simply pays lip service to it. We are an outlier in Europe in not recognising unions. That is a problematic issue in many areas I have dealt with in my portfolio dealing with employment. The voluntarist system does not work. I have worked in the private sector and the public sector and I have owned my own business, so I understand why the voluntarist system cannot work. It is because if a company is driven by profit, it does not ever choose to recognise workers' rights over shareholders' interests. It will never be something it will choose to do or volunteer to do. What the voluntarist system tries to do will never work because the power imbalance is too out of kilter.

I was at an event recently and heard a European commentator describe von der Leyen's approach on this European Union Administration as uncritically pro-business. That is an absolutely perfect term to capture the attitude of this Government: uncritically pro-business. In so many decisions it makes, policies it designs and laws it enacts, it thinks about business and how the market can solve our problems, to the detriment of all other interests in society. That is how it chooses to address this and that is why we persistently keep this voluntarist model we all know does not work.

We have heard a lot about the Covalen workers today. I joined those workers on their strike in Sandyford in my constituency a number of months back, when 300 jobs were under threat - never mind the 700 now under threat. They are part of the Communications Workers' Union. I then attended the digital and tech workers alliance chapter of that union. It is so hard for unions to recruit. People will ask why they should bother signing up to a union because when it goes to the negotiating table, it has no power to drive the employer to that table. Unions face a huge issue with recruitment and membership will always remain low if we have this voluntarist model. Despite that, speaking at the launch of the data chapter of the Communications Workers' Union was one of the most exciting moments I have had as a TD because it felt to me like the momentum we know from trade union movements of old, where people recognised that collective bargaining and collective action are crucial. There is a power imbalance which can only be addressed by solidarity and by speaking and acting together. That is what we need to do.

Those Covalen workers trained the AI agents which are now taking their jobs. They are the little tip of the iceberg we will see emerge in the coming weeks, months and years, which will devastate sectors of the workforce across society. Anything that is text-based - lawyers, journalists and accountants - is under threat because data models can take the information and do a lot of the tasks we do. We will see labour displacement through this industrial revolution - the fourth industrial revolution, the AI revolution - at a pace and scale we have never seen

before as a species. In this country, we have no power as workers to combat that or deal with it as the challenge it is.

There are many other crises and challenges facing our workforce. When I ask about youth unemployment, I get back that we have more people in jobs in Ireland than ever before and we have full employment. Youth unemployment is a canary in a coalmine. If we do not watch out for it and start to recognise it is coming in other areas, then we are setting ourselves up for failure.

I will be bringing legislation shortly to strengthen the right to request and to access remote and flexible working arrangements. It is not working as it is. We need legislation that allows people to put that question to their employer and directs that the employer cannot just pull out of thin air something they feel is an appropriate answer but has a categorised set of responses. We also need that to kick in from people's first day in their job. At the moment, it only kicks in six months after they start.

There is bogus self-employment, in-work poverty, the cost-of-living crisis we are all facing and the reduction in quality. ICTU has been out and about recently talking about quality work and quality jobs. The gig economy has started what we know is coming across multiple sectors in terms of automation, AI and the precarity of work they drive. When we say we have full employment, it masks the fact that much of that employment is poor quality. It is employment which does not allow people to advance in life or move out of their parents' home; it does not give them security or allow them to make decisions about living their lives and fulfilling their potential. It keeps them down, as so many of these mechanisms do. AI will keep coming at us. We do not have the social structures in place as it stands with this voluntarist system to combat that, deal with it and treat it in the just-transition way we need to think about. When we talk about just transition of the climate, we need to tack on to that the digital just transition that we should be considering. There will be such a level of job displacement that we need to see this as the crisis it is.

The other thing we need to call out is the resistance the Government has to the improvements we have seen in jobs and working conditions that have come through from the EU. Although we eventually transpose those things, we do so kicking and screaming. In terms of the current obligations we are trying to meet as Union members, I have heard Government representatives say the JLCs fulfil our commitments to collective bargaining, which is absolute nonsense.

The JLCs are working in some cases. I absolutely can see that. There are ways in which they are good but they are not good across the board. Some of them has hardly met and that does not create a situation where workers feel in any way empowered or in any way that they have a fair shout in terms of dealing with their employers.

The vision we need to seek is of a social democratic society where unions are properly recognised, where people can sign up for their trade union, where they do not have to hide and furtively discuss the idea of organising within their workplaces, and where access to the workplace is provided to unions which allows people to organise and to bargain collectively for better pay and working conditions. We need that system where the living wage is where our minimum wage is at and where people can access remote working and flexible working arrangements and that they can do so with the power of collective action, that they can sit at a table and expect their employer will meet them at that table. Right now, they can choose to

collectively unite and to collectively act but when they go to that table, the voluntary system means the employer simply does not have to come to it and say, "No thanks". I have heard of companies where one plant will recognise unions and another plant does not and that is just as a result of historical legacy issues where in one company issues are dealt with by human resources while in other it is dealt with by proper industrial relations mechanisms. That is ridiculous. It is absolutely insane that you cannot rely on the security of trade union membership and what collective action can bring to you in the workplace and that, literally, in one company, it can change from one thing to the other. We must address the power imbalance we currently have and we must force employers to come to the table. This motion does exactly that by outlining those key issues that need to be addressed: collective bargaining, union access, living wage and remote working.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for this important motion. I obviously agree with all of the points put forward about collective bargaining rights, providing unions access to the workplace, bringing the minimum wage in line with the living wage and the issue of workers' right to remote working.

I want to give a shout out to a few specific groups of workers. The first is the Oireachtas TV workers. They tell me that the people who broadcast these proceedings are being left off the roster because of their union activities and because they have campaigned over what is really shameful. They are doing us and the country a big favour, although maybe it is debatable that they are doing the country a favour by broadcasting what goes on in here but it is a public service. Some of them are earning about €12,000 per year and are laid off when the Dáil is in recess during the summer holidays, Christmas and all the rest. They are disgraceful conditions for people who are providing an important service for democracy and for this House. Nothing has been done about it. The company making profits from all of this continues to get the contract again and again. It is outrageous. Something needs to be done about it. It is disgraceful that has been let stand.

Second, I mentioned the Covalen issues already. I mentioned it earlier on and it has been mentioned here again. Covalen made €26 million in profit the year before last. It is a major contractor for META that is making absolute billions. These are the content moderators who protect people against the toxic content you get on social media and all the rest of it, who are then training up the AI that replaces them. Covalen benefits from all sorts of tax breaks and reductions and all that kind of stuff, such as research and development tax credits, no doubt, but refused to recognise the union and now 700 workers, and 300 before that, were told their jobs are gone without a by-your-leave. There will be no redundancy and Covalen refuses to engage with the union. Employers should not be allowed to do that to workers. It is as simple as that. Yet, this Government does not stand with the workers but instead bends over backwards for these companies that exploit workers, make super profits and treats them in this utterly disgraceful way.

I spoke to those workers, their union representatives, the Communication Workers Union, CWU, and their shop stewards this morning and they are asking the Government for an intervention. They want to meet the Taoiseach and the senior Minister and they want the Government to intervene with Meta to engage with the union and to, at least, insist something is done about this six-month cooling-off period - it means they cannot get a job elsewhere - so they can get alternative employment.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the proposals in this motion. It is long past the time that collective bargaining and trade union representation were made mandatory. It is 113 years after James Connolly and James Larkin led the lockout in this city to seek basic rights for workers. This State is completely at odds with the rest of Europe in not recognising the right to trade union representation and collective bargaining. All that is in the programme for Government are vague commitments. Yes, we have a high level of employment but we also have a high level of poor quality jobs and that continues to be a problem. A large percentage of those jobs are poor quality and low paid. There is widespread casualisation, short-term contracts, precarious hours, bogus self-employment, and I could go on.

Unions have been resisted by many employers. There are reports of the victimisation of those who try to join, or recruit for, a trade union. The Government talks about collective bargaining and social partnership but 78% of the workforce in this State are locked out of that because only 22% of the workforce are in unions in 2024, the second lowest rate of union membership in the European Union, according to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The Government needs to legislate to give trade unions legal access to workplaces, to organise and to provide legal rights for trade union representation and collective bargaining on pay and conditions, etc.

It was disappointing that the can was kicked down the road in regard to the living wage. This should have been brought forward and done a lot sooner. While the minimum wage has increased by a small amount, it does not cut it. Young workers aged under 20 are being exploited. Some of them are just getting 70% of the minimum wage, what is called a sub-minimum wage, but they are doing the same job. It is age-based discrimination. The Minister recently decided to defer any reform of the living wage until 2029 and that is disgraceful.

Big business was very well looked after in the last budget, in legislation and in everything in this Dáil. Workers, however, are being left behind and it is now time to give basic rights to workers - those who get up early and keep this country running. A legal right to representation by a trade union and membership of one is a must. While you can join one, you cannot be represented by it.

Access to the workplace for unions representatives is essential as is bringing forward reform of the minimum wage. That it has to wait until 2029 must be rescinded. We need to deal with the exploitation of young workers aged under 20 who are doing the same work but who are on this so-called sub-minimum wage. That is not acceptable. That is discrimination against young workers.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome the Sinn Féin motion and call on as many workers as possible to come out this Friday, on May Day, at 6.30 p.m. in Dublin. We need a movement of workers in this country and workers need to learn from what happened during the recent protests.

I do not have much time, so I will focus on the mistreatment of workers by the Government, their employer. They are the ASTI members. The Government has taken a decision to restrict access to promotional posts for the senior cycle leaving certificate reform. It will not be open to ASTI members, the biggest second level union in this country, because the ASTI did not vote the way the Government wanted it to vote in a recent ballot. The Government is discriminating

on the basis of union membership. ASTI members are being punished, not because they rejected senior cycle reform, by the way, but because they rejected an unsafe and unsupported implementation model. Despite this, ASTI members are now excluded by their employer from applying for AP1 and AP2 posts while other teachers in the TUI, in no union at all and who did not have a vote or who did not bother to vote will be permitted to apply. Even if they did vote against it, it is a bit like saying that Fine Gael tried to abolish the Seanad and failed, so it should never be allowed to go into the Seanad. It is the exact same situation.

This is a clear escalation from past disputes over pay and conditions into direct discrimination in career progression for teachers who are members of the union. Teachers are being asked to take on a huge amount of responsibility and these were the issues that determined that vote for State certification through additional assessment components.

8 o'clock

Teachers now have to verify authenticity in the age of AI, effectively taking over roles that were once done by the State Examinations Commission. They are also being asked to supervise exams or to run exams with significant safety concerns, for example the new laboratory-based assessments. These issues remain unresolved and it is not an isolated pattern. It follows a previous pattern where ASTI members were discriminated against but it is new in not allowing people to apply for promotion. It now means that any worker should learn from this because if the Government does not like a decision taken in a ballot, it can discriminate against you in order to reward compliance by one group of workers. That is an absolutely disgusting decision and I am asking the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, to reverse it. The Minister of State knows that he cannot stand over it. I am hoping it will be legally challenged on the basis of discrimination on the basis of union membership. It is absolutely shameful by the Government.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome this motion and support it. It is appropriate that we debate this motion on workers' rights in the lead up to May Day. May Day and May Day demonstrations resulted from the adoption of a resolution for a great international demonstration at the International Workers' Congress in Paris in 1889. That demonstration was in support of workers' rights and the demand for an eight-hour working day, and 1 May was chosen to commemorate a general strike in the United States which had begun on 1 May 1886. In Ireland, May Day was first celebrated in 1890, organised by the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. The key demand from the platform speakers on the day of course was the eight-hour working day.

The working class and their trade unions have always been at the forefront of the fight for workers' rights and for national independence and self-determination. We need only remember the 1913 Lockout, the 1916 Easter Rising and the role played by the Irish Citizen Army led by James Connolly. We remember the banner hanging from Liberty Hall, the HQ of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union at the time which said, "We serve neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland". Is it not shameful that, more than 100 years since independence, Irish workers do not have the legal right to collective bargaining through a union?

The work in Ireland survey 2026 found that the 44% of workers in Ireland who are not currently in a trade union would like to join. One of the reasons is that many employers, including hugely profitable multinational companies, refuse to negotiate with trade unions and cannot be forced to do so under current legislation. Urgent legislative change is needed to

provide for a legal right to collective bargaining by trade unions. These companies put every obstacle in the way of trade unions recruiting members, including refusing access by trade unions to workplaces. Some even resort to harassment of leafleteers handing out union information on public thoroughfares near their companies.

Trade union membership and collective bargaining have been shown to increase pay, productivity and employee retention, and benefits to the community generally. The Government decision to row back on commitments to increase statutory sick pay and to delay the introduction of the living wage until 2029 is shameful and should be reversed immediately. The ask now is to introduce legislation to provide for a legal right to collective bargaining by trade unions, to provide legal access to workplaces by trade unions, to increase statutory sick pay, and to introduce the living wage immediately.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Aontú supports workers' rights. Good work should ensure good pay, terms and conditions. A worker who works hard should have a decent wage and should be able to live well. Aontú is committed to justice in the workplace and the rights of workers on the island of Ireland to fair pay for fair work, and to allow for fair living conditions. We support dignity at work and the rights of workers to equitable pay and working environments.

Low pay and precarious work affect many people in this country. Some firms are treating workers without respect and with limited guarantees in terms of paid hours. I brought in the Banded Hours Contract Bill back in 2015. That Bill aimed to address erratic working hours in this country. Right now we need a strong and resourced agency to ensure proper compliance and legislation enforcement in these practices. Exploitative work such as bogus self-employment is a significant problem still today. It is an incredible situation. It robs the State of the taxes it is entitled to. That should be rooted out. It also robs the workers themselves of their rights and safeguards in terms of being able to look after holiday pay, sick pay and pension entitlements.

The national minimum wage needs to be sufficient, in truth, to deal with the 140,000 workers who currently are the working poor in Ireland. It is an incredible situation that 140,000 people are working but still do not have enough to be able to make ends meet in this country. That is a major problem. No business and no employer should have the right to build a business model that can only function when it provides a level of standards in terms of wages, pay and conditions that are not enough for people to be able to survive and live well. That should not be allowed. One of the biggest threats we have to the cohesion of the world at the moment is the over-concentration of wealth that exists and the fact that 1% of the wealthiest own about 43% of global assets. The lack of employee power in that relationship with employers leads in to that issue.

The Government also needs to look at the role it plays in this. Public services really can help in terms of workers. It provides a social wage, a type of income top-up, in relation to this. It means that workers have more disposable income because the services that they need are provided properly by the State as well. In truth, when I speak to workers around the country they tell me that some of the biggest problems they have at the moment are the cost-of-living crisis, the price of houses and the cost of rent. If we look at the incompetency of this Government, in many ways it is driving wage inflation in this country because workers are trying to keep up to be able to pay for the costs that are coming at them.

Before I became a TD I worked as a management consultant. I worked with hundreds of different businesses. I noticed very strongly that only when businesses are in equilibrium with employees in terms of the power dynamic are they likely to have a proper functioning business with happy employees who are productive and working well. When that power dynamic shifts and either one has too much power, that actually leads to a really difficult working situation and leads to damage to the functioning of that business. For an equilibrium and for a power balance to exist between employers and employees we must have the right to trade union membership and the right to collective bargaining. If we do not have that balance in the relationship, there will always be a section of employees at the wrong end of that power balance who will suffer. That suffering will be seen in exploitation and the loss of the ability to survive in terms of the work they do. We are calling for the Government to make sure that collective bargaining is brought into this country and that workers have a proper right to be represented.

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland supports a lot of what is being proposed here this evening going forward. I would also bear the employer in mind. I do not think anyone has spoken here about the employer and the difficulties many employers have at this present time and which many employers have had for quite a period of time. It is about finding that balance between rooting out the wrong being done to employees in this society but still protecting employers who are trying to create jobs. Sometimes when we talk inside in the Dáil here it is like everybody is Dell or everybody is Apple, but that is not the case. There are people out there with four or five employees and they are struggling at this present time. They are struggling to deal with the minimum wage even while many are giving over the minimum wage, and they are dealing with holiday pay, maternity pay and paternity pay. They pay out and pay out. They are telling me that they are barely surviving. They are struggling and many are walking away. We have to really find the balance here going forward. It is very easy for me to get up here and say, "Ah sure I am with you all the way and everyone is being wronged and everybody needs to be better paid." Yes, there are hard workers, those people who get up at unearthly hours of the morning every day of the week, fighting hard and struggling to survive, struggling to put money on the table to feed people, but so is the employer and certainly the small employers. We have to protect them also and we have to talk about them here as many have not. When I was at the fuel protests I spoke to many hard-working employers and employee. There was a unity at those peaceful protests.

These were farm operators, builders, taxi drivers, bus drivers and fishermen. They were all either employing somebody or employed. They were standing together because they knew they were at the end of their tether and they could not cope any longer. They needed State assistance and it was not there for them. Obviously, people got angry and things got little bit worse as the week went on but it was not too bad in fairness. A protest is a protest and I believe in democracy as long as it is peaceful.

