



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 30 Aibreán 2026

Thursday, 30 April 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Services Card

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on any plans to expand the use of a digital ID; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31202/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister will be delighted to know that my question is straightforward. It relates to the expansion of the digital ID, or the public services card as it is known. The Minister will be well aware that this card has been mired in controversy. A succession of Ministers have tried to defend how this card is mandatory but somehow not compulsory. There is an element to this that people have to have it but they also do not have to have it. For that reason, I and many others are concerned about its expansion.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank the Deputy for her question. In April 2024, the European Parliament and the Council introduced eIDAS regulation 2. The overall aim of this regulation is to create a predictable and legally binding framework for digital identities that will enable citizens, residents and business to securely access public and private services across member states. The regulation requires each member state to develop and provide at least one European digital identity wallet by the end of 2026. The wallet will enable people to store various identity credentials, such as driving licences, EU health insurance cards and age verifiers, securely on their mobile phone or device and produce them, at their own discretion, to evidence entitlement to services and benefits anywhere in the EU.

A key benefit of the wallet is that the personal data will be held and controlled by the citizen. The citizen will decide whether they want to use the wallet, what credentials they hold in the wallet and where and to whom they provide any credential.

The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport has responsibility for implementing the regulation while the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service

Reform and Digitalisation has responsibility for the development of the Government digital wallet. The wallet must meet EU technical, security, interoperability and certification requirements.

My Department's role is to use the existing MyGovID service to verify that the person seeking a wallet and wishing to download identity credentials into the wallet is the person they claim to be. We will also provide the core public service identity data, such as the name and date of birth, but we will not hold or have access to any of the credentials from other public service providers they subsequently download. We will not know what other credentials have been downloaded, nor will we have any access to usage data.

The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, OGCIO, is currently inviting the public to take part in a consultation and testing phase of a pilot Government digital wallet. Launching a consultation and testing at this stage enables the Government to engage with the public to understand what they would like from the Government digital wallet.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister will well understand why I and others, such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and other groups, are necessarily cautious about this. For example, when the public services card, PSC, was brought in, it was said that it would be mandatory but not compulsory, or *vice versa*. In the end, the requirement for those over 65 is that they must have one of these cards with a chip in it to access the free travel scheme. There is a creeping sense that people are being asked to hand over their identification and have a level of trust – this is not personal to the Minister - in the Government in the holding of their data. I do not believe that sufficient work has been carried out in order to assuage people. The Data Protection Commissioner has already made a ruling in this regard, although I understand it is under appeal. That ruling was damning of the Government's capacity to handle people's data.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy said, the ruling is under appeal. We are appealing it. I also thank the committee for beginning pre-legislative scrutiny of the social welfare Bill yesterday. There are initiatives contained in that Bill for a card holder to use their public service card for identity purposes at their own discretion in exactly the same way they can do with a driving licence or a passport. That is particularly for people looking for ID for bank accounts or credit unions, etc. We are trying to give people the ability to use the card at their own discretion and judgment.

The public service card currently does not display card holders' dates of birth. The proposed changes provide for a card holder to opt in to have their date of birth inscribed on their public service card. If they so wish, they can have it removed at a later point. Since 2012, over 5 million people have completed the SAFE registration process for the public service card. There are approximately 3.5 million users of MyGovID who complete about 60 million transactions per annum. It makes the provision of services a lot easier and quicker for citizens.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister stated that people can put their date of birth on it if they wish and that everything will be absolutely opt-in all the time but that is not true. The moment something like this is brought in, it becomes compulsory. Those aged over 65 have an entitlement to access the free travel scheme but they must have this card to do so. If people do not want to have the card, they are simply locked out of the scheme. When the Minister

says that something will be voluntary, such as the public services card, it is not the case. The only thing people are volunteering to do is not have their lawful entitlement to the free travel scheme if they are over 65. Does the Minister understand why people are naturally suspicious about this? In the Minister's answers, he talked a lot about it being voluntary and people opting in. In truth, however, the PSC is no longer voluntary, particularly for those over 65. People do not have the choice to opt in.

We are doing pre-legislative scrutiny on the social welfare Bill. It is a fairly big piece of legislation and changes to the PSC are contained within it. I am putting the Minister on notice that those changes will be resisted by me and the Opposition more broadly because there is no trust when it comes to the holding and collection of data.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I look forward to engaging with the committee on the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. I emphasise the voluntary nature of this. It is the Department's policy that this is digital by desire. We understand there are people who do not wish to or are not comfortable using digital services. We will continue to make our services available on an optional basis.

Equally, there is a level engagement with the public services card. There are a total of 3.4 million verified MyGovID accounts. In 2025 alone, we had over 44 million logins. That gives the Deputy a sense of the level of interest and use of it. We will have further questions later about the ongoing online services. I have made it clear within the Department that this should be digital by desire. If someone is not comfortable with it – I am speaking as one such person – those services and options should be fully available.

Pension Provisions

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the action he will take to ensure that vulnerable individuals are not left without access to an invalidity pension for months due to delays in processing appeals, such as in a case (details supplied); if consideration is given to ill health in how his Department interacts with applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31713/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Minister about the long delays in invalidity pension appeals. I am aware of one such case but I wonder whether there are others. In this particular case, the original appeal happened in January 2025. It is now five months since there was an appeal to the chief appeals officer but there has been nothing back. This woman clearly cannot work. She has extreme migraines that mean she often cannot get out of bed. She can barely take care of herself.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is important to ensure people claiming benefits satisfy the criteria established by the Oireachtas for entitlement to that benefit. However, in doing so, it is also important that we offer people who may not receive a favourable decision the opportunity to seek a review of that decision and submit a formal appeal. In that way, we work to ensure the entitlement is not denied to people who have a need for support and satisfy the relevant qualification conditions.

In the case of invalidity pension, we offer claimants both a review by the decision area as well as a formal appeal mechanism. In most cases, these reviews and appeals can be dealt with expeditiously. We are also continuously working to improve the service. For example, over the past year, we have introduced new regulations that extend the period of time during which a person can make an appeal from 21 to 60 days. The new regulations also grant additional rights to seek an oral hearing of the appeal and receive an explanation if an oral hearing is not granted. In addition, they grant specify specific timelines for the exchange and processing of appeal documentation.

In parallel, we have introduced a new IT system, including the ability to submit appeals online. An average of 60% of appeals are now received online. We have also significantly increased staffing in the appeals service. Indeed, I welcome members of the appeal service, who are in the Public Gallery.