What I am saying is that I do have very serious concerns. There are lot of home helps and carers who are undergoing savage costs. Carers are undergoing being means tested. These are such unfair burdens on people who are delivering and working for this country. They are saving this country millions of euro and they are not being respected enough. I have fierce concerns about home helps. I might bring forward something soon about the Government walking away from the old system that is there for the mainly women, who provide a fantastic service, and who are now being hit with massive fuel costs. They are also being hit with private companies

taking them over. People from all over the world are working in homes where people deliver locally. They were there and they were always willing to do more hours. They were never given that opportunity and that is an abuse of an employee as far as I am concerned. I see it in my own place in west Cork where people have told me they would work extra hours but they are not being given them. Then I am being told people cannot get them, which is only a fob job to get rid of us.

I look at ambulance workers and there is talk about a strike next month. I am not sure how negotiations are going. Recently, I read that there are issues regarding pay and a failure over the past 20 years to update staff salaries to reflect changes in the responsibility in the workload. These people work under immense pressure and I know it well. In my constituency we are blessed to have people who work long hours, delivering for people and saving people's lives. They are pulled and hauled all over the place, wrongfully, behind an iron curtain. They could be up in Tipperary collecting a patient when they should be down in Skibbereen. Terrible wrongdoing is being done to these people. A new wrongdoing is bypassing the local Bantry General Hospital. I am well aware of this. I have been notified about it on numerous occasions. Management in the ambulance service is trying turn a blind eye to it. That is very unfair, again, to workers who are fighting for their basic human rights. That is what they are fighting for.

The Government needs to sit up and listen and reward those who do get up in the morning, the hard-working man and woman who go to work every morning. Some of these people are even pension aged and are still working because they have to put bread and butter on the table. At the end of the day, when most of these people come home, they have very few comforts. They may have the little comfort of going to the coffee shop and maybe going for something to eat at the weekend but this is being denied them because they do not have the money. The people do not have the money and it is a massive crisis in this country.

I met a Nigerian gentleman lately who told me he has been here for 20 years. He said we have a beautiful country but it is badly run. I had to stand back and tell him he was bloody right. He stunned me but he was 100% right in what he said. He knew it and he focused on it. He loves this country and he works his butt off in this country. When I was talking to him we got into detail. The problem is we are badly run. We need to sit back and reward those who work mortally hard to keep this country ticking over.

Look at the fight we had about the SNAs this year. The Government put up a fight on the SNAs and basically it was getting rid of some of them. Not alone this but a bit of respect goes a long way. The Government did not give this respect and put the wrong message out. It was the wrong message, in fairness, but the Government withdrew it. It may not have had the intended effect but it frightened the living daylights out of parents, SNAs and those of us in politics who knew what the SNAs were delivering for the people and that the Government did not reflect this by rewarding them.

I have been on a school board of management for many years and I see school secretaries. Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about the Oireachtas TV company. It is the same for school secretaries. When summer comes, they are told to go home and go on welfare. This is not a fair reflection on society. If it is good enough for a teacher to get paid, it is good enough for school secretaries.

We have to be inclusive. We have to understand. I really do stand up for the small employers of this country who are massively struggling at present. We cannot point the finger at them because most of them are paying all their contributions and pension entitlements. There is a new one again this year that has worried the living daylights out of employers. A lot of them are saying it is not worth it. I see it in few cafés. I know that VAT is coming down and I welcome this but I have seen it in a good few cafés. Employers have told me they were working too but it was the workers who were making money while they were making nothing, so they are walking away from it. We cannot have a society like this. We need to encourage and reward people. This is a very difficult country for someone to make a profit in. They need to be rewarded for the work they put in. They need to be able to go home with a profit because a profit is turned around and put back into the business.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome this debate on workers' rights. I said in the House 12 months ago that if we are serious about workers' rights, we also need to be serious about protecting industries, infrastructure and investment to create and secure skilled and well-paid jobs for Irish workers. In recent weeks I have heard constant attacks on the private wires Bill, which will boost renewable infrastructure in this country. Too often the debate is driven by fear instead of facts. The reality is that the Irish energy transition is not an energy transition but an energy demolition and rebuild. For this we need to support workers and enable the grid to be developed faster and give jobs to electricians, crane operators and welders. This is why the private wires Bill, which has recommendations from the climate and energy committee, will boost Irish jobs, including machine operators, construction workers and apprentices throughout the country and in my constituency.

Over the weekend I spoke to a group of young electricians who were doing their PV course and looking forward to the boost in income from solar farms and, working with the Government, from the upkeep of plug-in solar. I would love to see this rolled out across social and affordable housing, which does not have access to rooftops and could benefit from a Government-led plug-in solar scheme. If we bought plug-in solar at a large scale and employed Irish workers to install it at a regulated setting and at a reduced rate for social and affordable houses, the people in my constituency who are struggling with their bills would benefit from it, as would the people who have trained to be electricians. It would create jobs and support workers.

Many projects and connections that simply would not happen in a reasonable timeline would be helped by private wires. Many companies would prefer to get standard grid connections quickly but this is not the case. Multiple parliamentary questions I have submitted on the timeline delays for renewable projects show the need for private wires legislation. With private wires legislation, we will increase the number of people who can work on renewable projects and increase the workforce, protecting workers.

When people in the House criticise the private wires Bill, they need to answer to the electricians, the workers and everyone in Ireland who would benefit from the increase of taxation of companies that will be using renewable projects to expand their business. When businesses invest here, the Irish people benefit. I hear claims about how private wires somehow shifts costs onto ordinary households. If the company remains connected to the public grid, it still pays the same connection standing charge as many other users. We have seen recommendations on this to protect and support people and the workers of the State. If we buy

less electricity from the grid, and it generates a source of renewable electricity, we will benefit Irish workers. I have heard other scaremongering.

If we believe that the charge instructions need to be changed, the CRU has regulatory power to adjust the tariffs and standing charges in order to ensure fairness to consumers. We need to be honest about data centres in this Chamber. I did my thesis on data centres 18 months ago. I worked in the industry. All my friends who are now working in the industry are shocked by what they hear in this Chamber in relation to data centres. Yes, we need to change the current system of how they are used. We could use waste heat utilisation for district heating systems, but all the optimisations in the context of how data centres are using energy will help Irish workers. People need to take the actual facts on board. I would welcome a debate.

With regard to the-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: All right. I will go again on that. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for giving us the opportunity to talk about a very important subject. I recognise the great work employees do in carrying out their duties in so many businesses that I know. When we talk about employees, we have to talk about employers as well because they are in it together. If an employer cannot carry on, he or she will not have the employees. I know this from working in the private sector for many years. My son is carrying on the business now. We have workers who have stayed with us for almost 40 years. We depend on them. If we do not treat them right and if they are not paid right or looked after, they will not stay with us. It is the same across the board. I recognise that many employees feel like maybe they cannot make ends meet. The cost of everything has gone up. What is happening in relation to the situation with oil is still hurting people. Little was done for workers by way of helping with their tax in this year's budget. That needs to be dealt with, sooner rather than later.

It is so hard now to get trained workers like good machine operators, lorry drivers, bus drivers or whatever. There are so many rules and regulations. We read in last weekend's newspapers that Ireland has the fewest entrepreneurs in Europe. We need to look at that and see how it can be changed. People are saying that this is caused by the fact that it takes so long to get planning and deal with the regulation and everything that goes with it, insurance, and so on. It takes too long to get things off the ground. That places a burden upon employers' shoulders. As we are talking here tonight, we are saying that workers must be looked after. They are the kernel of the issue. They have to be looked after and paid properly. An employer will not have workers if he or she does not look after them properly.

The Government has to do something about the tax situation because the cost of living has gone up in every sphere. The regulations will have to be looked at. When seeking to get connected to services, including those relating to water and electricity, people can be told that it could be any number of months. There is an exorbitant cost for those connections. It is taking so long for would-be employers to get going. All those things need to be addressed, as do the cost of public liability insurance and the weight that is placed upon employers' shoulders.

If employers cannot operate, they cannot hire employees or look after them properly. We have to look after people properly because if we do not, we will not have them. Good workers are very scarce.

I need to mention the oil crisis. Home helps and carers-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----are telling me that they cannot continue. It can go in one ear and out the other, but I ask the Minister of State to listen because we will not have these people. It is elderly individuals who want to stay in their homes for as long as possible who will suffer. They will finish up in hospitals and nursing homes-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----where it will cost a lot more to mind them. I ask the Minister of State to deal with that as a matter of urgency.

There was no package given in respect of the increase in the cost of the green diesel used in machinery that is involved in construction, and that will not carry on either. The number of houses that will be built will be reduced because when the price goes up from 98 cent to €1.78, people cannot afford it. They will not be able to keep going. I ask the Minister of State to deal with the last couple of things I said as a matter of urgency.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy and call the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all the Deputies who contributed to this debate. I reiterate that the Government's approach to employment legislation in recent years has been deliberate, balanced and firmly grounded in the lived realities of both workers and employers. Across remote and flexible working, sick leave, pay, collective bargaining and sector specific protections, we have pursued reforms that strengthen security predictability and fairness at work, while also recognising the need to maintain competitiveness and economic sustainability. Importantly, these reforms are not developed in isolation. They are informed by research consultation with social partners, engagement with regulators and evidence gathered through statutory reviews and economic analysis. We have responded to profound changes in how people work through the right to request remote working and flexible working, enhanced protections around working times, strengthened sick pay entitlements and the right to disconnect. We have modernised our employment framework to reflect the change in the labour market.

Where legislation has been introduced, the Government has committed not only to implement it but also to review it in order to ensure that measures operating as intended can be refined, where necessary. At the same time, decisive action has been taken to improve pay and conditions for low-paid and vulnerable workers. These include substantial increases in the national minimum wage, continued progress towards a living wage, stronger regulation to sectorial employment orders and employment regulatory orders and enhanced protections for

agency workers. Together, these measures demonstrate a sustained commitment to improve job quality and addressing insecurity at work. I also want to be clear that there are no constitutional or legal barriers preventing workers or employers in Ireland from freely exercising their right to collective bargaining where both parties choose to do so. The voluntary process is supported by an extensive statutory framework that underpins and reinforces collective bargaining, promotes constructive engagement between the social partners and ensures that dialogue and representation operate in a fair, structured and effective manner.

Ireland's action plan to promote collective bargaining represents a significant milestone. It reflects a renewed focus on social dialogue, effective employee representation and strong industrial relation institutions, all of which are the cornerstone of a stable, high-quality labour market. Through phased implementation, robust governance and close engagement with employers and trade unions, we are building an industrial relations framework that is both resilient, balanced and responsive to future challenges. It is also important to be clear about the fact that improving the quality of work does not fall to any single measure or piece of legislation. It requires steady and co-ordinated action across pay, work conditions, representation, enforcement and economic policy. This is precisely the approach that the Government continues to take.

The progress made in recent years has been real and tangible. It demonstrates a clear commitment to fairness and dignity and the opportunities in the workplace. While challenges remain, the direction of travel is clear. We will continue to listen, to review and act ensuring that Ireland remains a country where good work is supported, workers are protected and enterprises can grow and provide sustainable employment.

I commend these measures to the House and reaffirm the Government's ongoing commitment to building a labour market that works for every worker right across this country in every sector.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend everyone who has brought forward this motion and all the speakers so far. We have an issue in this country with workers' rights. While I understand the Government may be in denial of that, the fact of the matter is we do not have collective bargaining as a right and that is something which needs to be established as a right.

Of course, we enjoy pretty good employment. A lot of employers cannot get workers. That is one of the issues we have across our economy, but we also have an issue where we have a very large number of people who are in precarious employment and do not have the standards that they need to have. Those standards need to be put in place and that will only happen if the State has a firm hand of regulation to ensure they are put in place. That is why it is so important we have trade unions and that more and more workers recognise they would be better off if they were in a trade union. The difficulty is that the employer can just turn their back on that and will not allow trade unions into many workplaces. That is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

While Government has this notion that employers, particularly some of the large multinational employers in the country, can somehow or other step outside of the norm, that is not appropriate. We need to have a situation where we guarantee that people who work hard, who get up in the morning very early, who contribute to society and do everything right also have rights, and that those rights are underwritten by the State. That is why the State has to

come in to ensure that it underwrites those rights. So far, Government has failed to do that. The big message in this debate this evening is that the Government needs to step up to the mark here and needs to ensure that we guarantee workers the right to collective bargaining and the right to union access in the workplace, and that wages are something that workers must have to be able to live and to be able to get the kind of services they require across the economy.

One of the issues that often comes to light - I am sure in the Minister of State's constituency as well - is where we have people who are looking to get home help, for example, but they cannot get workers. We are told that they are advertising and they cannot get anyone. The reality is that such workers are being paid approximately €16 an hour. That is only about €2 above the minimum wage for work which is very difficult and very hard. There is a real, high responsibility in looking after elderly and sick people, yet they are on that kind of salary and that is the salary which is being offered to them by the State. There needs to be recognition that if we are to get people to do those kind of jobs, we need to pay them properly and the first people that have to pay them properly is the State. If the State and the HSE, which are directly employing workers in this regard, pay adequate and proper wages, the other providers will also have to step up to the mark and pay adequate and proper wages. That has failed to happen.

I commend this motion to the House and I hope that Government sits up and listens.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The cost-of-living crisis has hit particularly hard those on low and average incomes, who are more exposed to this crisis as well as the mounting inflation that has driven up costs. Public and private sector workers' earnings are being eroded. Such households have become especially vulnerable as a consequence of the fluctuating political problems across the world and the unnecessary wars that have brought us to the brink of a global recession driven by the escalating conflict in the Middle East and a related rise in worldwide energy prices. Low and average income households are struggling with spiralling energy costs and the Government's response to this current escalating problem is inadequate. There is a need for the reintroduction of energy credits and a removal of excise duty on home heating oil to help struggling families.

Workers also have concerns about the quality of jobs that they are doing. A significant portion of the workforce has characterised the work they are doing as low paid, insecure and with poor working conditions. What could offset much of this would be making collective bargaining a statutory right. Ireland is behind much of Europe by not having this as a statutory right. The Government's response to this anomaly is to introduce an action plan to promote collective bargaining which unions have condemned for lacking concrete legal reforms as well as its measures being primarily aspirational rather than mandatory. The plan is insufficient when compared to the rest of Europe.

Collective bargaining strengthens employees' negotiation power and balances the employer-employee power dynamic. The benefit for employees is that they can negotiate for improved compensation and better benefits. Collective bargaining can ensure overall fairer treatment for workers, can offer greater job security and, most importantly, legal agreement protecting working conditions. Additionally, the delay in replacing the national minimum wage with a living wage until 2029 will severely impact the lowest-paid workers who, according to the ICTU, will lose approximately €600 this year alone.

Strengthening workers' rights and improving conditions in the workplace is not only good for the worker; it also creates a productive economy. Workers earning the living wage will spend their wages on goods and services-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: -----which stimulates demand, driving further economic activity and thereby creating a cycle of growth which can only be good, not only for the worker but for the country.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The cost-of-living crisis is putting massive pressure on workers and their families. Everything they buy and use, including their rent, fuel, food and meals continues to increase leaving workers unable to make ends meet. The dream that is sold to young people, that if they stay in school, do well, go to college or get an apprenticeship, they will get a job that will meet their needs, is becoming a nightmare. A lot of our young people are voting with their feet and leaving this country.

Did the Minister of State know that the overall employment figures mask that one quarter of jobs in Ireland are considered poor quality, characterised by low pay, insecurity and poor working conditions? The findings of the 2026 Ireland Thinks poll, commissioned by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, found that 52% of workers do not believe they are paid fairly for the work they do and that figure is higher for women and for people on low incomes. According to the Working in Ireland Survey, 44% of workers in Ireland not currently in a union would like to join one. Ireland, as the best little place in Europe to do business, is an outlier in the European Union in not providing workers with a statutory right to collective bargaining and lags behind other EU member states. I have worked in several places where being part of the union was required. As you went into the employment, you were told you were joining a union. It was really good. We had very strong unions and very strong negotiations with the management and it was a brilliant place to work, but that is a rare thing and is getting rarer.

The Minister of State needs to provide a legal right to collective bargaining through a union and provide unions with legal access to a workplace. Imagine, we are asking for legal access to a workplace for representatives. The Government also needs to bring the minimum wage into line with the living wage and increase access to flexible and remote working arrangements for employees. It is about workers' rights. It is about giving people who are on low pay the opportunity that everybody else has - a right to collective bargaining and a right to be in employment that pays well.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank all my colleagues for their contributions. I have to say I am dismayed to see the lack of Government speakers on this important issue tonight. It does not bode well. It sends a message out to workers that there is nothing more to see here. I am really disappointed. I thank all of the Opposition for their contributions. I acknowledge the work of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the engagement we had earlier today. Its contribution reflected the lived reality of workers across the State and their voices deserved to be heard.

Our motion was grounded in two simple but urgent priorities: supporting workers through the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and expanding collective bargaining so workers have a real voice in the workplace. I will address a couple of points. This nonsense that there is no constitutional or legal impediment which prevents parties who wish to exercise their right to collective bargaining from freely doing so shows how out of touch the Government is with the reality of the way workers are treated when they try to access a union. Without having that legal provision there, it will not work and has not worked. There are companies that have branches in other jurisdictions which have that legal right to access trade unions. It is not right.

It shows companies are well able to do that.

I want to also address the position of small and medium businesses because we all care about competitiveness. That is why, in our alternative budget, Sinn Féin provided for a PRSI rebate to address those issue and to address the inequity where small employers may need an extra bit of help. There is a surplus in the National Training Fund. We just need a bit of imagination. However, we must collectively agree that everyone has to have access to a union and legal access to a union. That will not go away so my message to the Government tonight is that everyone should have a legal right to access a union.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 29 April 2026.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legislative Reviews

123. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if his Department intends to review legislation on remote working arrangements in the context of the current fuel crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30948/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: My question is in light of the current fuel crisis, which there is no sign will end any time soon.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for her question.

There has been a significant and lasting shift in attitudes towards remote working in recent years. Central Statistics Office data show that nearly 1 million people were working from home, either usually or sometimes, in the fourth quarter of 2025 and that figure has remained broadly stable since the pandemic.

The national remote work strategy and Our Rural Future highlight the role remote working can play in expanding employment opportunities outside Ireland's largest urban centres. The 2025 programme for Government reaffirms our commitment to this and recognises that flexible

working arrangements can deliver economic, social and environmental benefits for workers and employers. Ireland was among the first in the EU to introduce a right to request remote working and this was commenced for all workers through the Work Life Balance Act 2024. The legislation is accompanied by a code of practice that provides guidance for employers and employees on how to comply with the legislation.

My Department recently concluded a statutory review of the operation of the right to request remote working legislation and a report of the review was laid before the Houses in early March. The findings of the review were informed by a nationally representative survey, a public consultation that received more than 8,000 responses and engagement with the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. The review found that, when used, the legislation works effectively and that the majority of requests are approved either fully or partially, demonstrating that the legislation can facilitate compromise. The reported level of administrative burden is also low.

However, the key findings also looked at the challenges around awareness, with fewer than half of employees being aware of their right to request remote working. As with Ireland's broader suite of employment legislation, the legislation will be kept under ongoing review. However, providing a right to request strikes the right balance between flexibility and the need for businesses to remain competitive, profitable and viable.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State. I apologise. I forgot to thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for facilitating my going first.

I heard similar words from the Minister of State's colleague a short while ago when we were discussing the strengthening of workers' rights under the Sinn Féin motion and it rings hollow, I am afraid. What we know about and what we have seen is just headline after headline about people being called back into the workplace.

People are dealing with a cost-of-living crisis and now a fuel crisis and there are ways we can respond to that as a society. During the Covid-19 pandemic, remote working became something that worked for people. Yet, since then, we have seen it rolled back again and again. I literally just got a ping on my phone while I was sitting here, which was a headline published by *thejournal.ie* two hours ago about Aer Lingus calling its staff back four days per week. The Minister of State's numbers do not paint the actual picture. The 94%, which is a great result, applies to 70 application since 2024. Awareness raising is not the only answer. There are a lot more reasons people are not using this system. It is not simply because they do not know about it.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The fuel crisis is exactly why flexibility matters. It is exactly why we introduced this legislation and, where remote or blended working is feasible, it can immediately reduce the cost of commuting and mean lower household expenses. It can also ease pressure on workers. We have put the legislative framework in place. It is already in use. It has been very beneficial to those who use it. At the same time, we have also introduced packages to support workers with energy costs.

Remote working is part of the solution but it is not the only solution the Government has introduced to deal with the cost-of-energy crisis. Our approach is focused on the fact there are

different realities in different workplaces. Not all jobs can be done remotely. While we are supporting workers, we are also ensuring business needs are met through challenging periods. That is really our focus as regards the right to request remote working.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Essentially, what I am hearing is that the Government responded, it built a solution that is working and that there is nothing to see here. I am saying it is not working. I looked at the report by the Department. Although its conclusion states everything is working, which is what we heard again today numerous times, a few pages earlier it talks about the toothless tiger critique and states: "The qualitative findings clarify that this is not a vague or general complaint, but a specific and targeted critique of the perceived power imbalance within the current framework." That is my issue. It is laid upon a situation where we do not have collective bargaining so people are not coming forward to exercise their right to request remote working. They have no power to push back against multinational corporations, which at a whim can decide they want people to work two, three, four or five days in the office. That is the issue. Workers have no strength and the legislation does not help that in any way whatsoever.

We could be leaders in this. That is what kills me most. The Government tries to tell us we are leaders in the technology space. We could be leaders in this, by tapping into this technology and setting the trend for what we should be doing in facilitating remote working to deal with crises right now.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The numbers speak for themselves. Close to 1 million people work remotely in either blended or hybrid models. That is the reality. The shift since the Covid-19 pandemic has been enormous. It has been supported by the Government through the national remote working strategy. We have continued to roll out the national broadband plan, which will reach more than 1.1 million people in the most rural areas. That allows them to bridge the gap between jobs for which they might have to relocate to cities and jobs they can do at home.

The Government has gone even further. We have legislated for the right to disconnect. The national hubs network has more than 400 remote working hubs nationwide and more than €3 billion has been invested in high-speed broadband. That very much re-emphasises the Government's priority, which is to make sure remote working works for everyone and that those who want to work remotely have the legislative framework and code of practice under the WRC.

Business Supports

121. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measures his Department is taking to address the increasing number of shop closures in towns and villages across the State contributing to growing levels of dereliction; to detail any current or planned initiatives aimed at supporting small and independent retailers in rural and regional areas, including financial supports, rates relief or targeted regeneration schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30924/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Towns and villages up and down the country are suffering from dereliction. Vacant and boarded up shops are all too common now in once vibrant

communities and towns. Once thriving businesses, which employed local people have been replaced by empty units, a visible reminder that the Government is failing our SME sector. What new initiatives does the Minister plan to introduce to tackle this escalating problem given current solutions are not working?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for the question. It is very important that we all acknowledge the importance of having vibrant towns and villages and that local shops and the retail sector are an important part of achieving that aim. The retail sector provides highly important employment, with over 220,000 people directly employed in retail, contributing to the economy of every city, town and village in Ireland.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht developed the town centre first policy, which was launched in 2022. This is a major cross-government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. In March, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, launched the vacant over-the-shop grant, which will provide funding of up to €135,000 to support bringing above-the-shop vacant spaces into residential use where the commercial element is remaining. This grant is one of a number of measures, including a targeted top-up of the vacant property refurbishment grant and the expert advice grant, aimed at unlocking unused spaces in cities, towns and villages by converting vacant and derelict buildings and unused above-the-shop areas into residential homes.

The retail forum allows key issues of relevance to the retail sector to be discussed with a view to identifying practical actions which could be taken by the Government, or by industry itself, to support the sector, with particular emphasis on achieving sustainable jobs growth in the sector. The work of the forum is driven by its members and the issues that they have identified as being critical to examine to support sustainable jobs growth in the retail sector.

A broad range of supports for the retail sector, including training programmes and funding to help retailers adapt to new challenges and opportunities in retail, can be found on the national enterprise hub at www.neh.ie. This all-of-government service, staffed by expertly trained advisers, is focused on helping businesses to access a range of Government supports.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister's policies are not hitting the ground because towns and villages are hollowing out, with visible increases in vacancy and dereliction and declining footfall. Small and independent retailers, particularly in rural and regional areas, are facing unsustainable cost pressures. We know that rising costs in energy, insurance, rents and commercial rates are disproportionately impacting small businesses compared to the larger multinationals. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, who is beside the Minister will know what I am talking about when I say that I walked down the street in Castlebar last week and saw a number of businesses closed. He knows that businesses that have been there for years, if not generations, are gone and those units are now empty. That is exactly what I am talking about. We need action to be able to ensure that those units are full. We need to work to make sure they do not close down in the first place but, if they do, that they are quickly repaired and reoccupied. I am also concerned about towns like Belmullet where shop units are being taken

over for residential development in the middle of the town. I am worried about where towns are going when we do not have businesses in them.

Deputy Peter Burke: The town centre first policy has 33 actions right across government to enhance our town centres and villages. It is from the ground up and is community-led, to really accelerate those resources. The grant that I referenced of €135,000 will be of assistance in bringing on accommodation over the shop. We established our small business unit within the Department just a year ago and it has introduced a number of supports which are really targeted at our small business sector. As evidenced by Central Statistics Office data, all 13 sectors in our economy are now growing. There are challenges in town centres and that is why these grants are specifically targeted to bring them back to life. We can see the direct results of that, as well as through the croí cónaithe initiative, which is bringing homes back into use and accommodation over the shop. That will be a big asset.

We have a cost-of-business advisory forum, which is due to report in the coming weeks. That will look at business costs and how we can reach a position where we are taking less money from businesses by reducing their utility costs and growing their revenue, which is key to keeping them sustainable.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What the Government is doing is not working because vacancy rates in many towns are persistently high or rising, particularly outside the major urban areas. According to the GeoDirectory commercial buildings report prepared by EY in February, the national commercial vacancy rate in Ireland increased to 14.6% by the end of 2025. This is the highest rate recorded by GeoDirectory since it began tracking commercial vacancy data in 2013. In total, there were 30,687 vacant commercial units across the country in the fourth quarter of 2025. If what the Minister has outlined was working, this would not be the case. Fourteen counties experienced an increase in vacancy rates, with Sligo recording the highest commercial vacancy rate. Dereliction is not just an aesthetic issue. It affects the local economy and tourism and the existing supports clearly are not working.

Deputy Peter Burke: I would argue that we have a number of new schemes, particularly the one announced this month, which will make a difference to dereliction and reduce costs for businesses. We know from the evidence that traditional retail and hospitality are under significant pressure due to costs. What I have tried to do in the Department is bring about significant simplification measures. I have also tried to get additional grants in to small family businesses, which provide two thirds of employment across our economy. We can see that through our energy efficiency grant which reduces costs, or grants for growing their digital platform. We are very fixated on doing that.

New changes were also made by the Department of Finance in relation to dereliction, going through the Revenue Commissioners. That will involve a carrot-and-stick approach. We now have very significant grants, on the positive side, but the Government has also demonstrated that it will take action if properties are not brought back into use, particularly when we have a housing challenge. It is important that we see conversion rates increase and the policy balance that we have now will achieve that.

Business Supports

122. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the additional measures he will put in place to support small and medium-sized enterprises facing increased operating costs arising from the ongoing fuel crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30925/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I should not need to tell the Minister that businesses up and down this country are really suffering from an energy crisis that the Tánaiste and the Minister's party leader have acknowledged is the worst the world has ever seen. Yet, in the eyes of business owners, the scale of the supports from the Government do not match the scale of the crisis. What additional new measures will the Government put in place to support all businesses facing increased operating costs arising from the ongoing fuel crisis caused by the US-Israeli war in Iran?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for her question. The Government understands the pressures that rising fuel and energy costs are placing on small and medium enterprises, SMEs. These are not abstract figures. These are family businesses, local employers and community anchors in every town and village across our country. That is why the Government has acted quickly, decisively and in a targeted way. In March and April, we introduced a substantial package of fuel supports to the tune of €750 million to cushion businesses against the current fuel shocks. These include VAT inclusive reductions of up to 32 cent on diesel, 27 cent on petrol and 7.4 cent on green diesel, alongside a reduction in the NORA levy and the deferral of planned carbon tax increases until budget time. This is immediate, real relief at the pumps for businesses that cannot pass these costs on.

However, we did not stop there. We also strengthened sector-specific supports where fuel is a non-negotiable input. These include an increase in the diesel rebate scheme, rising to 12 cent per litre; a new road transporter's support scheme for haulage and coach operators; and €100 million for a fuel subsidy support scheme for our farmers, contractors and fishers during peak fuel use months. These are targeted interventions. At the same time, we are backing SMEs to reduce their dependency on volatile fuel markets through SEAI grants, energy audits, business energy upgrades and supports for microgeneration. Firms are being helped to permanently reduce their operating costs.

We are also ensuring access to finance through the growth and sustainability loan scheme, offering long-term, low-cost loans of up to €3 million. Finally, we are also tackling cost pressures structurally through the action plan on competitiveness and productivity and the cost of doing business advisory forum.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Business owners are begging for supports. Many of them joined the recent fuel protests as a last resort, just to have their voices heard. This comes in the context of the Government's spring economic statement, which predicts a surplus of €9.2 billion for this year, up from the €5.1 billion predicted on budget day.

9 o'clock

Many of the businesses we are talking about have contributed substantially to that figure. Small- and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy. They sustain local communities, especially in rural areas like Mayo. Half-measures and piecemeal offerings so far have barely scratched the surface and not provided meaningful relief for SMEs. I put forward some suggestions recently to the Minister regarding more flexible payment options for grants administered by his Department, including upfront payments or staged instalments, rather than reimbursement as a lump sum after works have been carried out, but he rejected that proposal. I also suggested increasing the energy-efficiency grant from 75% to 100% for eligible costs to help businesses to decrease energy costs in the long term.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy. I respect the concerns that she has raised, but do not accept the suggestion that we are leaving SMEs behind. Sinn Féin's talk around spending vast and wide in regard to budget surpluses is irresponsible. We have surpluses on the back of prudent and careful management of our economy. SMEs have been the beneficiaries in regard to the resources that we have at our disposal in recent weeks. These are designed precisely at a moment when our SMEs are exposed to fuel shocks at this magnitude. That is why we have ensured that we have seen reductions immediately at the pumps. We also have targeted schemes for transport operators, for agriculture, fisheries and contractors and SMEs dotted across our rural communities and across the country who need targeted supports at the most critical time of the season when they are very busy and have huge fuel consumption. We have put a real package of substance together to deal with the immediacy and the urgency in the here and now.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister of State may thank the protestors for anything that has been put in place. The proposals I presented to the Minister of State earlier would encourage greater uptake of the grants and secure the futures of many SMEs, but he has refused to take those on board. I want to talk about it in the context of tourism. Tourism is the heartbeat of many Irish communities, especially in rural communities that depend on visitors to sustain local economies and jobs. As a rural TD, I can tell the Minister of State that public transport, as he will know, is scarce. Tourists rely on private bus operators to bring them to towns along the Wild Atlantic Way. For example, hospitality providers are worried that spiralling fuel costs will make these trips unviable for operators or that they will become so expensive that tourists simply will not come. Higher fares mean fewer visitors, and fewer visitors mean fewer jobs. If the routes are cut, rural Ireland pays the price. The Government should be doing all it can to ensure this will not materialise.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I reassure all our transport operators that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, along with the Government, have introduced a substantial package of over €40 million a month to support our transport services, coach operators and haulage contractors. As someone who knows the importance of tourism in County Mayo, I look forward to Friday's launch of the Wild Mayo tourism strategy, which has a firm focus in regard to north Mayo and Achill Island. These are gems on the Wild Atlantic Way that we need to continue to promote and invest in. The Minister, Deputy Burke, has been working actively with Fáilte Ireland to drive our tourism programme to increase our visitor numbers because we know how vital it is to support more than 5,500 jobs locally. It also benefits the local economy to the tune of over €250 million.

That is why we have introduced A New Era for Irish Tourism, which is a five-year strategy that is backed with real money through a capital programme.

Departmental Policies

124. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measurable improvements in national competitiveness that have been achieved since the publication of the Government's Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30926/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We are constantly dealing with the growing challenge of improving Ireland's competitiveness. While our economy, on paper, seems strong, there are clear and persistent structural weaknesses that are undermining our ability to sustain growth to attract investment and support our people. Last September, we received the Government's Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, which contains 85 actions. Since the publication of this action plan, can the Minister report any measurable improvements to our national competitiveness?

Deputy Peter Burke: The preparation of the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, which was published on 10 September 2025, was a commitment under the programme for Government. Its delivery was expedited in response to international economic developments. The overarching objective of the action plan is to maintain and improve Ireland's position as a competitive and productive economy capable of withstanding shocks, building on our strengths and developing our indigenous enterprise base while continuing to attract investment and talent from abroad.

Ireland holds a strong competitive position globally. This is reflected in our current position as the seventh most competitive country worldwide in the latest IMD world competitiveness rankings 2025. Among EU member states, Ireland ranks second. The next update to these rankings is expected to be published in June 2026. I am pleased to report that the implementation of the action plan is well under way. Currently, the vast majority of actions are regarded as in progress. A number of key actions from the action plan have already been delivered or are due for completion in the coming months. The next progress update on the implementation of the action plan will be discussed as part of the Government's annual competitiveness summit in July 2026, with a first implementation report to be submitted for discussion at the summit.