These changes have resulted in a reduction in the number of appeals on hand from 21,630 appeals at the end of December 2024 to 7,470 appeals on hand at the end of March 2026. Processing times have also improved from an overall average of over 23 weeks in 2024 to just 9.5 weeks today in the case of invalidity pension.

However, having said all of that, some cases, in particular those involving the exchange of complicated medicine, take time to finalise. With respect to the case referenced in the Deputy's question, while I cannot discuss specific details on the floor, I have raised the case with the chief appeals officer, who acts independently in the performance of her duties, I will engage directly with the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In this case, the woman is often in so much pain that she cannot leave the house. Sometimes, she might be well and can function as others can, but on other days she cannot even open her eyes. She is obviously not in a position to find work. There is a question as to whether this case is illustrative of a wider approach of delaying appeals. The woman has made the point that she has the capacity to fight, contact a Deputy, write letters and do those things. However, she acknowledges that plenty of people cannot necessarily do that and, when confronted with a wall of delays and refusals, might just give up. Is this part of a policy? It is interesting that the number of recipients of invalidity pensions has fallen at a time when the population has increased and the number of recipients of other payments has increased. I wonder whether there is some sort of policy or approach being implemented to push people back from receiving what they are entitled to.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can absolutely assure the Deputy that is not the policy and approach. As I said in my initial response, we are working continuously to improve the appeals process and are continuously investing in that process. We are also investing in the initial process in terms of medical assessment and knowledge. By introducing a new IT system, we have given people the capacity to make appeals online. They do not have to physically post applications; they can apply and exchange information online from the comfort of their own homes. We have also increased staffing in the appeals process office considerably.

As I want to reiterate, some 21,630 appeals were on hand at the end of December 2024, which we reduced to 7,470 by the end of March. More importantly, the processing times for appeals have reduced from 23 weeks in 2024 to nine and a half weeks today, in particular in

the case of invalidity pension. I am very focused on appeals. I thank the appeals office, which is independent, for its work in this space. There is a specific issue with regard to the case raised by the Deputy, which we will discuss separately. I assure him that there is no policy to dissuade people from applying for any payment or making appeals.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In that case, I do not know whether the Minister or Department has carried out any analysis of this area. What is the explanation for the decline in the number of recipients of invalidity pension? The number was about 55,000 in 2015, which rose to 59,000 in 2020, but the figure has fallen year on year to a low of just over 55,000 in 2024. There has been an increase of only 1% despite the population having significantly increased over ten years. The number in receipt of carer's allowance is up from 62,000 in 2015 to almost 100,000 in 2024, a 56% increase. The number in receipt of disability allowance is up from about 120,000 to close to 170,000, but the number in receipt of illness benefit has fallen. The Minister has said there is no policy of his predecessor's "I, Daniel Blake" policy, which was withdrawn and is not being implemented through the back door, in terms of targets to refuse applications or make it harder for people to access illness benefit and invalidity pension.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can do some work and come back to the Deputy on invalidity generally. As he said, there have also been increases in disability and other areas, such as carer's allowance. There is definitely no policy to discourage people from applying. It can be challenging in terms of getting the necessary medical information, in particular where a case is not as black and white as other cases may be. The appeals team and medical team are very much attuned to those cases. That is why we have put a focus on invalidity and domiciliary care allowance appeals and reducing the processing time in order to give certainty to those making the appeal.

I will engage with the Deputy directly on the specific case he mentioned and will come back to the House generally on invalidity pension and illness benefit and the relevant figures.

Cost of Living Issues

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he has given consideration to an emergency cost-of-living payment to vulnerable households at risk of poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31203/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As the Government seems to be blissfully unaware, there is a cost-of-living crisis. We know this from the numbers of people in energy arrears. We also know this from the figures from Barnardos and other agencies. This is backed up by the survey on income and living conditions, SILC, data. My question is simple. In light of the announcement of a surplus last week, has the Minister given any consideration to a cost-of-living payment for those vulnerable households at risk of poverty?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We are all greatly disturbed by recent geopolitical developments, including the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine. Wars are destroying lives across the world and in communities and will deepen and entrench rather than

resolve any situation. As a nation, we feel the impact of these conflicts in the upward pressure on fuel costs, in particular. We should always remember those who are suffering in other ways.

In response to the spike in fuel prices, the Government has acted more decisively than many other Governments. We have made an investment of over €750 million, which will bring down fuel prices and provide targeted support to households on low incomes in receipt of the fuel allowance payment. More generally, the Government increased core welfare rights above the rate of inflation in budget 2026. In 2026, my Department will spend €28.9 billion on schemes and services, which includes €1.15 billion in new measures, comprising an above-inflation increase of €10 per week in core rates and a range of targeted supports, including €320 million in measures that are alleviating child poverty. This also includes the largest ever increase in the child support payment.

The budget also provided significant support to help households with the cost of heating and other energy bills. The fuel allowance has increased by €5 per week, or 15%. For the first time, families in receipt of the working family payment qualify for the fuel allowance. The Government has also extended the period of time during which the fuel allowance is paid by four weeks to the end of this week. Combined, the changes in fuel allowance equate to a year-on-year increase of nearly 32%. The fuel allowance is paid to just under 469,000 households across the country.

Taken together, the increase in core rates, the child support payment and the fuel allowance mean that, for example, a lone parent family with one child will see an increase of over 9%, or nearly €1,800, in payments from the Department, while a household comprising two adults will see an increase of over 8% percent or €2,300 in their payments. Those increases are significantly ahead of inflation and we will continue to monitor the situation and cost-of-living pressures, including those arising from any developments. I will continue to revert to the House on that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister will know that, before the war in Iran, 330,000 households were already in arrears with their bills. The average household arrears are €470. The Minister is playing ducks and drakes with percentages and references to millions of euro. The figure for the average arrears for household energy bills is €470 and the extension to the fuel allowance is worth €136. The Minister can see how those figures do not add up. The Taoiseach referred to October and January, but if people are struggling now, what is the Minister prepared to do for those households that are at risk of or are in poverty? They cannot pay their bills today and cannot wait until the budget in October and the measures to be introduced in January. That is far too long for people to wait.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have acted. I again emphasise the increase in the fuel allowance and the extra four weeks of the payment bringing it to the end of this week, which is the beginning of the month of May. That has not been done previously. We increased the fuel allowance by €5 per week. As I said, the increase in the fuel allowance is a 32% increase for the 469,000 households that are in receipt of it. For the first time, the fuel allowance is now being paid to working families. Those in receipt of the working family payment were eligible for the fuel allowance. We made a back payment to the beginning of January so that those in receipt of the working family payment received a lump sum for January and February at the beginning of March and now have the benefit of the extension.