Monitoring the success of this action plan will operate across two distinct but complementary dimensions. The first focuses on practical delivery, tracking the timely and effective implementation of specific actions and commitments across government. The second assesses strategic impact, evaluating progress toward the broader goals of the plan, namely, sustained improvements in Ireland's competitiveness and productivity. It should be noted that changes in productivity and competitiveness are typically driven by structural factors and are characterised by lasting improvements in efficiency, capacity and innovation. They will therefore require time. In that regard, to support monitoring and oversight in respect of the broader aims of the action plan, the Government will continue to seek advice from the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Across many metrics, the Government is failing to address the challenges to our competitiveness and what we are hearing back from businesses. The housing crisis has worsened, with record rents and with homelessness at a record high. Employers are asking us where their workers will live. They have nowhere to live. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, which has been dealing extensively with the cost of doing business. We have heard at first hand from various chambers, ISME, the Small Firms Association and many more that these costs have increased significantly. Infrastructure delivery is slow and insufficient and not in keeping with demand. We have labour shortages in sectors that are crucial to our growth, such as construction. Our unreliable energy sources and grid capacity are stifling growth in many areas. On housing, we must confront the reality of Ireland's housing crisis. Our competitiveness is being eroded by a system that cannot provide affordable accommodation for its workforce.

Deputy Peter Burke: First, I go by evidence and fact. We are the second most competitive economy in the eurozone, which is a very strong value proposition. Since the report was brought forward in relation to the action plan, we have had a number of advances. Our semiconductor plan has commenced, which is significantly attracting investment in that space. Our action plan for market diversification is building on the risks that are there geopolitically, taking advantage of the 41 free trade agreements across the European Union with 72 countries. We brought forward our action plan for collective bargaining, which we discussed earlier on.

Despite the Deputy's reference to business costs, in the earlier debate she was looking to abolish subminimum rates, which would increase the costs of small shops by 30% or more. She is looking to bring in additional sick pay and refresh the living wage to bring it in more aggressively. All of those are costs to businesses. The Deputy should practice what she preaches in that regard. We have also brought forward and are working on a timeframe to ensure we lift the Dublin Airport cap. That is another important part of our tourism strategy. We brought forward our tourism strategy, A New Era for Irish Tourism, which was launched in December as part of the action plan.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is why we proposed in our alternative budget that we would have a PRSI rebate for businesses as well to enable them to meet the cost. I know that the Minister would not be suggesting a race to the bottom in relation to workers and workers' rights.

Our motion earlier was about collective bargaining and the right that workers have in other jurisdictions to access to a union. I know the Minister wants good, sustainable jobs and I am sure he has looked at the good jobs legislation that my colleague, Caoimhe Archibald MLA, is bringing forward in the North.

We are facing significant skills and labour shortages in key sectors, including construction, healthcare and technology, which are all reporting struggles to recruit and retain workers. We cannot stand here and ignore what has happened with the Meta workers and the outsourcing company where jobs are really at risk as well. What is the Minister specifically doing to retain those jobs and support those workers, and has he met with those workers?

Deputy Peter Burke: I have pointed out how we are improving the competitiveness of the economy, which is critical to ensuring we keep attracting jobs. We have about 2.83 million people working in our economy right now, which is a record. All 13 sectors of the economy are growing. That is not me saying that. It is the CSO, which is the gold standard. Real wage growth increased past inflation last year. Again, that is the CSO report, which is there for everyone to see. That shows there are very strong opportunities within the economy that is growing.

In relation to Deputy Conway-Walsh's colleague in Northern Ireland proposing to ban zero-hour contracts, we have done it. They are proposing to bring in tips legislation; we have done that. They are proposing to improve the work-life balance; we have done that already. So, a number of the initiatives that have been brought forward in the Deputy's colleague's Bill have already been acted on in this State's jurisdiction. We also brought forward the action plan on collective bargaining in advance of the target within the EU, and I made the commitment, irrespective of the European Court of Justice case, that I would accelerate it and bring it in. That is a strong testament to workers right across the economy.

Business Supports

125. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will consider targeted supports for family-run and seasonal businesses in Mayo that are particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations, in view of the fact that these businesses are often the backbone of the economy in rural areas and require support year round; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30586/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: Seasonal businesses, like many in my county of Mayo, are particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations. Will the Department consider targeted supports to these businesses that are often the backbone of the economy in rural areas but also the social environment? Given there are three out of five Oireachtas Members from Mayo in the Chamber, I wish everybody a happy Mayo Day, four days early.

Deputy Alan Dillon: As Deputy Keogh said, family-run and seasonal businesses are the backbone of rural economies like ours in County Mayo. They sustain employment, support tourism and hold communities together while often operating on tight margins and facing unique challenges linked to seasonality, distance and volatility.

The Government fully recognises this reality. Rather than narrow, sector-specific schemes, our approach is to ensure that enterprise supports are flexible, accessible and responsive to businesses with different operating models, including those that are seasonal or family owned. My Department works closely with Fáilte Ireland, the local enterprise offices and Enterprise Ireland to help rural businesses extend trading seasons, manage costs, upskill staff and adapt to changing economic conditions.

In tourism and hospitality, which are critically important right across the country, Fáilte Ireland provides practical, cost-management supports including free food and beverage and energy costs toolkits and confidential one-to-one clinics. These supports are designed specifically to help small, seasonal operators protect margins, reduce waste and improve

resilience. At a local level, the local enterprise office in Mayo plays a central role, and in 2025 alone it supported 200 client businesses and over 1,380 jobs, with a strong focus on competitiveness, digitalisation and energy efficiency.

Mayo businesses have also seen a strong uptake in grants such as the energy efficiency grant, green for business, grow digital and LEAN for business. Access to these supports have also been simplified to the national enterprise hub that supports over 250 Government supports. Enterprise Ireland also continues to support job creation and indigenous enterprise growth right across Mayo, with over 6,500 people employed in Enterprise Ireland-supported companies.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister for State. I also thank the Minister, Deputy Burke, for visiting Westport earlier in the year and meeting with our businesses. However, I have to say and I am sure the Minister of State is aware, the last few weeks have been hugely difficult. I have met with business people who maybe do not call to the office or do not usually talk to me on the street about their problems. I am thinking about a retailer who inherited the family business who is close to closing the doors of a clothes shop. I am thinking of a beautician who has been open for 15 years who told me this was the hardest year ever. I am thinking of the pubs that are closing in places like Achill or Ballycroy, which are where men in their 60s, 70s or 80s especially, who may not be in men's sheds yet, go for social connection. Do we have to help those pubs transition from pubs into community hubs or think outside the box? I think of an ice cream shop that would love to stay open until 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock at night but cannot get the staff.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We do all meet those types of business owners. However, the Government has looked at how we can respond and how we can support many businesses that are feeling the impact of rising costs. Through the cost of business advisory forum we have had SME representatives very much at the heart of reviewing the structural costs within their businesses and, indeed, we will be shaping the next phase of measures once that report comes before the Government. How we respond will be crucially important in terms of the practical measures and the evidence-based decisions. We are also undertaking a review in regard to the grants that are being administered through the local enterprise offices. We will have more details in the coming weeks on whether the grants are doing what they should be doing. Notwithstanding that there has been a good uptake in grants in Mayo, are they being measured through an additional employee or are they building resilience into the businesses that are currently operating? That is really what we want to hear for businesses.

Deputy Keira Keogh: It is very obvious we have been doing a lot to support and I think of the 9% VAT rate in the hospitality industry, which has been really welcome. What struck me about these businesses is that they do not seem to be reaching out for the local enterprise office supports. They do not seem to be aware of that cost of business advisory forum or the small business unit. What are we doing wrong that these business people I am meeting in the street do not seem to be aware of these supports or they are saying these supports are not enough? From an outreach perspective, what are the plans in order that we can reach these people who feel like they are on the cusp of closing their doors?

The biggest thing that came across when the Minister visited Westport and met with the chamber of commerce was rates. Businesses were talking about when they were paying rates

when they first opened their doors, they were getting rubbish collection and free water, and now they feel it is only the roads and the lighting they are getting. We need to go a bit further to reach these businesses that are telling me they are not feeling the support and are close to closing their doors.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy again for her question and response. The Minister and I chair the retail forum and the enterprise forum. We also co-chair the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, dealing with employers and employees. We try to gauge the feedback regarding where supports are required and how we can actually look at this, not just in the short term but also the long term, and the structural needs of many businesses. That is why, as I said earlier, the local enterprise office is the first port of call for somebody starting a new business but we do also identify there are many businesses that fall through the cracks and who are not being supported by the local enterprise office. We need to bring them in.

That is why Enterprise Ireland is looking at its own structures and trying to create a centre of excellence that will have more broad outreach to those businesses because they are Irish businesses creating vital employment in our local areas. Indeed, they may not want grants available through the local enterprise offices but it is a case of how we can support them in different ways, such as through mentoring and expert advice. Can they become the next company that has export potential? It is about building that leadership capability within those companies as well.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Táimid críochnaithe le Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain dóibh. Anois beidh Ceisteanna Eile faoi choinne an Aire Fiontar, Turasóireachta agus Fostaíochta. Ar dtús tá Ceist Uimh. 126, atá in ainm an Teachta Fleming, ach tá an Teachta McCormack á glacadh.

Business Supports

126. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measures he is taking to support the retail sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30062/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: What supports are currently available to the retail sector and are any additional measures being considered to assist retailers facing increased operating costs? I have asked this question previously on a lot of occasions, and the answers the Minister of State gave me, to be honest, just do not land with retailers on the ground.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government acknowledges the enormous contribution of the retail sector to our economy in every city, town and village in Ireland. It plays an important role in employment, with over 220,000 people directly employed in retail. As I said in response to the previous Deputy, I meet quarterly with the retail

representative bodies for all retailers right across the country. The Minister, Deputy Burke, and I are aware of the issues facing retailers.

In addition, during the recent fuel price disruptions, officials in my Department engaged with the main multiple grocery retailers and focused on the impact on issues such as distribution, supply and home deliveries. As I said earlier, we are looking to identify practical actions that could be taken by the Government, or by industry itself, to support the sector, with particular emphasis on achieving sustainable jobs growth in the sector. The last meeting of the retail forum took place on 3 March. The topics discussed included retail crime, the deposit return scheme, environmental levies on single-use disposable cups and the national minimum wage.

The Deputy might be aware that the cost of doing business advisory forum has been established. It will look at the inherent costs for many retailers who are finding it challenging in regard to the increase in labour, insurance and energy costs impacting them. Over the last eight weeks, we have met regarding the various thematic areas of concern. Most of those focused on planning, insurance, infrastructure, water services and wastewater and legal costs. We want real outcomes from this forum. The last meeting was only held last week. It was attended by the Minister and the two Ministers of State here, given the political commitment we have to try to support the retail sector.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the supports that are in place and acknowledge the strong work being done for small and medium-sized enterprises by local enterprise offices, LEOs, and Enterprise Ireland in supporting businesses across the country. However, we have to be honest about the reality facing the retail sector. Over the last 12 months in particular, retailers have been hit from every angle. Rising energy costs, increases in the minimum wage and now the additional burden of auto-enrolment are all adding to the pressure on businesses already operating on very tight margins.

I have raised this issue with the Minister of State previously on the floor of this House, and while the supports are appreciated, there is a clear sense across the sector that more needs to be done. I say this not just as a public representative but on a personal level. I started my first retail business at the age of 21. I was born into the retail business sector through a family shop at home. I know what it feels like to open the doors every morning wondering if enough will be made to cover the costs. I understand the responsibility that comes from employing people, the weight of knowing that others rely on you for their livelihood. I have lived it. Right now, many retailers feel that they are not being heard. What additional targeted measures are now being considered to support the retail sector in the face of rising costs, including energy, labour and auto-enrolment obligations, so that viable businesses can survive?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I understand the concern raised by the Deputy, and I certainly do not underestimate the challenges many retail businesses face. That is why we have undertaken interventions in March and April in regard to the ongoing energy crisis we face. We have also looked at VAT changes, which will be introduced in July of this year, in respect of many cafés and small coffee shops. We have also looked at the targeted grants for local enterprise offices around cost reduction and digital adaptation. This is important. As I said earlier, we want to ensure that many retailers have consistency around cost certainty, simplification and where we can inform policy and inform regulators in regard to challenges or burdens being placed on

retailers. This is why that exercise within the forum is not a box-ticking exercise. We want to look at the situation structurally and see where we can identify cost pressures and alleviate many of them to ensure the viability of businesses.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Building on that, there is real concern that without further action, small, independent retailers will continue to struggle, particularly in regional towns and rural communities. These businesses are the backbone of our local economies, as the Minister of State said, and are vital to keeping our town centres alive. Are specific cost relief measures being actively considered for the sector, particularly in relation to energy costs, labour pressures and the added impact of auto-enrolment? Will the Government engage directly with retailers to ensure the supports being developed truly reflect the reality they are facing day to day? Talk is cheap. We need to act now and act fast.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We are actively engaging with the retailers and the representative organisations. That is crucial. The charge may be that we are not listening, but we are listening. I think that is an important starting point.

The Deputy hit the nail on the head when he said we want to have less talk and more action. This is exactly what we are looking to do, focusing on delivery. We want to ensure that the grants around green for business, digitalisation and energy reductions, working with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, are targeting businesses and reducing their energy dependency. This is something we are talking to the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, about, and the energy affordability task force will look at the structural costs around energy for businesses. On regulation as well, we have established the small business unit within our Department. That is about the thinking small business first principle, which is what we want to do. We have introduced the SME test within the Cabinet handbook. This is very much focused on assessing before approval the regulatory impact on small businesses of any new policy or legislation that comes forward.

Question No. 127 taken with Written Answers.

Industrial Development

128. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the current position regarding the IDA-owned lands at Ballingarrane in south Tipperary, including the extent to which IDA Ireland is actively promoting the site following the recent grant of planning permission for an advance building; the marketing and investor engagement strategy now being pursued, including international outreach and the inclusion of the site within IDA property portfolios; whether any expressions of interest or inquiries have been received to date; to provide an updated timeline for the delivery of an advanced facility on the lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24947/26]

Deputy Michael Murphy: Will the Minister give an update on the IDA-owned lands at Ballingarrane industrial estate in Clonmel and the extent to which the IDA is actively promoting the site, particularly following the recent granting of planning permission for a 100,000 sq. ft advanced building solution?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Murphy for his very important question and the work he is doing on the ground for our enterprise areas in Tipperary. Balanced regional development is a key focus of the work of the Department through our development agencies. In this regard, IDA Ireland is continuing its strong commitment to promoting foreign direct investment, FDI, in regional locations as part of our 2025–29 strategy, Adapt Intelligently, and is targeting 550 investments of FDI projects outside Dublin over the strategy’s lifetime. Furthermore, IDA Ireland is positioning the midwest, including Tipperary, as a competitive destination for global investment and is targeting 100 of these 550 investments for the midwest.

The availability of suitable property and strategic sites is a critical component of the regional value proposition and can be a key differentiator in investment decisions from both new and existing clients, as well as clients of Enterprise Ireland and our local enterprise offices. IDA Ireland, in partnership with Tipperary County Council, has secured planning permission, as the Deputy pointed out, for a proposed 10,000 sq. m advanced factory building solution on a site of approximately 3.4 ha at Ballingarrane Science and Technology Park in Clonmel, which I visited with the Deputy earlier this year. This advanced planning permission allows maximum flexibility to the potential client, whereby they can avail of the permission or amend it to suit their specific requirements, subject to further planning permission.

IDA Ireland, in conjunction with Tipperary County Council, continues to aggressively market the Ballingarrane site and the proposed advanced building solution to existing investors, including in the IDA Ireland portfolio and through our Enterprise Ireland global office network, its regional offices and IDA Ireland’s website. The timeline for delivery of the proposed advanced building solution will depend on when the site is acquired and developed by a suitable client.

I will give more information in my follow-up reply.

Deputy Michael Murphy: It is positive to see that foreign investment is now at record levels.

There have been 323 investments in the past 12 months that will realise more than 15,000 jobs. Unfortunately, none of those investments are at Ballingarrane industrial estate. As the Minister said, this is a fully-serviced, strategically located land bank of more than 50 acres. It is in IDA ownership for more than 25 years. We have planning permission for that 100,000 sq. ft advanced building solution. As the Minister knows, Clonmel has a strong track record in terms of delivery, multinational employers, a skilled workforce and a reputation for reliability. Why has it taken so long to get to this point? It is crucial that Ballingarrane is prioritised within the IDA’s international marketing efforts.

Deputy Peter Burke: I hear Deputy Murphy's frustration and I assure him I will leave no stone unturned in getting a client for this very exciting opportunity in Ballingarrane, which is an exceptional site that has full planning permission. We have approximately 16 IDA clients in County Tipperary such as Boston Scientific, Abbott, Merck, Sharp and Dohme, MSD, and Waystone. These are all exceptional clients providing high-quality employment across the sector.

We have approximately 95 Enterprise Ireland clients in Tipperary that employ 6,800 people. Between both agencies there are more than 12,000 people in employment. Critically, and I

know the huge work the Deputy is doing in the tourism sector, we hope to have our capital schemes for Fáilte Ireland out in August.

I know at the forefront of the Deputy's mind is the Bulmers visitor centre at Dowd's Lane, which is another exciting project. The enterprise projects, between tourism and enterprise agencies, will critically breathe life into rural areas and give towns that strong, sustainable employment they so badly need.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister. It was remiss if me not to acknowledge his own visit to the site at Ballingarrane. This site has been in IDA ownership for a very long time. The people I represent want to see tangible results, zoned and fully serviced lands, planning permission secured and a clear opportunity to deliver a flagship facility. I appeal to the Minister personally to keep the pressure on the IDA. I do not want to be asking the same question in six, 12 or 18 months' time, but I will. I really want to see a timeframe for delivery of an IDA-linked company at this particular site. It is great to see more than 300,000 people now employed in IDA-linked companies. I want to see Clonmel in that number.

Deputy Peter Burke: I assure the Deputy of my intention to continue to work very hard with the IDA to try to secure a client for that. It is important to note IDA employment increased 30% over the past five years in Tipperary as a whole. When we consider the region it is linked with, it has outpaced it by a very significant margin. Those exceptional clients in Clonmel and Tipperary as a whole create a solid ecosystem that makes it attractive for other clients to come into the region. We will work very closely with the Deputy to have a very strong value proposition. Budget 2026 achieved that for the enterprise sector. With our research development and innovation tax credit and the work we can do in supporting sustainable investments, in working with training and skills, we have a very important and exciting opportunity in Tipperary to work and develop further the options and value proposition Ballingarrane gives. We will do our very best to try to secure a client for it.

Business Supports

129. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the initiatives he or his Department or associated State agencies have taken to encourage prospective new owners to establish a business at the former factory (details supplied) at Carrickmacross; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30067/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Bose factory was a landmark in the region of Carrickmacross for many years. In 2015, the factory closed and essentially has remained closed ever since because despite the huge fanfare from a Government colleague of the Minister's, a then Minister, about 60 jobs coming, they never actually came. In recent months, we have been told that the factory is in fact up for sale. I seek an update on the Minister's efforts to secure alternative employment for that site.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his very important question. Enterprise Ireland supported the owners of the factory in Carrickmacross over a number of years as they sought to establish themselves as an infant formula and nutrition providers manufacturer. In March

2025, the company informed Enterprise Ireland that the business was no longer viable in Ireland due to inflationary pressures and market conditions. The company had intended to produce infant formula for the Chinese market. A number of factors have impacted on demand for imported formula in China, including a switch away from imported products and rapid growth in locally produced products. There has also been a significant decline in the Chinese birth rate over the past decade. As a result, the owners of the factory took the decision to sell the plant in Carrickmacross and appointed an Irish agent to support the sale process. They are actively seeking interest from potential purchasers of the facility and discussions have taken place with a number of interested parties. This process is ongoing and Enterprise Ireland continues to support the company by facilitating introductions to potential buyers where appropriate. Active promotion of the facility is being undertaken and further expressions of interest are being sought by the company both in Ireland and internationally. The Department keeps in regular contact with Enterprise Ireland about that important site. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, is very much linked in with it as well. Enterprise Ireland will continue to liaise with the agent in supporting the promotion of the facility to the relevant potential purchasers as a matter of priority.

My Department remains committed to driving balanced regional development, including in the north east. Enterprise Ireland supported 84 companies in Monaghan and 66 companies in Cavan in 2025. These companies employ more than 14,000 people. The north-east region enterprise plan is also focused on delivering a range of collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise environment in the region.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The building has essentially lain idle for 11 years. I mentioned it was 2019 when we had the fanfare and the Minister's party taking credit, make no mistake about it, for jobs brought by Fine Gael to Carrickmacross. The jobs never materialised. The question that needs to be answered is whether the Minister will take a hands-on approach.

We met Enterprise Ireland. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, she organised a briefing for local Oireachtas Members when the Minister, Deputy Burke, refused to answer my repeated requests for such a meeting. This is a crucially important venue. It is a huge site and was historically, economically very significant and important for the south Monaghan region, and it has lain idle. It seems as though everything is being left in the hands of the owners of this building, who have left it vacant for the past six years. My request is that the Minister take a hands-on approach to ensure we restore viable, high-end employment to this site.

Deputy Peter Burke: First, Enterprise Ireland is working hard. It is the Government agency responsible for procuring a good client for the site in partnership with the owners. As I pointed out, this is a company whose business model was no longer viable. It is not fictitious; it did happen. The *prima facie* evidence is there. The owners engaged with Enterprise Ireland and were hoping to employ 60 people. This is obviously a very strong asset and Enterprise Ireland will work closely with national and international clients and the IDA to try to see if we can get a tenant for it.

There is significant employment in Cavan-Monaghan between Enterprise Ireland and the IDA with some very high-value jobs. In Cavan, as I put on the record, there are 66 Enterprise Ireland clients employing more than 6,000 people, as well as 1,557 people employed by clients

related to the IDA. We have very strong jobs which our State agencies support in the area. We will do all we can in working with our agencies to get a good client for the site.

Deputy Matt Carthy: If a buyer is found and a new enterprise is established, the Minister will be there to cut the ribbon and get all the glory. That is the benefit of being in government. However, the job of being in government is that one does not get to hide behind a State agency when we are trying to secure reinvestment in an area that has been deprived because of the closure of a substantive factory. People refer to the *prima facie* evidence, good will and the rest of it. Has the Minister's Department established whether the owners of the Newbaze site, previously the Bose factory, availed of the immigrant investment scheme, for example?

There are huge question marks over what exactly happened on the site. Given the level of investment we were told was being made in the building, with virtually no economic activity as a result, it does not make sense.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am not aware of whether the owners availed of the programme in question. Obviously, they availed of some significant Enterprise Ireland funding but the majority of that was repayable and has been repaid under the terms of the original agreement. Again, that demonstrates that a significant business was put forward at that juncture.

As I said, there is significant employment in the region. There are, as we heard from Deputy Michael Murphy, many sites that require good clients in them but the *Realpolitik* is that we are operating in a very different economic environment, with so many geopolitical uncertainties, and the challenge to get capital investments is more difficult. Notwithstanding that, the economy is growing. We have seen all 13 economic sectors growing, no more so than in Cavan-Monaghan through the jobs being supported by our agencies. We will continue to do that and we will market the site aggressively, as we do by putting Irish enterprise first. Enterprise Ireland is ensuring that over 60% of jobs are located outside Dublin throughout the regions.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That means 40% of them are in Dublin.

Fuel Prices

130. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the assessment his Department has made of the impact of recent fuel price increases on small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in transport, construction and agri-related sectors; and if he will outline any targeted supports under consideration. [30164/26]

134. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment given that many SMEs are being disproportionately affected by the spike in fuel prices, and with businesses across the retail and hospitality sectors facing particularly heavy energy bills, the plans he has in place to help address these challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30074/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Has the Department prepared any assessment of the recent rise in fuel prices and the impact it is having on small and medium businesses in agri-related sectors and the construction and transport sectors?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I propose to take Questions Nos 130 and 134 together.

As the Deputy said, the Government is under no illusion about the seriousness of the fuel price shock facing small- and medium-sized enterprises. We recognise that for many businesses fuel and energy are not optional costs. They are a core input that determine whether a business survives or fails. The Department has carried out a detailed sector-by-sector assessment and the evidence is clear that the impact is uneven but acute in particular sectors. In transport and haulage fuel is a direct and immediate cost and price spikes feed straight into cashflow threatening viability, particularly for small operators with limited margins. The agriculture and agrifood sector faces double exposure, with fuel and fertiliser costs along with transport and processing pressures. These costs hit hardest during peak seasonal activities. In construction fuel and energy costs are embedded in materials, logistics and machinery use. The impact here is real and can be built up over time.

Beyond that, retail and hospitality SMEs are also facing sharp increases in energy bills that cannot simply be passed on without rising costs on competitiveness. This assessment has shaped a targeted Government response. Over March and April, we have introduced a substantial package of fuel supports, including VAT-inclusive reductions of 32 cent on the price of a litre of diesel, 27 cent on the price of petrol and 7.4 cent on a litre of green diesel. This is alongside a reduction on the NORA levy. Crucially, we have also deferred the planned carbon tax increase, providing immediate breathing space at a time of exceptional volatility.

We recognise that some sectors also need more than just price relief. For this reason, we have introduced and increased the diesel rebate scheme to 12 cent per litre. We have also established a new road transporter's support scheme, with direct payments for haulage and coach operators, which will cost up to €40 million per month over the next three months. We have also introduced a €100 million fuel subsidy support scheme to assist farmers, contractors and fishers during peak fuel-use months.

At the same time, the Government is looking at the structural costs to reduce further exposure altogether. This is being done through SEAI supports for businesses, which are being helped to cut energy demand permanently through audits, upgrades, renewable heat and microgeneration. Access to finance is also critical. It has been a barrier for many businesses to obtain the right finance to make these upgrades. The growth and sustainability loan scheme provides long-term, low-cost lending of up to €3 million, giving SMEs the capacity to manage shocks and invest through them.

These immediate supports are also being reinforced through structural reform. I outlined earlier that the cost of doing business advisory forum is now finalising its report, which has been brought by SMEs, regulators and Departments through a policy process identifying real cost drivers and also outlining practical solutions and recommendations.

While introducing immediate relief, we continue to monitor sharp rises in cost pressures to ensure that SMEs, jobs and our communities are protected in these uncertain times.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I want to make something abundantly clear and it is very important that I get this point across. Let us take someone in the agri-sector who is contracting day in, day out. If their machine is costing them an extra €200 a day to keep on the road, that amounts to a grand a week, which is over €50,000 a year. No business can survive that. That is why this intervention is absolutely critical. School bus operators are signed into a contract. They need to be supported. We are already having issues getting school bus drivers and operators. We need to ensure they are supported and they can survive and continue.

This country runs a serious risk of seeing massive construction inflation if we cannot manage the costs facing both self-builders and those building our national infrastructure and other projects across the country. It is vital that as much intervention as possible is put in place to help these SMEs survive. What further interventions does the Government plan to make?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the supports that are in place but we need to recognise the immediacy of the pressure facing small- and medium-sized enterprises right now. For many small businesses, particularly those that deliver their own goods in a fleet of vans, the spike in fuel and energy costs is not something they can simply absorb. These are businesses operating week to week, dealing with rising bills, fluctuating costs and very tight cashflow. Unlike larger firms, many SMEs do not have the capacity to hedge energy costs or spread risk. They are exposed in real time and that is where the pressure is being felt most. They do not have the economies of scale enjoyed by bigger businesses. There is real concern about viable businesses being pushed to the brink, not because of poor management but due to external cost shocks that are outside their control. Will the Minister of State outline what representations he has made to the Cabinet for small- and medium-sized enterprises as part of the package for agri-contractors, hauliers, bus companies and fishermen? Where is the package for companies with fleets of vans or cars, taxi companies and businesses that are the backbone of our community?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputies for their questions and contributions. I and my colleagues in the Department of enterprise have placed SMEs in all sectors front and centre. They are not being left behind. We fully understand the cost pressures many of them face. The memo the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, brought to Cabinet today was supported right across the Government. It outlined the types of measures that will be introduced over the weeks ahead. There are other specific measures within the construction industry. The sector was referenced today at Cabinet and more needs to be done for it.

On what we are doing and have done, we outlined the assessment that was made precisely to support those sectors that needed the intervention. If we take transport SMEs - our bus operators and haulage companies – they will receive direct fuel-linked supports because fuel makes up a huge proportion of their costs and they have felt disproportionate increases. Agricultural contractors are also receiving monthly targeted payments because they are exposed during seasonal periods. That is very important. Many businesses in retail and hospitality will see energy relief in terms of their distribution and they will have a significant VAT reduction to 9% on 1 July. We want to continue to ensure that businesses are supported.

Notwithstanding this, there is not a one-size-fits-all list of measures that the Government can introduce. The package currently stands at €750 million to support jobs, communities and

SMEs right across sectors. This is targeted, evidence-based and an intervention that the Government wants to continue, and we are not finished there yet.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the intervention and the sizeable package that has been put in place, but it is like any scheme or package that was rolled out over the past few years. It is about how quickly a business can get this into its bank account to provide cashflow and liquidity so it can continue in business and get through a difficult and turbulent time. It is critical that the supports that are put in place now are through a streamlined process that is easy to draw down. Where I come from in east Galway, my family runs an accountancy firm and many of our clients are agri-contractors, small businesses and construction companies, and I see the hoops they have to jump through in trying to draw down many business schemes. I remember the temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS. That was extremely complicated and complex and it ended up being handed to the accountants to do. It is critical that people are able to utilise this scheme and get it as smoothly as possible.

Deputy Tony McCormack: They are being left behind. The companies and businesses I spoke about previously, which have fleets of vans and taxis, which rely on vehicles and fuel to power their business, are being left behind. Looking beyond the immediate pressures, there are also broader concerns about competitiveness. If energy and fuel costs remain elevated, many SMEs will struggle to remain competitive, particularly when compared with businesses in other jurisdictions which may have lower operating costs or greater state support. Will the Minister of State outline what longer term measures are being considered to protect the competitiveness of Irish SMEs, especially in energy-intensive sectors like retail and hospitality? How will the Government ensure that small businesses are supported not just to survive this period but remain viable in the future?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I certainly disagree that SMEs are being left behind. This is one of the most substantial packages across the European Union. It is all about supporting jobs and those who are most impacted but also ensuring they can absorb some of the cost increases that they are facing. We cannot cushion all the price increases. There is a reality here that many governments are trying to grapple with. A sum of €750 million is really substantial. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, met many of the pillar banks as recently as last week, advising them that these schemes are in place and that they would provide working capital to many of these businesses in the short term until they get this money into their bank account. That was received well.

We want the scheme to be simple in nature. We are all about simplification and being fast and agile. I expect that would be the approach for many Department officials with regard to trying to get this up and running. Looking at the more structural interventions we need to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, we are looking at a large investment, through price review 6, PR6, into the grid and infrastructure, in ESB Networks and EirGrid. That will ensure we have the renewable energy deployment required right across the country, that we have energy efficiency supports and that we are looking at large-scale industrial decarbonisation. That is backed by over €300 million in environmental aid. We all know we cannot continue to go from shock to shock and not build resilience into businesses. That is why the Tánaiste is working through the Department of Finance in looking at hybrid heat recovery pumps, hydrotreated

vegetable oil, HVO, and other energy efficiency measures to reduce that burden either through tax measures or through grant supports and subsidies. They will have a meaningful impact for businesses across the country.

Artificial Intelligence

131. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the way in which his Department is ensuring that small- and medium-sized enterprises can move from AI awareness initiatives into measurable productivity gains from AI adoption; the changes that are required on current schemes to ensure sufficient scale and design; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30424/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: AI is no longer evolving year on year but rather month on month. Businesses are now encountering agentic and autonomous AI systems that can plan, act and execute workflows. While larger firms are moving more quickly, SME adoption is lower and more uneven. That risks embedding a two-speed economy. Will the Minister of State set out how current AI supports are being adapted and scaled to help SMEs to move beyond pilots and entry-level tools and into more measurable and productive approaches?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Deputy for his important question. The Government is committed to ensuring Irish businesses can adopt and benefit from AI. Many firms, particularly at an early stage of adoption, are seeking practical guidance on applying AI across core business functions. In response, my Department works closely with the enterprise agencies to develop practical guidance, case studies and sector-specific examples that demonstrate the tangible business benefits of AI.

The recently published national digital and AI strategy, Digital Ireland - Connecting our People, Securing our Future, sets out a clear roadmap for Ireland's digital and AI development and includes actions to support AI readiness across enterprise. Evidence points to rapid progress. Research from the expert group on future skills needs shows that AI usage and demand for AI roles have doubled since 2023, with strong skills demand matched by supply. CSO data shows over 20% of enterprises used AI in 2025, up from 15% in 2024, while the European Commission's 2025 digital decade report indicates that 13.8% of Irish SMEs use AI, above the European average and up from 8% in 2023.

My Department is also working with the ESRI to assess AI take-up among SMEs, including barriers to adoption and investment. A key priority of the new strategy is accelerating technology adoption among enterprises, especially SMEs. Under the Government's AI good for business initiative, a national AI and digital awareness roadshow is being delivered in partnership with our local enterprise offices, LEOs. The roadshow helps SMEs to understand the practical benefits of AI and digital tools, showcases real SME success stories and highlights available LEO supports. The initiative also includes the appointment of AI sector champions and the establishment of OBAIR, the Observatory for Business AI Readiness.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: We already see evidence that many SMEs are stuck around entry-level AI adoption. Most businesses planning AI investments are expecting to spend under

€10,000. That is typically on more basic content creation and basic marketing rather than on deeper, productive gains through workflow automation and supply chain optimisation, for example. At the same time, Ireland remains mid-table, just above average, in EU business AI adoption. That is behind countries like Denmark and Finland. How will existing schemes, through the likes of Enterprise Ireland, the LEOs and Údarás na Gaeltachta be redesigned or scaled up to support deeper AI integration in SMEs instead of fragmented, one-off or pilot schemes? How will the Department measure whether those interventions are actually delivering productivity gains at a company level?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We have work to do to ensure that the whole SME sector is open to and embracing AI tools. If they are not embracing it and looking at digitalisation in their companies, they are set to lose and the divide between the successful and businesses that will fall behind and may ultimately fall off will come down to their ability to adopt technology. We have a suite of measures to try to make that job easier. I am always keeping a close eye on the uptake of those grants to see how businesses are engaging with them. This LEO roadshow is incredibly important because it gives not just the Department's supports but also the LEOs', which are incredibly important at a local level. The case studies and, for me, meeting businesses and doing these roadshows is key, where businesses can see businesses like theirs and the difference that adoption makes.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I want to move the focus towards job protection. The real risk from AI is not so much AI itself as the poorly managed adoption of AI.