That is a very targeted intervention to those 469,000 households in receipt of the fuel allowance. We continue to pay the household benefits package. Over 500,000 households are in receipt of that. That is a direct payment that people can use in relation to fuel and energy supports. We have just finished a run of engagements across the country with Members of the House around availability of additional needs payments. That may be something we can come back to.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am a constituency TD, as is the Minister. I listen to my constituents and I have talked to people in my own party. From our read of it, there is a need for an intervention from the Government. We have proposed €400 in energy credits, a cut to the USC, which would be worth €500, €400 in emergency welfare payments and a €500 cost-of-disability payment, as well as an additional eight weeks on the fuel allowance because that is what people need.

Last February, I was ten years in the Dáil. The Minister has been here longer. I have never experienced the level of poverty that I see in my constituency offices in Balbriggan and Rush. I have never seen anything like it. My constituency manager would say the same thing. People are desperate and being put to the pin of their collar. We are not making this up in the Opposition. This is coming to us. The Minister saw people on the streets, not just in tractors, but in wheelchairs, telling the Government very clearly that they were making choices between heating, eating and charging their mobility devices. The time for intervention is now.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I acknowledge that pressure. We see that as well - we are not immune from that - but we also have to be honest with people about our ability to make interventions. We cannot make interventions every few months. There will be an intervention in the context of the forthcoming budget. We have made a €750 million intervention since March in two packages, which has reduced the day-to-day cost of fuel for people and has brought in a targeted extension of the fuel allowance payment, giving people access to the fuel allowance to the beginning of May. This was not previously available to those 469,000 households. Some 500,000 households are benefiting from the households benefits package, which will be paid all year around, including the summer.

We will continue to review all of the pressures people are under. We get it, but we also have to be honest. We cannot support all of those pressures, and we have to do this in a manner that is feasible and allows us to respond when the winter comes when energy prices and energy pressures will possibly be worse.

Social Welfare Code

4. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on the commitment to introduce a cost-of-disability payment; the current status of policy development and implementation; the expected timelines for introduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31682/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá mé ag lorg nuachta faoin infheistíocht do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas, go háirithe i mBaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh ach nationally chomh maith leis sin. I

would appreciate if the Minister would give me a detailed timeline for the next step for recognising the associated costs for people with disabilities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste ar son na ndaoine faoi mhíchumas. Gabhaim buíochas leis as a shuim san ábhar seo. Tá sé ráite sa chlár Rialtais go mbeimid ag seasamh le daoine faoi mhíchumas agus go bhfuil muid ag obair go crua air sin. Supporting disabled people is a key priority for this Government. That is why the programme for Government is introducing a number of commitments to improve the position of people with disabilities, including a commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. Under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was developed with significant input from disability groups and advocates, it was agreed to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability. This is being led by my Department, but it should, must and does include other Departments as well as disabled people and their advocates.

We have had a series of meetings with a number of organisations, including disabled persons organisations, DPOs, to discuss the structure and content. A public consultation process is also being established on how a cost-of-disability payment can best be achieved. That was launched on Friday, 20 February. It ran for just over six weeks until Tuesday 7 April. I am pleased that there was an exceptional response, with over 1,000 submissions received. Some 87 submissions were from groups and organisations and 12 were from disabled persons organisations and disabled persons representative organisations. Accessible ways to partake were widely used, with almost 60 submissions made over the phone, 20 received by post and seven by video. I thank all of the contributors, including Members in the Chamber, for taking the time to make a submission to the process.

The summit will now be held on Lansdowne Road on 13 May. It will be an in-person event, with online access also available. The summit and the submissions received through the consultation process will help inform the approach to be taken in delivering on our programme for Government commitment.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Táim buíoch as an bhfreagra sin and the continued engagement with my office. I commend the staff in his office for their hard work as well as the Minister himself. What is absolutely clear is that the cost of disability must reflect the reality. In north Dublin in my constituency, we have the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, the Central Remedial Clinic, CRC, and multiple disability organisations. I have been speaking to them about the urgency needed, not just in the winter, but also with transport costs, infrastructure and electricity. I hope that the Government acts on plug-in solar, which will reduce the cost for apartment dwellers, particularly people with no access to rooftops but who could easily access a similar system with a low initial cost. In conjunction with batteries, this would help with electricity costs. We also need to be clear about eligibility. Those who are on disability payments, who are in employment or who are over 65 need to be prioritised.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his input. We will be having the summit on 13 May, which is next Wednesday week. Following the summit and the consultation process, we will be preparing a paper that will outline the key learnings and any tangible outcomes that

support how we deliver in this area going forward. I will work with my colleagues in government in relation to a potential proposal around the eligibility for the payment, who should get the payment and how it should be paid. We will have engagement around that with the committee on social protection.

I wish to emphasise that we have made increases this year to the fuel allowance and the weekly rate of disability allowance. Additional needs payments are also available through the community welfare office network. I encourage people to ensure that they have access to those payments and have engaged with the network in respect of them. We have done a lot of work in recent weeks to make information about those payments available to Members of the Oireachtas so that they can pass it on.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: There is real urgency here. I welcome the fact that the Minister is acknowledging that this is needed. The gap is not abstract and it is felt every single week by the people I represent and people across Ireland. The payment would be very meaningful and very well accepted. I look forward to working with the Department and the disability organisations on that.

This does not relate to the Minister's Department, but last night, we saw Irish citizens from my constituency and some of my friends illegally abducted by the Israeli Government. I was part of a previous flotilla. Could that be brought to the Department of foreign affairs, as they were off the coast of Crete in international waters? I know that the Minister cannot act on this in his Department, but I need to highlight it on the floor of this House and do everything I can do. A lot of these people were with me previously.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have absolutely no doubt that the Department of foreign affairs is fully monitoring that situation. Our thoughts are with all of those Irish citizens this morning and with their families here at home.

Regarding the Deputy's question, the cost of disability and the challenges facing those with disabilities is not solely a matter for the Department of Social Protection. It is essential for transport costs and employment costs - there are other supports from the Department of Health, obviously - that all of those Departments are part of this conversation. That is our intention and our priority as regards both the summit and the paper that will inform decisions. We will be prioritising the cost-of-disability payment from the Department of Social Protection in this year's budget but other Departments are going to have to come to the table as well with supports to allow to people to travel, use medical services, access primary medical certs, avail of motorised transport and deal with the various costs that are there.

A whole-of-government approach is necessary. We will work closely with the Minister, Deputy Foley, and other Ministers in relation to this.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Social Welfare Benefits

5. Deputy Colm Burke asked the Minister for Social Protection to confirm that consideration will be given to an automatic entitlement to the fuel allowance where a member of the household is over 70 years of age; the cost of implementing this proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31303/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. There have been significant improvements in recent years to the fuel allowance scheme, which has resulted in more than 100,000 additional households qualifying for the payment. The budget for the fuel allowance scheme has increased significantly, to €557.4 million in 2026. That compares with €290.45 million in 2020. In January 2023, enhanced fuel allowance measures for people aged 70 or over were introduced. These have since been extended to those aged 66 or older. This included a new weekly means threshold, which now stands at €534 for a single person or €1,068 for a couple. In addition, the amount of capital that is disregarded in the means test was increased from €20,000 to €50,000. The weekly means threshold for those aged under 66 was also increased by €80, to €200, above the appropriate rate of the contributory State pension.

In response to the rise in fuel prices, the Government has approved the extension of the 2025 to 2026 fuel season by four weeks, until the end of this week. This provides an additional €152 to some 470,000 households at an estimated cost of €71.4 million. A number of other important improvements to the scheme have been introduced. In budget 2025, we allowed the carer's allowance to be considered as a qualifying payment for the fuel allowance for the first time. The fuel allowance was extended in budget 2026 to recipients of the working family payment from January 2026. In budget 2026, we allowed those who leave their disability payment to take up employment to continue to receive the fuel allowance for five years after exiting the payment.

We do not hold data on household composition to be able to identify where a member of the household is over 70 years of age, and therefore, cannot provide a costing for the measure that is proposed by the Deputy. However, the criteria for the fuel allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources that are available to my Department in as targeted a manner as possible. Extending the eligibility to include automatic entitlement to the fuel allowance for those over 70 years of age could change the targeted nature of the fuel allowance payment. It would require additional funding and would need to be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

Deputy Colm Burke: Where I am coming from is the context of people who are living on their own. One of the big problems that we have where a person is living on their own is that there are additional costs. The cost of heating a house and normal maintenance is the same as it would be if there were two or three people living in the house. If we look at the allowance that the Department is paying out and the cost to the State where a person ends up in a nursing home, the average cost in a nursing home as a minimum now is €1,250 per week. Therefore, if we look at the overall cost in real terms, there are challenges for people, particularly in rural areas, who are living on their own trying to make ends meet. The cost of heating, especially in older houses, is a huge additional cost. It is something that needs to be looked at. The cost of administration is taking up a lot of money. If the allowance was already there for anyone over 70 years of age, that would reduce down the cost of administration.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. The Deputy's question was framed in the context of the fuel allowance, but the living alone allowance would be the payment in relation to those people. It is a payment that I intend to focus on in this year's budget. There is no doubt that people on their own have extensive outgoings, particularly those who may end up on their own following the death of their partner or separation. It is an area that I am going to be very focused on in the context of this year's budget. The proposal to give an automatic entitlement to the fuel allowance for somebody who is over 70 would require significant resources and would take away from my capacity to do something on the living alone allowance, but also de-target some of the necessary element of the fuel allowance which we can target at people. I am very conscious of those living of their own and older people living on their own and the very disproportionate bills that they face, oftentimes without any warning or notice. I am going to be very focused on the living alone allowance in the context of budget 2027.

Deputy Colm Burke: The cost of running a house for one person is the same as the cost of running it for two people, especially in relation to heating and maintenance. That is where I am coming from in relation to the fuel allowance for the over-70s. There is that huge additional cost. I recall dealing with one man whose basic allowance was the old age pension. His wife died. The income was cut in half but the cost of running the house was the same. In rural areas, we have quite a lot of properties that are not in great shape. They are extremely costly. People do not have the funding now to do major renovations despite all the grants that are there. It still costs a lot more money than what the grants will provide. In that context, I am wondering about making the fuel allowance automatic for people living alone rather than having their income assessed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have made considerable changes to the fuel allowance in recent years. We have considerably increased the disallowance in the context of means. A lot more people have qualified for it. We have gone from €290.4 million in 2020 to €557.4 million in 2026. A total of 470,000 households qualify. We need to do more work on the living alone allowance to cater specifically for the kind of cohorts that the Deputy spoke about. In many cases, for the fuel allowance and somebody living on their own, many people will qualify. We will do some more work around communicating the new means. I will be specifically targeting the living alone allowance to address that kind of cohort of people, particularly those who are left on their own, either by death or separation, with large expenses. The Deputy is absolutely right. We have the retrofit programmes and various support programmes, but for many older people it is a very big project to take on. I am going to be doing a lot of work in that space.

Child Poverty

6. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on child poverty figures and the effectiveness of his Department's measures to reduce child poverty. [31238/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The subject of my question is child poverty. Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures that were released recently show that the consistent poverty rate for families headed by lone parents was about 13.4% last year compared with 11% in 2024. It is a 22% increase in consistent poverty for one of the most vulnerable groups in the country, including

the children they take care of. Will the Minister confirm what new measures the Department is designing to reverse this trend?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The key national metric relating to the measurement of poverty is that of consistent poverty. It records those households who are both at risk of poverty and are experiencing deprivation. It is independently measured by the CSO through the survey on income and living conditions, SILC. SILC 2025, which is based on income data from 2024, was published in March. This shows a reduction in the child consistent poverty rate in 2025, from 8.5% to 7.8%. This is equivalent to an 8% reduction year-on-year. As SILC 2025 is based on 2024 income data, the survey does not take into account Government measures to reduce child poverty that were included in budgets 2025 and 2026. Budget 2026 included some of the most significant investments any government has made in tackling child poverty in order to make progress towards our new child poverty target.

Budget 2026 contained a €320 million social welfare package specifically to reduce child poverty. Key measures included the largest ever increases to child support payments, with a 16% increase for children under 12 and over 25% increase for children over 12, higher income thresholds for the working family payment and expanded access to the fuel allowance and the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. Taken together, the increases in core rates, the child support payment and the fuel allowance as well as the recent four-week extension in the payment of that fuel allowance means that a lone parent family with one child will see an increase of over 9%, or nearly €1,800, in payments from the Department and a two-adult household will see an increase of just over 8%, or €2,300, in their payments.

Budget 2025 extended the hot school meals scheme to make it available to all primary schools.