10 o'clock

Where we have seen agentic and autonomous systems, as I mentioned earlier, they must not just assist with the work but should carry out tasks and co-ordinate workflows. Where people are trained to supervise and validate the work alongside the AI, productivity can grow; where that training is absent, it looks like the AI will almost substitute for the person. Smaller businesses are expected to redesign roles, supervise autonomous systems and comply with the EU AI Act, and to do all that at speed. How are AI initiatives being accelerated beyond basic literary into practical job-protecting capabilities? How are these skill supports being used to help SMEs manage change without job displacement?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: It is true there will be disruption in the labour force and in business because of AI. The disruption and impact will be greater if businesses do not embrace AI. We have the observatory piece in our Department, OBAIR, which is looking at mitigating that. The AI will impact the workforce required. We will look at how to retrain and upskill staff so they are not left facing redundancy or anything like that. I am not in denial, and I do not think anybody in government is in denial, about the impact this will have.

Our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, launched this week AI Ready which is to get down to the nitty-gritty with individuals in the workforce so nobody feels a digital divide and to help people who want to explore AI to upskill within a business. That is all part of our suite of measures in place to help the worker and the company.

Tourism Industry

132. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his assessment of the likely impact of current aviation challenges on the number of overseas visitors to Ireland in 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30451/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Anois tá Ceist Uimh. 132, atá in ainm an Teachta Shay Brennan ach tá an Teachta Cahill á glacadh.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I raise this issue at a time of growing uncertainty for Ireland's tourism sector. In counties like Kerry, the uncertainty is very real. What is the Minister's Department's current assessment of the likely impact of these aviation challenges on overseas visitor numbers in 2026? Specifically, what contingency planning is under way to protect regions like Kerry? What actions are being taken to safeguard air access, support regional tourism and ensure counties like mine are not left exposed?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy. The tourism sector entered the year with positive momentum. There were consecutive months of growth in overseas visitors from August through to February, the most recent period reported by the CSO, indicating that tourism was performing strongly prior to the escalation of the conflict. The Government, however, recognises that geopolitical instability, including the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, can have implications for international travel and tourism. Tourism is a vital pillar of Ireland's economy, with overseas visitors contributing approximately €6 billion annually to the island. The sector supports close to 10% of total employment, and critically, around six in every ten tourism jobs depend directly on international visitors.

The Middle East plays a critical role in global aviation, acting as a major transit hub and accounting for approximately 14% of international transit traffic worldwide. Disruption in the region therefore has system-wide effects that extend well beyond its borders, particularly for connectivity between Asia, Australia and Europe. These disruptions have altered the operating environment for tourism and underscore the importance of continued vigilance and a flexible, responsive policy approach as global uncertainty persists.

Tourism Ireland continues to take a forward-looking approach to market development, underpinned by resilience and diversification. In August 2025, the Government set out targeted initiatives to grow tourism within mainland Europe and globally and avoid over-reliance on any single market. While maintaining strong performance in the US and Great Britain, Tourism Ireland is increasing its focus on mainland Europe, developing Canada as a key growth market, and laying the groundwork for long-term growth in markets such as China. The growing network of new air routes from the US enhances marketing potential. Tourism Ireland continues to undertake extensive advertising, publicity, social and digital activity along with airline and tour operator partnerships. Tourism Ireland's Kickstart campaign earlier this year covered 19 US states.

As an island destination, air access is fundamental, accounting for approximately 90% of overseas inbound connectivity.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Tourism in Kerry is the lifeblood of our local economy. From Dingle to Cahersiveen, from Killarney to Ballyheigue, from Kenmare to Ballybunion, from

Glenbeigh to Listowel, from Valentia Island to Tralee and right across the county, thousands of jobs and small businesses depend directly on a strong and stable flow of overseas visitors. That stability is under threat. We are seeing the early impacts of global aviation disruption, driven by the conflict involving Iran and rising jet fuel costs. Airlines are already scaling back. Lufthansa announced 20,000 flight cuts. We have seen reductions from Aer Lingus while others are adding fuel surcharges. For an island nation like ours that predominantly depends on air access, fewer flights mean reduced capacity, higher fares and, ultimately, fewer visitors.

The Irish Tourism Industry Confederation has signalled the earlier growth projection of 5% to 7% this year is unlikely to be met. For Kerry, even a small drop in overseas visitors has a disproportionate impact. We are a premium tourism destination but also a peripheral one. We rely heavily on connectivity through our regional airports and on visitors making the additional journey beyond Dublin.

Deputy Peter Burke: We have had strong growth this year, which is important to recognise, particularly since we brought in a new tourism policy in December, A New Era for Irish Tourism, which looks at bringing new strategies to lengthen the season and at ensuring we have a strong culinary strategy this year that will enhance the value proposition across the country, and, hopefully, an accommodation strategy that will look at viability for hotels.

I want to be careful in terms of airlines. Many airlines are consolidating their routes. If they run two flights and they are half full, they will only run one. We want to be careful how that translates into cuts in numbers. We are encouraging the airlines and working with them on this huge challenge. We have a lot of capital schemes coming out from August for Fáilte Ireland looking at enhancing visitor attractions, working with the 46,000 SMEs and, hopefully, getting capital into them to enhance their value proposition. Through our viability mechanism - our VAT cut - we are giving them 4.5 % on their margin. We need 6% and 7% growth on domestic and overseas tourism, which will be important for the communities the Deputy represents.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I appreciate the Minister's response but I want to press the point about regional impact. This cannot be approached in a one-size-fits-all way. Kerry and the wider south west are particularly vulnerable to any reduction in air capacity. If flights are cut or become more expensive, visitors do not just delay; they often choose alternative destinations entirely.

While there is a suggestion Ireland could benefit as a safe destination or from increased domestic tourism, we need to be realistic. Domestic tourism will not fully offset a decline in high-value overseas visitors, particularly in areas like Killarney, Kenmare and Dingle that rely heavily on international markets. We need to see proactive measures, not reactive ones.

I urge the Minister to consider targeted supports for regional tourism businesses if numbers soften, enhanced marketing through Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, particularly in North America and mainland Europe, and, critically, protect and expand regional air access, including routes that serve the south west.

There is a strong case for ensuring Kerry Airport and access routes into the region remaining a priority, especially in the context of any wider aviation strategy. The message from the

ground is clear. There is nervousness in the sector. I ask that additional flights for Kerry be looked at from Belfast, Barcelona and Amsterdam to boost visitor numbers.

Deputy Peter Burke: We will do our very best to ensure the sector keeps growing. I am aware that overseas visitors are critical for regional locations. That is why we are looking at growing our value proposition. Remember that some of the viability mechanisms have not started yet; they will not kick in until 1 July. They are coupled with reform of our capital schemes, and I have taken the view within the Department that what you cannot measure, you cannot manage.

We have targets in Fáilte Ireland relating to growth on a month-by-month basis and strict KPIs to build up support for SMEs. There will be significant support across 2026 and we will continue that. We have about €400 million in our capital plan for the next five years to support the tourism sector.

That is a very significant increase on the previous one. We also have a very strong budget working with our strategic air activation scheme. We are putting boots on the ground where we have new flights because we need resources to market them and to get the awareness of flights and to get them to take hold. There is a lot of work to do over 2026. I look forward to working with the Deputy to ensure the kingdom does benefit from that.

Crime Prevention

133. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his assessment of the recent escalation in retail crime, including theft, organised shoplifting and related antisocial behaviour; the impact this is having on small and family-run retailers, particularly in terms of financial loss, increased operating costs and staff safety concerns; the specific measures, supports or interventions being developed by his Department to assist affected businesses, including with insurance and security costs; the nature of engagement under way with representative bodies and other relevant Departments, including those responsible for justice and policing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24948/26]

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government fully recognises the significant harm caused by retail crime, which not only impacts retailers and retail employees but also has broader consequences for local communities and the national economy. Theft, organised shoplifting and associated antisocial behaviour are not victimless crimes and directly affect businesses' viability, staff safety and community confidence. I am acutely aware retailers are facing real financial losses, including rising insurance and security costs, and have deep concerns around the personal safety of staff, many of whom are working alone or at late hours. For small independent retailers in particular, a single incident can have a real impact on weekly profits, or worse. The issue is being taken very seriously by the Government. The programme for Government makes an explicit a commitment on retail crime, including the development of the retail crime strategy, which is being led by my colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

Over the past years, we have met officials from both Departments and have engaged extensively with retailers and representative bodies at the retail forum to understand at first

hand the scale, patterns and consequences of retail crime. Operationally, An Garda Síochána has established Operation Táirge to specifically target organised retail crime and Garda management has briefed the retail forum on its progress. I welcome the strong focus on intelligence-led enforcement but also the increased visibility of Garda members in crime black spots and the disruption of repeat offenders.

From my Department's perspective, we are also acting to support retailers through enterprise supports. We will establish access to grants and have engagement on insurance and regulatory burdens, but that will be done through the cost of doing business advisory forum. We will continue to work on this matter and shortly will have the publication of the action plan on retail crime.

Deputy Michael Murphy: The reality on the ground is stark. Retail crime is no longer sporadic; it is systematic. We are seeing organised shoplifting, repeat offenders and a growing sense among retailers that there is little deterrence and few consequences. For small and family-run businesses, retail crime leads to lost income, rising insurance and security costs, and in many cases fear among staff going to work. I hear directly from retailers that feel they are being asked to absorb the cost of crime themselves and that cannot be acceptable because right now the perception, and increasingly the reality, is that retail crime does pay.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his contribution. All retail workers deserve to go to work without fear and business owners deserve the protections of the livelihoods they have built. That is why we are very much focused on the retail crime strategy. It is well advanced and will include specific, targeted measures including prevention, enforcement and support for affected businesses. Operationally, An Garda Síochána has rolled out Operation Táirge, which has been successful. We have seen more disruption, arrests and prosecutions in many crime black spots, but we need to continue to redouble our efforts because retail crime needs to be confronted. It cannot be normalised and we need to work with retailers and their employees to ensure it is stamped out for good.

Deputy Michael Murphy: We need to do everything we can to support our retailers. They are the real heroes at the local level due to the extent to which they hire locally, spend locally and invest locally. Those same retailers tell me that the offenders are well known. Incidents are frequent and brazen and the system is simply not responding at the pace required. We cannot let the situation continue whereby honest businesses invest, employ people and contribute to their communities while others repeatedly break the law with little fear of consequence. What immediate actions, not long-term plans, will be taken in the next three to six months? Critically, who is taking ownership of this matter across government?

Deputy Alan Dillon: As I said, the retail crime strategy is being worked through at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. It is being led out by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. I have had extensive engagement with him and his officials. We have held a round-table meeting with many retailers, who were representatives of the retail forum. We want to ensure that strategy has concrete interventions and that these can be delivered within the term of the Government. It is a programme for Government commitment. We want to see

this being worked through and we will, within the Department of enterprise, continue to support that over the months ahead.

Question No. 134 taken with Question No. 130.

Questions Nos. 135 to 152, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Wage-setting Mechanisms

153. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will introduce legislation to raise the minimum wage for workers under the age of 20 and for apprentices in their first two years so that they will be at parity with other workers. [30429/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is a film called "No Country for Old Men". This is no country for young people because the Minister discriminates against them in their entitlement to the minimum wage. People aged under 20 get paid either 90% of the minimum wage, 80% of it or sometimes as low as 70%. Apprentices, who we need a lot more of to help us to build the houses we need in this country, also earn less than the minimum wage in their first and second years, so it is hardly an incentive for young people to stay in this country. I ask the Minister to ensure that whether a person is a first or second year apprentice, he or she will get at least the minimum wage and that, similarly for those aged under 20, these discriminatory rates of minimum wages will be got rid of and that young people will be entitled to the full minimum wage.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for his question. We are very clear we want to see real wage growth in the economy. We saw from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, index in December that all 13 sectors of the economy are growing, but critically, we are seeing real wage growth. I know that will be a challenge across 2026. I note the Deputy's concerns about the subminimum rates but we were very clear in our concerns for small businesses, for corner shops and for that developmental piece in terms of the early years of one's career when young people get experience. I am particularly thinking of our corner shops and the potential imposition that a 30% uplift in costs would put on them, really threatening their viability. We also have to be careful of any unintended consequences of these decisions on third level education.

The Minister, Deputy Lawless, is working on an action plan for apprenticeships and that is key. The Deputy raised a very valid point about making apprenticeships attractive and ensuring we are bringing in skills that are critical for the construction sector and for trades, some of which are exceptional in terms of the career pathway they offer. Critically, as a Government, we have brought parity of esteem to third level education and apprenticeships in the Central Applications Office, CAO, process, which was a very strong signal from the Government. We put forward an amendment to the motion earlier to detail the huge improvement we have seen in workers' rights in this country, from improved agility in remote working to the trajectory towards a living wage, the different schemes to support workers, the tips legislation, the ban on zero-hour contracts and the right to disconnect.

There are so many different areas we have made progress on. I am thinking particularly of the action plan for collective bargaining, which we brought in ahead of schedule. I gave that commitment despite what happened with the ECJ case. Again, that gives us a good pathway for continued improvements in workers' rights.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Deputy Boyd Barrett has 30 seconds. We do not want to go over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Okay. The Minister seems a bit more sympathetic on the apprentices, but will he do something about it? The higher education committee recommended it in a report. It is ridiculous. We desperately need qualified apprentices in the trades in particular but also in many areas of the economy. For first- and second-year apprentices to be paid either €7.67 in their first year or €11.50 in their second year is pathetic. Many of them are in their early 20s. Some of them are paying rent or have families. They need to be paid properly. I disagree with the Minister on young people. Corner shops or anything else should not be based on exploiting young people who should be paid the minimum wage.

Deputy Peter Burke: To be fair, I do not think they are exploiting young people. In the many communities that have small shops, they really provide a service to the community and provide a huge resource, especially socially, to so many villages right across the country.

On apprenticeships, I absolutely think we have a lot of room for improvement. We are working on the action plan with the Department of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to improve conditions and to make apprenticeships more viable career choices. Those are the skills of the future that a growing and dynamic economy needs. I am happy to work with the Deputy in that regard.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): 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 Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss the detention of an Irish citizen by German authorities.

Deputies Claire Kerrane and Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss issues raised about children in State care arising from a recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned new Courtown coastguard building.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss when the OPW will reopen Rattoo Round Tower.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the need for emergency works at Scoil Assaim in Raheny.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss funding for improvement and refurbishment works to school buildings across County Kerry,

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the issue of public health nurses in Dublin 8 and 12.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the potential loss of the 6.50 a.m. train service from Athenry to Galway.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss prevailing issues with water supply and outages across the State and local and national responses to same.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the increase in drug-related intimidation and violence in Cork city.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss ongoing capacity issues at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputies Joanna Byrne and Ged Nash - To discuss inclusion of Drogheda schools in the DEIS plus scheme.

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness and David Cullinane - To discuss the decision by Tusla to cease therapeutic support services for children in care and foster carers at St. Brigid's family and resource centre in Waterford city.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss payments to landowners along the south Kerry greenway.

The matters raised by Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett, Duncan Smith, Sinéad Gibney, Claire Kerrane and Ruairí Ó Murchú, Aidan Farrelly, Pa Daly and Danny Healy-Rae have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Consular Services

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Daniel Tatlow-Devally has been in prison in Ulm in Germany since September. He is incarcerated for 23 hours a day, effectively in solitary confinement, in pretty shocking conditions in prison. He was not allowed to hug his family until there was intervention by myself and other TDs with the German ambassador several months into Daniel's incarceration. He was not allowed to get books of his own choice. Generally he is kept in pretty awful conditions. The circumstances are that his trial was due to begin yesterday in Stuttgart.

He is imprisoned because he engaged in a direct action protest against Elbit Systems, which produces 80% of the weapons for Israel which they have used to commit a genocidal massacre against the Palestinians in Gaza. The protest was attempting to uphold the obligations of all states to act to prevent the committing of genocide and which they failed to fulfil under the Genocide Convention. It was a direct action protest but it was not one where anybody was physically threatened or harmed. The people did not run away and they did not resist arrest. Indeed, they waited for the police to come and arrest them and they represented no physical

threat to anybody. The German authorities have, however, decided to try to convict them under legislation that is reserved for organised crime and are trying them now in a court that is normally reserved for terrorists and for organised criminals.

In the trial that began yesterday, the lawyers defending Daniel and the four other members of the Ulm Five who were involved in the direct action protest against Israel's genocide and the complicity of Germany and Elbit Systems in that genocide, described what happened in the courtroom as completely unprecedented. The lawyers had never seen anything like it. For example, in any normal trial in Germany the person who is on trial, even if they are a terrorist or a neo-Nazi murderer, can sit with their lawyers. They can sit in between their lawyers but in an unprecedented move this is not being allowed to the Irish citizen or to the other members of the Ulm Five. They are put in behind a high-security glass cage, essentially, so they cannot communicate properly with their lawyers. They are being tried as organised criminals when they represented no physical threat to anybody but were actually acting to protest against genocide.