This additional investment supplements other cross-government supports such as free schoolbooks, free GP visit cards and enhancements to early childhood care and education schemes. While the impact of some of these non-cash measures will never be fully reflected in poverty statistics, I am confident that, together, they will bring us closer to achieving our target, which I am determined we will meet.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister for his reply. Many of those payments and changes are welcome but there is a question, in the context of the growing hardship on families, the cost of energy and the cost-of-living crisis, that people are being left behind. Potential talent, in particular, is being left behind at a young age if we do not reverse the trend of consistent child poverty. The Government's target is about 3%; 7.8% is still quite a long way off, despite the things the Minister has worked on.

In our alternative budget, the Social Democrats proposed a reworking of the working family payment to create a highly targeted support in the form of a second tier of child benefit. We were promised a second tier by the Taoiseach for budget 2026 in August. I think the Minister gave some support to that, but it did not appear. Will the Minister commit to the Government taking the rising poverty figures and the cost-of-living crisis as impetus for introducing a second tier of child benefit?

Deputy Dara Calleary: In budget 2026, we introduced record increases in the child support payment, which are making a direct impact for families as shown by the figures I have provided.

In relation to a targeted child benefit payment, I want to announce to the House that I am introducing a public consultation, opening next Tuesday, 5 May, and look forward to the input of Members of the House around that. It will be aligned with a consultation on a working age payment. Both payments are aligned and will have impact. We will review what comes back from that consultation.

Through the Taoiseach's intervention, we have a child poverty unit in his Department which is driving all of us across government to take the appropriate action. We can take action in the Department of Social Protection but it also requires input from the Departments of children, health, transport and education. That is also happening. We will be in a position to make reports on that in the context of the Taoiseach's office and the roadmap for social inclusion. I will be publishing a new roadmap before the summer recess, which will have a specific focus on child poverty on a cross-government basis.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is worthwhile to read into the record some of the harrowing stories presented by St. Vincent de Paul and the reality faced by lone parents. One parent said: "I can't get control, we can't make plans, it's like being in a deep hole, no matter what we do we can't get out of it. We climb up and fall back in." Another single mother told the organisation: "I find life very hard, not being able to pay all my bills and always putting some on the long finger. The stress makes me sick. I'm always worrying knowing that my kids have to go without." We know targeted interventions into child poverty are not just a moral imperative; they are the best investment the State can make into its people. Early intervention makes a huge difference later in life and can improve life trajectories and reduce the need for support down the line. A 2025 report from the ESRI suggested a payment of this type would cost around €772 million and could lift more than 50,000 children out of poverty. I hope the Minister takes that on as a major point of intervention. In the context of the energy and cost-of-living crises, the Minister has to do all he can on child poverty.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I think I have taken it on. We have directed our resources through a €320 million package in this year's budget. My new measures package was €1.2 billion and €320 million of that went specifically to child poverty measures - a 25% increase in child support for children over 12 and 16% for those under 12. They are making a difference. A lone-parent family with one child will have an increase of nearly €1,800 in their payments from the Department this year while a two-adult household will see an increase of just over €2,300. That is a direct difference and is making a difference in weekly payments as we speak. There is the increase in and, particularly, the expansion of the fuel allowance. The working family payment will assist children under the pressure the Deputy outlined.

We will publish the roadmap for social inclusion 2026-30 before the summer recess. That will focus on child poverty. The child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach continues to keep every part of Government focused on this space.

Social Welfare Benefits

7. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of applications for urgent needs payments in Cork in the first three months of each of the years 2019, 2025 and 2026 respectively, by category of application, and the number approved, in tabular form. [31076/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister provide an update on the number of applications for urgent needs payments in Cork for the first three months of the years 2019, 2025 and 2026, by category of application and the numbers approved, in tabular form?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make additional needs payments to help meet essential expenses that a person cannot pay from their weekly income or other personal and household resources. This includes supplements to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from the customer's own resources and which are deemed to be necessary. The main items eligible for assistance include utility bills, repairs to household appliances, clothing, child-related items such as cots and prams, assistance with funerals or burial costs, and travel costs.

The reporting of this scheme was revised in 2022 to give more complete information; therefore, the format requested by the Deputy is not available for previous years, including 2019. I have a tabular statement for this reply and will provide it to the Deputy separately. It outlines the number of additional needs payments registered and awarded, by category, in County Cork in quarter 1 of 2025 and 2026. In 2025 there were 1,078 awarded in quarter 1, compared with 1,038 in quarter 1 in 2026. The largest number of claims fall into the general category, followed by housing and then clothing. The figures do not reflect the number of claims that have been withdrawn, cancelled or are awaiting further information. Applications are assessed on the basis of identified need, income, available resources and essential expenditure.

I would encourage anybody to engage with the community welfare service. We have done a lot of work in recent weeks to connect that service to Oireachtas Members through *mywelfare.ie* or through the community welfare contact centre.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Go raibh maith agat. I would have preferred to have the information in front of me so I could have gone through it. There has been a reduction of 40 payments made between 2025 and 2026, if what the Minister has said is correct. I find that unbelievable. More and more people are coming to my office every week in urgent need - people in debt, whether in arrears on electricity or on gas; people who have had a car break down and do not have the money to fix it; people who are struggling to pay for confirmations and communions at this time of year. For it to be less, that is a failure of the Government to let people know the payment is there. There are just over 1,000 people availing of the scheme in Cork; that is only a fraction of the people who are in trouble. We know from information that came out this week that over 300,000 people are in energy arrears. The ESRI found today that more than one in ten households cannot afford a warm home. How do these figures match with that? They just do not.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I share the Deputy's concern about the low number. That is why we put in considerable effort, following submissions from the Deputy's colleague, Deputy

O'Reilly, and other Deputies in recent months, to bring the community welfare service here. We had a very good afternoon in the audiovisual room a few weeks back. Each community welfare service had a clinic in every part of the country for Oireachtas Members to attend, meet them and get information. We have provided considerable information to every Member in recent weeks about that contact point, the qualification, the means test and so on. I will give the Deputy's office that information again. I want people to avail of these services. We have done a lot of work in relation to feedback about the ESB and, in particular, meters - the so-called pay as you go. There is an awareness of the difficulties people are under there, from feedback from Deputies.

If the Deputy feels we need to do more in the Cork area in terms of information, we will do that. We have tried to use Oireachtas channels to provide that information; if there are other channels, we will use them.

Deputy Thomas Gould: If we are serious, the Minister has a job of work to do now. Over 300,000 people are in arrears on their energy bills. The Minister for energy has announced that there will be a 9% rise in energy prices, so more and more people will go into arrears. What is the plan? Has the Minister devised a plan in his Department to support affected people and let them know support exists?