I was talking to an MP from the German Parliament who was going down to monitor the trial and he was not physically allowed into the court. He was told that it was full, but Daniel's mother was in there and she said it was not full at all. The legal team on behalf of the defence is saying they have never seen anything like this. They have called for the judge to recuse herself such is the level of obvious bias. There were riot police in the court physically threatening members of the family and people who were in there, suggesting violence and so on against them. It is a show trial. They are asking that the Irish Government would send monitors to look over this trial, which will be spread over multiple days across May, June and July. We call on the German Government to stop treating these people as if they are organised criminals when actually they are people upholding international law in protesting against the genocidal horror that Israel has inflicted on the Palestinian people, for which Elbit Systems provides the means for Israel to commit that crime.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I am responding on behalf of my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who are unavailable due to their ministerial duties this evening.

Providing consular assistance to Irish citizens who find themselves in difficulty abroad, including in cases of arrest or detention, is a cornerstone of the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its embassies and consulates around the world. Each year the Department provides support to a significant number of Irish citizens arrested or detained overseas. Our ethos has always been to place a strong emphasis on ensuring that Irish citizens receive timely and empathetic consular assistance.

We are aware of the case referred to by the Deputy. Consular assistance has been provided to the citizen referred to since September 2025, soon after their detention. I can confirm that a dedicated consular officer in the Consulate General of Ireland in Munich has been assigned to support the citizen and their family and has provided support and advice in accordance with the Department's consular assistance charter. I can further confirm that staff in the Consulate General in Munich, including the consul general and deputy consul general, have undertaken four consular visits to the citizen in prison, most recently on 10 April. We are in regular contact

with the citizen and with family members. Consular visits are an opportunity to check on the welfare of a citizen, ascertain if there are any medical issues that require attention, offer pastoral support, and assess the conditions of detention. Our consular officers can also act as conduits, helping to share information from and to loved ones in Ireland if that is required by the citizen.

I understand that the conditions of detention in the case referred to by the Deputy are the same as those of any other person in their situation, which includes access to video calls and in-person visits. Prisoners at the facility in question also have access to a social worker. I understand that court proceedings in this case started yesterday. As laid out in the consular assistance charter, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its embassies and consulates abroad are precluded from intervening in the judicial and legal processes of another country. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to comment on the ongoing legal case. The Deputy asked that we send monitors to the trial. I will bring this back to the Minister. I assure the Deputy that the Department will continue to provide all necessary and appropriate consular assistance to the citizen and their family.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is not the senior minister and he is just reading off the script, which is a bit frustrating given that there is somebody facing very serious charges in a court in Germany and is being treated in an absolutely disgraceful way for protesting against genocide. This is about genocide. Ireland and Germany and 153 other countries are signatories to the Genocide Convention. In case the Minister of State does not know what is in that convention, I will outline what we signed up to.

What we signed up to and what every signatory did, after the Holocaust, was to prevent even a suspicion of a possible genocide taking place, and to act to prevent it and to do all in our power. States have failed to do this, self-evidently. This is why Ireland eventually joined South Africa's case against the genocide. People have not prevented it because, of course, the genocide continues in Gaza.

Daniel, an Irish citizen, and other people acted to do what states have failed to do, to try to disrupt the ability of Elbit Systems in Germany to provide Israel with the weapons to commit a genocide. For this, the German Government is prosecuting them as if they were organised criminals. This is not just for property damage, protesting or public order offences but as organised criminals. It has brought them to a courthouse normally reserved for terrorists and people involved in organised crime. There are riot police all over the place. Restrictions are being imposed which their legal team says are completely abnormal. The judge will not even talk to the defence legal team about the conditions in the court and the conditions under which Daniel is being detained. This is not normal. To simply say we do not interfere is not good enough when an Irish citizen is being treated like this for protesting against a genocide, which the Irish Government even thinks may be a genocide and why it has joined the case. We are asking the Government to send monitors to the trial, to make a public statement in support of Daniel, and to say the way he is being treated by the German legal system is an absolute disgrace. That pressure can impact on the German Government.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett. As I mentioned, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is fully aware of this case and has provided all appropriate consular assistance to the citizen and their family since September 2025 and will continue to do so. The Department, through its consulate general in Munich, has been in regular contact with the

citizen since their detention began, and a series of consular visits has been possible to verify that the conditions of their detention are in line with those of other detainees.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are not. I am telling you they are not.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Our embassies and consulates overseas play a vital role in providing support to Irish citizens who have been arrested or detained, and this is a core part of our consular assistance mandate. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is precluded from intervening in the judicial and legal processes of another country in the provision of consular assistance. I will bring Deputy Boyd Barrett's views back to the Department.

Children in Care

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I acknowledge that the Minister is here tonight to take this Topical Issue. I am sure she will agree that last week's "RTÉ Investigates" was appalling. It gave us just a glimpse into the experience of some children in care and what they experience. I certainly felt, having watched it, that somebody needs to be held accountable for what we saw in the programme and it cannot just be Tusla. I have said before that the Government is in charge. The Minister and the Department have a responsibility for children who are in care, our most vulnerable children in the State. Far too often it is easy for all of us to point the finger at Tusla. It has been too much of an easy out and the time for that is over.

The system we saw last week on our television screens is one that is causing harm to children. We saw children who are being neglected. It is a system that consists of children who go hungry and children who run away because they cannot bear to be where they are put. It has actively led to children being exploited and being assaulted. It has brought vulnerable children into a world of drugs and crime. It has led to severe mental health issues and it has led to homelessness. These operators are being paid for this service and they are being paid in the millions. It is, frankly, disgusting that this is what they are being paid for.

The use of unregulated profit-driven residential settings has to be banned. There should be no room for profit making when it comes to looking after the most vulnerable children in our State. It is not just about a ban but about building capacity in the State system. This is there in terms of the voluntary residential services. They are ready, willing and able. They want to grow and they want to do more. Why can they not do so? It is because the funding they receive cannot and does not operate the services they have today. They are fundraising for their services. We need to give them funding that is adequate to do the job they do and we need more of them.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister for being here. We dealt with this to some degree last week but, as Deputy Kerrane has said, it is utterly shocking and harrowing. There are no terms to describe the story of Max, which we all saw on "RTÉ Investigates". We are talking about special emergency arrangements or accommodations that are not in any way suitable. He was missing for two and a half hours before anybody noticed and before the child was abused, and this is only part of it.

Unfortunately, this is a representation of many children who are in these inappropriate settings. It is all we can call them. They are inappropriate settings for which we are paying huge money. We heard it was €2,000 per child per week. This is utterly frightening. I raised this with the Minister last week and she told me that last year there were 170 special emergency accommodations and now there are 70. She said she is talking about reducing the number by 50%. We need to see special emergency accommodation gone. My fear is that the pressure is on, rightly, following "RTÉ Investigates" and the shock that everybody got. We also understand the complexity of the issues, the lack of addiction services and the lack of mental health services and early interventions for families.

We are still talking about Tusla, which is dealing with these issues, probably a lot later because of the size of the caseloads. It is dealing with them a lot later when the issues have become a lot more complex. While we would prefer to see special care facilities funded, if special emergency accommodation is not being utilised, what is happening with the kids who have to be presenting at this time? My fear is that even if we are avoiding using special emergency accommodation, which we should long term, we are talking about inappropriate care, inappropriate supports and inappropriate accommodation.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I will begin by expressing my thanks to Deputies Kerrane and Ó Murchú for raising this important issue and for offering me the opportunity to respond. I acknowledge, as I have previously, how upsetting it was to watch and listen to the experiences of the young people interviewed as part of last week's programme, and I commend and thank each one of them on speaking out. It is vital that we have the opportunity to hear from young people with experience of the care system and it is important that we listen to them.

For the information of the House, I would like to share that the vast majority of children in State care, 96% in fact, are in foster care or residential care. In comparison with our international peers, we are doing well on this front. Nine out of ten young people in foster or residential care are engaged in education, and three in every four young people leaving care and entering aftercare services are now participating in education and training, according to the CSO.

However, Tusla also deals with children and young people in care who are often coming from highly traumatic situations through no fault of their own, and in some instances foster care and residential care settings can break down. Last year Tusla received 106,444 child protection and welfare referrals, up 10% on 2024. I was pleased to secure a 14% increase in funding for Tusla in the most recent budget, bringing its overall budget to €1.4 billion in 2026. Tusla had approximately 5,661 whole-time staff at end of 2025, 343 more than at the same time in the previous year, including a 3.15% rise in social workers.

As regards special emergency accommodation, Tusla has experienced a 500% increase in the number of separated children seeking international protection being referred to the agency since 2022, along with an increasing number of children with more complex needs. This challenge is not unique to Ireland. The Department, along with Tusla, recognises that the use of special emergency arrangements is far from ideal. The Department is proactively supporting Tusla to improve the availability of placements and to expand capacity across its network.

emergency placements under the governance of Tusla and subject to inspection and monitoring by HIQA; 35 centres are in the process of registration; and 19 centres have completed registration and will be subject to Tusla's inspection and monitoring service in line with all private residential placements. This means that by the start of May this year, Tusla will have reduced the number of emergency placements that are not registered by almost 50%. The work to move that to a zero point continues this year.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister. In her closing remarks, she might let us know the action that has been taken. Has she met Tusla since that programme was aired last week, for example? Why are we not looking at the 13 voluntary residential services that have agreements in place with Tusla? Staff in them have experience of 25, 30 and more years' experience. We should be looking at those providers. There should not be any room for profit-making when it comes to children in the care of the State. Again, I make the point that we have residential services in the voluntary sector that are regulated to the hilt. They have to account for every single red cent. They are fundraising to keep their doors open to stand still. We are throwing money then at private providers, some of which are providing what we saw last week on the television. Can the Minister come back to us specifically on those voluntary residential services?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will also follow up. The Minister stated that "by the start of May this year, Tusla will have reduced the number of emergency placements that are not registered by almost 50%". When are we taking that from? Are we talking about the 70 there at the moment becoming 35? We are literally talking about the end of this week. I am going to put that question again. There are obviously complex cases. We get the idea of the huge issue in respect of separated children seeking international protection. The Minister spoke about the issue of the age discrepancy, which needs to be dealt with, particularly from a safeguarding point of view. However, what happens with a complex child if we do not have a special care facility and we do not have the residential care that Deputy Kerrane is speaking about and which is underfunded? What happens in this day and age? As much as I want to see the end of SEAs, and it needs to happen as soon as possible and I ask for a date, I have a fear of what happens at present with one of those children to avoid them being placed in an SEA. Where do we put them if we do not have the appropriate residential care facility? I am very worried. I will also go back to that point that we are missing the early intervention piece that could avoid an awful lot of this nuclear action and we would not be failing children to the degree we are.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue. In order to overcome the challenges within the care system that were highlighted on the programme and which have been raised by the Deputies, which I acknowledge, the Department secured an overall increase of €177 million for Tusla in the most recent budget. That is representing a 14% increase in Tusla's budget over 2025. This brings Tusla's total budget to over €1.4 billion. Additionally, Tusla plans to invest a total of €286 million in expanding mainstream residential care in 2026; an additional €53 million of current funding compared with 2025. As I mentioned previously this evening, 96% of all children in State care are placed in foster care or residential care. In this regard, in addition to building on the capacity of mainstream residential placements for children, prioritisation has also been given to building on supports with respect

to foster care, which resulted in a 21% increase to the foster care allowance in 2024, a new initial placement payment to foster carers, improved travel allowances and greater access to therapeutic and peer supports.

I want to assure the Deputies that officials within the Department are proactively engaging with their counterparts in Tusla to continue to build on the supports that foster carers can avail of. The Department also expanded Tusla's capital budget to €35 million in 2026, which represents growth of 100% since 2024. That refers to the provision of additional residential places. This investment will support Tusla to expand its residential care, as has been outlined by the Deputies, including the provision of step-down units for children leaving special care. Three new step-down units are scheduled to come on stream. Two will become available in December of this year and one in January of next year. This will, in turn, add to capacity in special care going forward. As I said, significant work has also been undertaken to reduce the number of unregistered special emergency arrangements. Last year, there were 170 such facilities and we now have reduced this number to 70. We will continue to do more in this space going forward.

I would also like to confirm to the House that the Department has also engaged with children and young people on a consistent basis in the past year both through the care experiences project and through the significant consultation that has been undertaken as part of the development of a new national policy framework for alternative care. Combined, this research and policy development will allow us, as a State, for the very first time, to take a strategic approach towards the future of the care system, guided by the lived experience of the young people who have first-hand experience of the care system.

Water Services

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for being here this evening to take this question. I appreciate that. The Minister of State will not need me to tell him that the people of Kildare and the eastern region are sincerely sick and tired of waking up to dry taps. In Kildare, in particular, we have had such consistent outages over the past number of weeks and months in many different areas that frustration is really at boiling point at this stage. For context, we saw in the census very recently that Kildare's population 100 years ago was 50,000-odd people. Fast-forward 100 years and it is nearly over 250,000 at this stage. It is the fastest growing county in the country. That population has doubled in 30 years. We have had huge population growth, but I cannot understate the impact that has had on the services, most specifically when it comes to water. It is really having an enormous impact on people's lives.

We had a nice few days last week with a bit of sunshine. People woke up on Sunday morning to hear that in 24 hours, with no notice, Allenwood reservoir had run dry. A lot of pockets of these same communities only four, six and eight weeks ago were told there is a risk of planned flooding because the reservoirs were too high. It seems that we cannot deal with too much water and we cannot deal with too little water. My worry and my analysis keep bringing me to this point: where is the political accountability or oversight here? My concern is that without direct involvement at ministerial level, the utility is missing some sort of accountability. We have had it before the Committee of Public Accounts. We have had really thorough and robust engagement with the representatives. However, that is a very rare opportunity for political questioning. As a TD, as any Member of this House will know, if we

put a question to the Minister for housing who has ultimate responsibility, the first line of every parliamentary reply is that water is not his responsibility. The Minister of State has been here as a councillor. He knows all too well the number of queries or contacts a county councillor will get about water, whether it is planned outages, unplanned outages or capital works. People go to the authority or the local authority and they say it is not their problem either. TDs cannot get answers from a Minister and councillors cannot get answers from the local authority and so people go to the rep desk. I am sure it will be part of the Minister of State's response that the rep desk is there but if he has used it, he will know that you will wait weeks upon weeks for an answer that ultimately does not ask. Really, it goes beyond what is acceptable in terms of any sort of real, thorough engagement.

I am asking with great sincerity tonight, not just for Kildare at all, although it is significantly felt in Kildare, but right across the region. Is there an appetite within the Minister of State, the Department or with Government colleagues to further increase political accountability and oversight here? I accept that many bodies are established to allow a set of professionals, in this instance, Uisce Éireann, to get on with the work and to escape any sort of political influence.

That is laudable. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General and many others have noted that Uisce Éireann is quite specific in its set-up. We know the origins of that. My worry is there is a lack of strategy here, a lack of oversight and a lack of transparency within which political representatives, whether they be councillors, Senators or TDs, can get access to timely information.

I look forward to the Minister of State's reply. I sincerely emphasise that piece with regard to Kildare.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for raising what is obviously an important matter. It is an issue of concern both locally and nationally. I appreciate the impact and challenges that shortages and outages of water have on communities around the country where they occur.

As the Deputy will be aware, since 1 January 2014, Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at a national, regional and local level, including investment in wastewater treatment plants, returning wastewater safely to the environment in an efficient and sustainable manner and supplying drinking water to the population across the country. That being said, the Government is equally concerned with ensuring citizens receive adequate water services and as such is delivering significant investment in our water infrastructure.

In response to the complex challenges facing the water sector, we have developed strategic objectives and supporting actions that will help us address our most critical needs and ensure that we continue to deliver sustainable water and wastewater services for the long term. These key objectives are highlighted in Uisce Éireann's water services strategic plan, which was approved by Government last year. The water services strategic plan presents Uisce Éireann's objectives for the next 25 years and the means by which they will be achieved. It aligns to requirements set out in the Water Services Act 2013. The first water services strategic plan was published in 2015. This was then replaced by the strategic service plan 2050, which was approved by the Minister, Deputy Browne, as I said, last year.

Since 2014, Uisce Éireann's capital investment has grown from €300 million to €1.4 billion under budget 2026. This sustained investment will support the delivery of key strategic programmes and projects in our cities and regions to deliver the additional water service capacity required for new housing targets, while prioritising public health and safeguarding the environment. Uisce Éireann is also committed to improving water supply by reducing leakage and carrying out upgrades to the infrastructure to ensure it can obtain maximum output.

Much of Ireland's drinking water is lost to leaks before it reaches our taps. To conserve this precious resource, Uisce Éireann has invested €2 billion to upgrade the underground water network across the country through the delivery of a leakage reduction programme. It is continuing this work with over €1 billion in further investment up to the end of 2029 to fix leaks and replace pipes to improve service and provide a more reliable water supply.

The revised national development plan, which was launched last July by Government, provides record funding of €12.2 billion for the water sector, of which €11.7 billion will be allocated to Uisce Éireann to support the delivery of large projects and critical infrastructure required to deliver 300,000 new dwellings by 2030. Uisce Éireann has said it is committed to delivering a multibillion euro capital investment programme under the revised national development plan. Major projects in every part of the country are being progressed, including two generational investments in the water infrastructure - the greater Dublin drainage project and the water supply project for the eastern and midlands region. Under the NDP, €2.5 billion has been specifically allocated for these projects. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, not only meeting the Government's commitments in the programme for Government but also meeting Ireland's obligations under UN goals.

These are very serious issues. Of course, I accept the Deputy's bona fides in raising these matters. Other Deputies have concerns around the country as well. The response times are something that the Minister, Deputy Browne, has raised directly with Uisce Éireann.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for that response. Even in Kildare, you can see the impact of that funding. You can see the works happening from a capital perspective, whether it is roadworks or significant works that are happening to unlock that residential development within the county. The problem is we are midway through that in Kildare and I wonder whether the capacity is increasing at reservoir level. That is a concern for me as a wider piece. The Minister of State might come back in on that.

The bit that irks me a little, if I am honest, is that I am genuinely curious as to the nature of the relationship between the Department and the body itself. How involved is the Minister or how involved can he be, when we heard at the Committee of Public Accounts that nearly 94% of Uisce Éireann staff got their full bonuses in 2024? That smacks in the face people in Leixlip, for example, who have been noting, in 2026, unplanned outages in February and twice in April; and in 2025, in January, March, twice in May, twice in July and December. When these outages happen, the staff on the ground are phenomenal at trying to minimise the impact on communities but there is something wrong at the core if this is continuously going to happen. As I said, the news a couple of months ago was that they might have to flood our community because the reservoir levels were too high and then, a couple of weeks later with a little sunshine, that water is gone and they have to turn our taps off.

At this point, I offer my full support for greater oversight and greater communication networks between public representatives, the body and the Department. I welcome the billions of euro for infrastructure, which is more than needed, but what happens after that if the capacity remains a problem?

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy raised valid points, particularly around the reservoir levels. Obviously, I cannot answer to that specific case in the Deputy's constituency, but he is correct in pointing out that the significant investment of taxpayer's money we are allocating to Uisce Éireann as a utility company to be able to deliver those generational projects, and also to deliver those smaller projects right across the country, is critical to ensuring we are able to develop the quantum of housing required for our people. Only two weeks ago, in Dungarvan, County Waterford, I turned the sod on a water facility, which is a €29.5 million investment. It is being replicated right across the country to build that resilience into the network, as in the wider Dungarvan area, not only for the existing population but for what will be projected going forward. In the context of the €12 billion we are allocating to water in the national development plan, every cent of that will be put to good use because we need to build that resilience into the network right across the country.

It is true to say that there has been underinvestment in water over many years and catch-up is required. It is also true to say that Uisce Éireann needs to streamline its processes to ensure that infrastructure is delivered in a quicker manner. It is also true to say, and it has been raised by other Deputies, that communication needs to be better. That has been raised with Uisce Éireann by the Minister, Deputy Browne. For my own part, I have regular engagements with Uisce Éireann, particularly around connection times in relation to the developer-led infrastructure initiative and other matters, as the Minister has too. I assure the Deputy that while Uisce Éireann is there as a body, certainly the political involvement does occur.

Heritage Projects

Deputy Pa Daly: Eleven years ago, a reply was given by a Minister of State in this Chamber that the works at Rattoo Round Tower in Ballyduff in north Kerry, which were being undertaken at that time, included conservation and repair, working on the exterior and then moving on to the interior.

11 o'clock

The works are continuing to this day and great work is being carried out by the national monuments depot works section, which is based in Killarney and in general does excellent work. However, the pace of the work is incredible and there is deep frustration in the Ballyduff area that this magnificent round tower, which has an unbelievable history going back 1,000 years, has remained closed for the past 15 years. Back in 2015, there were a few jobs to be done. The lightening conductor was being reinstalled and there were some other minor projects and it was promised at that time that some new interpretation would be made available on the site.

I am not sure that the Office of Public Works, the Department or the Government realise the significance of this former ecclesiastical site. I met some German tourists there last year who came to Ireland to see two sites. One was Clonmacnoise and the other was Rattoo Round

Tower, so on an international archeological basis, this is of huge significance. At one stage, the site contained the 1,000-year-old round tower, which is probably the best preserved in Ireland and the only round tower remaining in Kerry, an abbey and a hospital and, according to a local schoolteacher, a harp school of music operated there going back to the 1600s.

As I said, the site has been closed for 15 year while these works are being carried out. Internal works have been completed and I am told there was a promise going back to the 1980s to reopen the site with an interpretative centre. In an area like Ballyduff, which some people feel has been neglected - there is a totally inadequate wastewater system there, for example - there is all the more reason for them to feel that the untapped tourism and historical potential is not being addressed. People are frustrated. The round tower could be the centre of a tourism project that would boost the village because it is just off the Wild Atlantic Way and employment, including secondary employment, could be created there. However, because of the scaffolding that surrounds the bottom of the round tower, it is a building site. People are not even allowed to go in and walk around the base of the structure.

I am asking that the Government do one of two things, either build a platform so the inside can be accessed or, if it will not do that, remove the scaffolding so people can be allowed access around the base of the tower so it can be viewed properly. In the meantime - and this is an easy request; going back to the 1980s, as I said, there was to be extra interpretation - will the Government put some information signage with QR codes so the history, which is unknown to many people, can be explained? Will it link in with local people to source the local history? I suggest that the site be opened either for the Ballyduff Summer Festival, which will take place in June, or for Heritage Week, which will take place in August. The time for delaying this is over. It has gone on long enough and I ask the Minister of State to make it a priority.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Rattoo Round Tower, national monument No. 55, is a national monument in the ownership of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and is maintained by the Office of Public Works. In recent years, as the Deputy outlined, an ongoing programme of repairs has been undertaken, which included the regrouting and repointing of stonework and the installation of a platform to facilitate safe height access for future maintenance.

The substantial works on Rattoo Round Tower are now complete and it is envisaged internal lime-washing will be done in the coming weeks when the walls have sufficiently dried out after the winter. Upon completion of the repairs, as previously advised, the OPW will issue a full report to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as required under the terms of ministerial consent.

The OPW intends to introduce a new interpretation service at Rattoo Round Tower that will explain its history and context in Ireland's early Christian heritage. The OPW would welcome community stakeholder engagement during this process. That is what the Deputy called for - information signage to be put up and that will be helpful. It also hopes to be in a position to facilitate internal access to the tower for Heritage Week 2026. The logistics are currently being considered and the main factors contributing to this will be an appropriate outside access structure and the form it will take. That is the platform the Deputy is looking for. I think it will be delivered as well.

As the Deputy is aware, there are challenges with access to the tower given the tall, slender structure with its confined internal spaces and steep vertical climbs. For the future, it will be necessary to undertake a safety audit of how visitors can access the areas within the tower, given the limitations of its upper floors. The Deputy also said that 15 years sounds like an incredibly long time and I suppose the locals in Ballyduff are anxious that the tower open as quickly as possible. It is interesting to hear it is of international archeological importance. The more we can do to open these facilities and heritage areas, which are much treasured, the better.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I am glad minds have been concentrated and I hope they will remain concentrated after today. I hope the Minister of State will go back to the Department. I asked a parliamentary question about this matter a year ago and the reply indicated that a reassessment of risk and public safety access would be prepared. I understand from the Minister of State's reply, which I thank him for, that the OPW will issue a full report following the completion of the works, which should be soon.

It is all a question of priorities at this stage. Given the length of time we have been dealing with this - the works have gone on for 15 years, but the OPW and Department have been looking at this and considering various interpretative centres around the area for 40 years probably - the least the people of Ballyduff deserve is that the report be prioritised and expedited as quickly as possible so the tower can be opened. The report will allow the access structure or whatever alternatives there are, to facilitate the reopening as soon as possible. It is not a lot to ask. The internal works have been completed. There is a platform inside. The door is 9 ft off the ground so when people go in they are on a platform. I think the lime-washing has been completed. If it is just a question of preparing a report regarding safety and the completion of the works, can that be done? Then, perhaps the centre could be open in time for the June bank holiday weekend, when the Ballyduff summer festival is on, or as the Minister of State hinted, it could be open for Heritage Week in August. That would be greatly appreciated after all this time.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I reiterate that the OPW remains committed to the conservation and protection of Rattoo Round Tower. Repair works will ensure the long-term preservation of the monument and provide the foundation for a careful reassessment of the extent to which internal public access may be possible. The OPW looks forward to the completion of this project and welcoming the Deputy and the local community to view the interior of Rattoo Round Tower in the not-too-distant future.

The Deputy is absolutely right that this is an area of conservation. We also have heritage sites all around the country and sometimes we take them for granted. We probably did so. The Deputy outlined that German tourists came especially to see Rattoo Round Tower and Clonmacnoise. We have others. In our area, we have Moygara Castle, Carrowkeel, Sligo Abbey and Carrowmore and it is amazing to see people come who say they are there for the megalithic tombs or whatever. We sometimes take them for granted so I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I will discuss it with the Minister again tomorrow.

Greenways Provision

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: This has been an ongoing for a long time. Back in 2014 when the compulsory purchase order, CPO, was being mooted and talked about, the management in Kerry County Council at the time were insisting on the CPO process to all the members of the council. Both myself and Councillor Johnny Healy-Rae were totally and absolutely against the CPO process because it encapsulates and gives fierce powers. I have always believed in ownership. If somebody owns land or owns a house, I believe it is theirs and that to deal with them, we have to buy it or make a deal in some way or other. The idea that someone can come on to someone's land and take as much as they want or need without any clarity for the owners to build a road or a cycleway that will be finished and opened to the public, but the owners are not yet paid, is very hurtful to many people, and indeed it is hurtful to me.

Where accommodation works are needed, they have to be agreed with the owners. If a road is put through a field and that field was always open for cattle, sheep, silage, hay or whatever, to get from one side to cross the greenway as easy as you can for cattle and for tractors or whatever, accommodation works are needed and have to be provided. For greenways going forward, CPO is not the way to go because we need to have the goodwill of the people. People are entitled to and can have a different value on different properties, for example, a site for a child, for themselves, or for whatever other use they have which might place a significant value on the land over what the people dealing with them might think.

Greenways sometimes finish up close to dwellings or outbuildings. This is the case in this instance and many families feel that their privacy is compromised. They feel very exposed to the public view. There is no doubt that local businesses in Glenbeigh, Rossbeigh and all of the other business down to and including Cahersiveen badly need the perk and the boost to the economy that this very scenic greenway will bring. I had to pay for any property I ever purchased before I entered it or began working it. I cannot understand why a greenway or piece of land that is to be used as an amenity is not paid for in the same way. Surely a contract should have been drawn up detailing what the land take would be and the accommodation works needed, that the farmer would be paid before any work started, with evidence provided of insurance to cover the farmer, the workers, any visitors and everyone involved.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter, which I am dealing with on behalf of Minister for Transport. On a personal level, I do not disagree with a lot of what the Deputy said. He is absolutely right and I will come back to that in a minute.

The Minister for Transport has responsibility for the overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to greenways. The planning, design and construction of individual greenways is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, as the approving authority and the relevant local authority, which in the case of this project is Kerry County Council. The delivery of the south Kerry greenway is a key priority within the greenways programme. It is a significant project that will link Glenbeigh and Cahersiveen, with the 24 km route primarily following the old railway line. Over €9 million has been allocated to fund this project in 2026 alone, while a further €7 million, approximately, was allocated to fund this scheme in 2025. This significant investment underlines the Government's commitment to the project.

I hear the Deputy's point about the economic lift the greenway will give the areas he mentioned. I understand that two sections of the greenway route have opened in recent months

and that another section will be opened over the summer. This is a positive development and signals Kerry County Council's commitment to progressing this project to delivery. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the challenges involved in delivering this scheme, which range from complex engineering issues involving topography and remediation works on historical structures to inflationary pressures and, of course, land acquisition. The preferred approach to land acquisition for greenways is to procure required land by voluntary land agreements, VLAs. All reasonable efforts should be made to acquire land on a voluntary basis. It is only as a last resort that a CPO will be pursued by a local authority and it should only ever be a last resort. Even then, where a CPO process commences, there should be further ongoing engagement throughout the process to try and reach a voluntary land agreement. That may not happen in some cases. I have heard that this is not the situation in some cases, which disappoints me. CPOs are a long-standing statutory mechanism available to local authorities for public infrastructure projects and their use is subject to strict legal processes and oversight. I hear very clearly the Deputy's remarks about the use of CPOs and he is right. It must be by the will of the people. There must be engagement, constructive and meaningful talks and conversations with landowners and others. That is the only way to proceed. I see this in my own constituency and in Cork South West, with the Cork to Kinsale greenway. I fully agree with the Deputy that we must bring people together, not divide and conquer.

Kerry County Council has advised that land is being acquired from 138 landowners for the south Kerry greenway. As of early April 2026, compensation has been agreed and paid to 36 landowners. Compensation has been agreed with a further 54 landowners and these claims are at various stage of the conveyancing process. The average time between finalising conveyancing details with a landowner's solicitor and making payment is five to six months. I have been advised that it is expected that all of these 54 claims will be paid in 2026, barring any unforeseen circumstances or issues. I would like to confirm to the Deputy that funding is available to pay these claims in 2026 on completion of the relevant legal documentation. When completed, 65% of all impacted landowners will have been fully compensated for their land.

In 16 cases, no statement of claim has been received from the landowner or the landowner's agent, which is resulting in delays to the process. There are other cases where agreement of landowners' agent's fees is also delaying the process. Three cases have been referred to arbitration and are engaging with the formal process to help bring matters toward a fair and timely resolution. I have been assured that Kerry County Council officials are working closely with remaining local landowners and their agents to finalise accommodation works and land acquisition payments. As the Deputy will appreciate, it is critical that there is a working relationship between the local authority and all landowners to ensure that all claims can be settled. I encourage all landowners to engage with the project team if they have not done so.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed reply. Before work starts on any man's land or woman's land, it should be paid for first, and not afterwards. It is not right that they may be paid at a later time. The Minister of State is telling me that some of them will be paid this year. What I am saying is do not go into any other man's land without paying first and agreeing the accommodation works. That is my view on it anyway.

To go back to when the CPO process was put in place, I was there and involved in the council meetings before Christmas. The officials came back and said they could not agree with six or seven.

I begged the manager to send down more help with him, and that I would go myself, if needed, to talk to the landowners and see how those six or seven could be brought around.

When the compulsory purchase order was being mooted first, I thought it was only for those six or seven. I appreciated that all the rest of them were willing to talk and to agree. As a last resort, it should have been only the ones they had trouble with and not all of them. When we see the powers that were given and that people are not paid until the works are completed, it is very wrong.

I am asking the Minister of State not to allow this to happen in any other part of the country - our country. I am talking about Kerry. It is vital that the landowners are brought on board where these walkways and cycleways are going through. You will always need their goodwill and to show goodwill to the people who are coming to visit our county. That is important. I am asking the Minister of State not to let this happen in any other part of the country. These people have not been paid and their accommodation is up in the air. They need to be talked to. There is a lot of work to sort it out. I am begging the Minister of State to do so and to ensure that we bring back the goodwill of the people whose lands we are going through because it is vital to have their goodwill on our side. The greenway will help everyone. It is making life difficult for the landowners, but they have to be compensated and seen after.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The first point I will make is that greenways will have significant benefit to the local areas, as the Deputy said, in terms of significant benefits beyond the transport sector in areas such as regional economic development, public health, climate resilience and economic activity. The point the Deputy made is that it is important that three sections of the Kerry greenway will be open to the public by the summer. I will restate that it is, and should be, as the Deputy said, the primary objective across all proposed greenway schemes to acquire land voluntarily. In the transport committee in November, TII committed to reviewing the code this year. In tandem, the Government will review the parent greenway document strategy. I will come back to that again another day with the Deputy. It is important that best practice for regional and national greenways is that we do not enter into CPOs as a first resort, that it is the last resort, that there is engagement, connection and conversation, and that it is voluntary land acquisition.

I ask Deputy Healy-Rae to be that conduit. I believe, and will make the point, that Kerry County Council has said it is a priority for it that it will settle land acquisition arrangements. I hope it will because they are landowners. As the Deputy said, they are people who have worked hard for the land that they have. Equally, it is important that all lines of communication are open and that there is an opportunity to be taken to resolve the matter to ensure we see a positive solution that can be achieved for all the people living and working in south Kerry. I hope we will see progress. We need to see that done. The Deputy is right; there is no point in driving and dividing people. It is about bringing people together, and we all benefit from that.

I thank the Deputy for raising the matter on behalf of the people of south Kerry. I have it my own constituency. I am fully aware of the issues he has raised. It is one that we need to see common sense in as well, because it is about people. People in these cases are not looking to cause trouble. They are looking to protect themselves and do what is best for their communities. I am sorry to the staff for running over time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.24 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 29 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.24 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 29 April 2026.