The fuel allowance ends today. In the next week, we will see temperatures drop to 5°C. What about those people who are going to struggle, who cannot afford to turn on their heating? It is going to be cold and the fuel allowance is to end.

Let me put on the record the view of a 21-year-old who is trying to pay rent. The person says the cost of living has reached a point where it feels impossible to get ahead. They add that everyday expenses like those related to food, rent and bills are becoming overwhelming, and despite working hard, it feels like there is no real support available. I have a list of people crying out for support. The Minister needs to do more.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said earlier, this year, 2026, we are going to spend €557 million on the fuel allowance. We have extended it to May. It is being paid right until the beginning of May. It has been extended by four weeks and increased by €5 per week. It has been extended to 50,000 people who are on the working family payment. That is a significant extension. In 2020, we spent €290.4 million on the fuel allowance. This year, we will spend €557.4 million. The household benefits package continues to be paid.

I am very much open to getting information about additional needs payments out. A household with two children on €45,000 a year can still qualify for an additional needs payment. Our community welfare teams, including the local ones we all engage with but also the central one, through *mywelfare.ie*, are available to assist people in any given situation. The supports are available and open. Once again, we will make information available on them.

With regard to the fuel allowance, an investment of over half a billion euro is very significant.

Social Welfare Benefits

8. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will report on the introduction of pay-related benefit in March 2025 linking unemployment payments to previous earnings; the number of persons who have availed of it to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31132/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McCormack for his question. Jobseeker's pay-related benefit is a new social insurance income support that replaced the jobseeker's benefit scheme for people who became fully unemployed since 31 March 2025. This is a significant reform that brought Ireland in line with many other European countries. Jobseeker's pay-related benefit means that the income support is directly linked to a person's previous earnings.

People with five years' PRSI contributions receive 60% of previous earnings, subject to a maximum of €450, for the first 13 weeks. After that, the rate reduces to 55% of earnings, subject to a maximum of €375, for the following 13 weeks. A further 13 weeks sees a payment at a rate of 50%, up to a maximum payment of €300. People with between two' and five years' paid contributions receive 50% of previous earnings, subject to a maximum of €300 per week, for up to 26 weeks.

The scheme is demand-led and cost €297 million in 2025. We have provided over €560 million for the scheme in 2026. It is important to emphasise that jobseeker's pay-related benefit costs are funded by the increases in PRSI that have been legislated for. Over 97,000 people have been awarded jobseeker's pay-related benefit within its first year. There are currently almost 34,500 claimants. Of these, the majority, 84%, qualify for the higher rates payable to those with at least five years' PRSI contributions. Over half of those who qualify for the higher rates are being paid the maximum weekly rate of €450 for the first three months of the payment.

The jobseeker's pay-related scheme is in its early days. We are closely monitoring its impact and the pay-related approach to a benefit payment. It is still too early to make assumptions about trends or patterns. However, the data so far show that those on the scheme are returning to employment and generally close their claims before decreasing to the second tier of payment after 13 weeks.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the introduction of the pay-related benefit and believe it is an important step forward in how we support people who find themselves unemployed, especially the 97,000 who have received the benefit in the past 12 months and the 34,000 on it at the moment. For many families, losing a job is not just a financial shock; it is also an emotional one. It creates uncertainty and pressure at a time when people are trying to get back on their feet and secure new employment.

As I am hearing directly from people, the scheme provides stability during the period of transition. It allows people to focus on finding the right job rather than immediately falling into financial distress. From my interaction with individuals who have availed of the support, I believe there is a strong sense that it preserves dignity. People feel they are being treated fairly and that their contribution over many years of work and paying taxes has been recognised. That is an important principle. When people have contributed to the system, they should feel supported when in need.

Can the Minister outline how the Department is assessing the early impact of the scheme, particularly in terms of supporting people in returning to employment while maintaining the sense of stability and dignity?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. His overview of people's feelings about the scheme is absolutely correct. There are 34,500 claimants of the benefit in the first year, 84% of whom qualified for the higher rates payable. Over half of those who qualified for the higher rates were paid the maximum rate, €450.

We have begun an analysis of the first full year of operation, which ended at the end of March. It is too early to identify a trend or pattern from that, but most people are closing their claims before moving to the second tier of payment after 13 weeks. That is welcome and it explains the link to earnings. We will share the full analysis when we have it later in the year.

It is important to emphasise that this scheme is funded through the Social Insurance Fund, through people's own PRSI contributions. In this regard, people are basically getting back what they are putting in through PRSI. We will be learning from the jobseeker's pay-related benefit scheme for the lifetime of the Government and considering how a similar pay-related approach might be applied to other schemes.

Deputy Tony McCormack: It is great news that the majority of those who receive the benefit do not proceed to the second stage, which means the job market in Ireland is buoyant and people are able to find alternative employment. Building on that, I believe this approach should form a cornerstone of how we think about social welfare supports more broadly. It is about recognising contributions, supporting people through difficult periods and helping them to return to work in a sustainable way.

Can the Minister outline whether there are plans to further develop or extend pay-related supports and how the Government intends to ensure the principle of recognising and rewarding contributions remains central to our social protection system?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government commits to introducing a pay-related parent's benefit and also to exploring other payments where a similar model could be applied. Parental leave and benefit were introduced in 2019. As the Deputy knows, parents can take up to nine weeks of leave in blocks of a minimum of one week in the first two years following the birth of their child.

We are now going to examine the experiences from the first year of operation of jobseeker's pay-related benefit to inform thinking on extending pay-related benefits to parental and other benefits. We will be launching a public consultation to capture the views of the wider public on that process at some stage during this year.

This is the first scheme of this type introduced in the country and I want to ensure we have a very good understanding of its benefits, but also any challenges that may have arisen, inadvertently or otherwise. Once again, it is important to emphasise that any pay-related scheme is funded through increases in PRSI contributions that have already been legislated for.

Social Welfare Appeals

9. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number and percentage of disability allowance decisions that are appealed; the number and percentage of decisions that are overturned on appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29507/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am asking this question on behalf of my colleague an Teachta Darren O'Rourke. It is fairly straightforward. It is just looking for the number and percentage of disability allowance decisions that are appealed, and the number and percentage of decisions overturned on appeal. What we are seeking to understand is the reasoning. In most circumstances, nothing changes materially, so it is essentially the same person submitting the same claim again. Sometimes it is overturned.

My feeling is that a high number of cases are overturned on appeal but I await the figures from the Minister.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There is no direct correlation between the number and percentage of disability allowance decisions and the number of appeals that are registered during a particular time period as time differences always apply. This is particularly the case given that appeals regulations that came into effect on 28 April last year are now giving customers 60 days to make an appeal from the date of their decision. This is an increase from 21 days previously. Accordingly, appeals received in January 2026 may refer to decisions that were made in November 2025. However, as an indication of the appeal rate, 8,786 disability allowance decisions were made during quarter 1 of this year with 1,951 appeals being registered in the same period. That represents an appeal rate of approximately 22%. A total of 24% of appeals that were determined by appeals officers were allowed in favour of the appellant with a further 36% awarded by the decisions team without the need to complete the formal appeals process. Taken together, this means that 60% of appeals received had a favourable outcome, which represents about 13% of all disability allowance decisions that are made.

It is important to note that where decisions are allowed on receipt of an appeal, this may not mean that the initial decision was incorrect. A decision can be revised because the person making an appeal provides additional information that was not made available when the decision was first made. In other jurisdictions, appellants are not allowed to submit additional information but instead are required to submit a new claim. By referring the appeal papers back to the deciding team for a review, the process is more flexible. It does not require a person to restart his or her entire claims process. As a result, 606 of the 1,096 disability allowance appeals granted in quarter 1 of 2026, which is about 60%, were made by way of revised decision of the scheme deciding officers.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Sixty percent of them?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will come back to that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It had better be something good because that is not a good figure. It is traumatic for people to have to go through the application process. I know the Minister has sat in his constituency office with people and has gone through these forms the same as I

have, so he knows these forms are not easy. They are necessarily comprehensive and I am not for a moment suggesting that the information should not be collected but if 60% of them result in what the Minister refers to as a favourable outcome, that is not exactly a massive endorsement of the process that happens initially. With regard to 60% of them being overturned, the Minister says that new information can be provided but that is not an indication that there is new information. In my experience, very often, it involves the same information and the same person with the same disability and 60% of them are being overturned. That figure is one that should cause the Minister some concern.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have emphasised that 60% did not go into an appeals process. There was engagement with the person through that. As I said, in other jurisdictions, the person would be asked to submit an entirely new application. In respect of the 40%, if that decision remained unchanged, the appeal went to a formal determination by the appeals officer. The appeals officer then examined the documentary evidence that was presented and considered the appeal. Where an oral hearing is required, the appellant is generally given up to two or three weeks advance notice. A person can avail of an oral hearing.

Regarding going back to the original team and providing extra information, I have drilled into this quite considerably over 15 months as Minister. It is getting about the information, which can be difficult at times, and getting the medical information. We have tried to ask our team to engage with medical professionals so that there is consistency in the information that is provided. I accept that this is a very difficult process and I do not want to make people's difficult journeys even more difficult but, equally, there is a minimum threshold of information we need to make a decision and we continue to engage with medical professionals in particular in that space.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Those figures are not brilliant. The Minister can present it any way he likes but those are not good figures. He mentioned medical professionals. The problem is not specific to Balbriggan but the most recent case that was brought to me is in Balbriggan where doctors are now refusing to fill out these forms and not just for people on the medical card, although it happens a lot with people on the medical card. I always encourage my constituents to appeal where a decision goes against them if I feel they have grounds for that. Increasingly, I am advising people to appeal but they have to go back to their doctors now and they are not getting the forms filled out. The doctors are just point blank refusing them. The former Minister for Health, Dr. James Reilly, was in the newspapers sometime back regarding all the money he gets, and rightly so, for the medical card patients he has but some of these practices are getting a lot of money from the State and are then refusing to handle requirements for applications for payments from the State. It is a bit much. I know that is somewhat tangential but it is a very serious issue.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is not tangential. It is really crucial that we get consistency of information and a certain level of information and engagement. I will revert with regard to that. During quarter 1 of this year, nearly 9,000 disability allowance decisions were accepted and approved so we also have to look at the overall approval rate, which continues to be quite high. I will follow up with engagement with the various organisations regarding the consistency of information that is provided. It is important our medical assessors and appeals

teams have engagement and consistency around the information that is provided. What the Deputy said was not tangential. It is crucial to the quality of the application. Those making these applications deserve that level of support and that level of consistency from medical professionals with regard to the completion of their application forms.

Pensions Reform

10. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the required additional funding has been provided to social welfare branch managers to pay for pension auto enrolment costs imposed from 1 January 2026 and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31208/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Industrial relations are a bit like the song "Hotel California", in that, apparently, I was able to check out but, unfortunately, was unable to leave. This industrial relations dispute concerns branch managers of social welfare offices. The Minister will be aware of the dispute. He will also be aware of the requirement by the Department that branch managers participate in auto enrolment but if it is not funded, how are they going to be able to do that?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am certainly very aware of the situation and very much acknowledge the work of our branch managers around the country in the delivery of our services. The introduction of auto enrolment in January 26 2026 sought to address the employee pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland in order to provide all employees with greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income. As the Deputy knows, each social welfare branch office is operated and managed under a contract for service by our branch managers. As independent contractors, branch managers do very significant work on a commercial contract for service that is subject to public procurement rules. As is standard in commercial agreements, each branch manager is expected to meet operating costs from within the agreed pricing.

Auto enrolment obligations involving 1.5% of payroll costs now apply across the economy and with the exception of those community and voluntary organisations paid on a cost-recovery basis via grants, it is not appropriate for the Department to unilaterally approve changes to pricing arrangements to fund auto enrolments costs under commercial contracts such as those in place. However, we have received a request for review the overall remuneration arrangements for branch managers. We are engaging at the moment with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and will be in a position to revert to branch managers in the coming days with an update. I am hopeful that we can finalise revised terms very shortly. I am very conscious of their work, the contribution they make and the presence they give the Department around the country.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I might do the lotto on my way home because apparently I have incredible powers of prediction. I literally told the Minister this was going to happen. I said that if the Minister did not provide funding for people and if he put in an obligation regarding auto enrolment, particularly on organisations and entities that do not have access to any revenue-raising powers, this would happen.

10 o'clock

These people cannot raise revenue; they are not in a position to do that. They are entirely dependent on the State and the Minister knows that. He put the obligation for the auto enrolment on them. They want to be part of the auto enrolment scheme but my information is the Minister's Department is refusing to go to arbitration with them. That is very much a backwards step. We know we have the Kevin Duffy recommendation, which was accepted by both sides, but the individual branch managers want to be in a financial position to discharge their obligations. They have no capacity to raise the revenue, the Minister knows that, and the obligation is on his Department.

I welcome that there is news in the coming days and I would welcome it even more in the Minister's next contribution if he advised me this is going to be good news for the branch managers and news that will allow them to discharge their obligations for auto enrolment and stay within their budgetary guidelines.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can assure the Deputy there has been a lot of engagement from my Department's branch office support unit with both branch manager associations. Over the course of 2025, both associations expressed their intentions to seek a request for the review of the remuneration package. The representative group of branch managers submitted its formal request and case to the Department in May and the branch manager association did so in August. They all reflected not just auto enrolment but also the operational challenges of the branch office network, other costs that have increased and the cost of living.

We have been engaging with the Department of public expenditure on that and in respect of our responsibilities to engage with that Department around that. I acknowledge the frustrations with the time it has taken but we have to engage with that Department regarding this space, and we are nearly there. I wish the Deputy well in the lotto, also.

Social Welfare Schemes

11. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of paying carers who care for two or more people, based on a full carer's allowance in respect of each person, not a half-rate for a second person. [31340/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Wall for his question.

The Government recognises the important and valuable role of family carers and we - myself in particular - are committed to continuing to improve the supports available to them.

Carer's allowance provides a personal rate for the carer with additional increases for child dependants. If the carer is providing full-time care to more than one person, the rate payable is increased by 50% of the standard personal rate. As part of budget 2026, the personal rate of carer's allowance increased by €10 per week. A person caring for more than one person and receiving the maximum rate now receives a personal rate of €405 per week if aged under 66 or €462 per week if aged 66 or over.

An accurate estimate of the full year cost of paying carers who care for two or more people with a full carer's allowance in respect of each person, as requested by the Deputy, is not

currently available. However, I have asked for that to be prepared and I will forward the same to the Deputy.

Carer's benefit also provides an enhanced payment where care is provided to more than one person. The weekly personal rate of payment increased to €271 where a person is caring for one person and €406.50 where two or more people are being cared for. The annual carer's support grant is available to all carers providing full-time care regardless of their means. Last June, this grant was increased by €150 to €2,000 - the highest ever level. Domiciliary care allowance is payable to a parent or guardian of a child under 16 with a severe disability. Where a person is caring for more than one child, they may claim the allowance for each child. There is no restriction on the number of children being claimed for.

The programme for Government commits to examining how best to support carers who are providing full-time care and attention to more than one person. This work will continue to be advanced over the lifetime of the Government, taking account of available resources and the broader budgetary context. However, in line with the views expressed to me by carers and carer associations, my first priority will be the removal of the means test.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister for that. Yesterday, myself and a number of colleagues in the House this morning attended the Family Carers Ireland briefing scorecard for 2025 in respect of the Government. The big issue that arose for many of us at that briefing was that the Government needs to listen and to listen more.

The organisation appreciated the change in the means test. Obviously, many of people there said it needed to be abolished but the problem for many of them is two- or threefold. Many people who were present yesterday were caring for a second loved one and the costs do not diminish when you have a second child but they actually increase. The Minister said there is a commitment in the programme for Government to review this but we still do not have a costing on it. Does the Minister know when he may have a costing on it? Is it realistic for it to be in the programme for Government? Is it something the Department is currently looking at?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We also engage with the carer organisations and we look forward to engaging with them on their work yesterday and at our annual carers' forum, which is being held next week on 7 May. This gives carers and carers' organisations a chance to engage directly with not just myself but also with officials from across the Department and a range of budgets. We also have our pre-budget forum as a Department on 1 July, at which carers will be represented and will be part of.

There are a number of issues and I will pursue the costings as regards the Deputy's proposal, particularly for those carers who provide care for several people. I am determined to abolish the means test during the lifetime of this Government but I am also very aware of existing carers for whom that will not make a difference in their weekly payment and in the supports available. I will be very focused on what we can do for those who are on the existing payment regarding providing extra supports for them in their very important work.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister for that. Regarding what he has just said on providing additional supports, in parliamentary questions I tabled to the Minister, it came to

light that only 4.4% of those who were in receipt of carer's allowance were getting fuel allowance, which is a very low figure. Some 106,000 people in this country are getting carer's allowance and only short of 6,000 of those are in receipt of fuel allowance. We have been told time and again, and we were told this again yesterday, that bills for those looking after their loved ones are three times higher than those who may not have to look after loved ones. Can the Minister look at something like that for them? The costing we have on it is around €107 million but the cost involved, and we are in the middle of a fuel crisis as has already been said this morning, would make a difference to so many. The Minister knows the cost of heating, the cost of using a washing machine, etc., when you have somebody who needs that level of care. It would make a huge difference on a weekly basis.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is a very sensible proposal and those who care depend on heat and very high energy usage in terms of washing machines, tumble dryers, electrical equipment, beds, etc. I will look at that and see what the reason is. We introduced carers as a qualifying payment for fuel allowance a number of years ago. We will do some work to make sure those who are supposed to get it are getting it.

As I said, this year we expanded the fuel allowance to those on the working family payment but, obviously, anything we do has to be done within a very strict budget envelope and there are many priorities. However, I can assure the Deputy and the carers organisations - we will spend a day engaging with them next week - that their work is valued by the Government and by myself and we will certainly try to look at the schemes we can do, not just removing the means test for potential carers but also for those on existing carers payments.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Pension Provisions

13. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will increase his departmental budget allocation in budget 2027 to those in receipt of the State pension, in response to the increased cost of living as a result of the conflict in the Middle East; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31283/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Callaghan for her question.

As part of budget 2026, I announced a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures, which included a €10 weekly increase across social welfare schemes from 1 January 2026. This raised the maximum personal rate of State pension contributory to €299.30 per week and non-contributory to €288.00 per week.

These increases were set above the prevailing consumer price index, CPI, with pension rates rising by 3.46% for contributory and 3.60% for non-contributory.

In determining these budget increases, consideration was given to the most recent available consumer price index data and the broader cost of living pressures were also assessed in areas such as housing, energy and food.

I am very conscious of the impact that increases in the cost of living are having on those who rely on social protection supports, particularly older people who may not have the ability to get extra income, but also carers, those with disabilities and low-income families.

Additional relevant measures contained in budget 2026 included a €5 increase in the fuel allowance, which brought it to €38 per week, and a Christmas bonus was paid to pension recipients in December. In March, as the Deputy knows, the Government also approved an extension of the 2025-26 fuel allowance season by four weeks, which will see it continue to the end of this week, as part of the temporary and targeted measures to help those most vulnerable to rising energy costs. That included pensioners, and over 460,000 households are in receipt of the fuel allowance payment.

While it is not possible at this stage to set out specific budget parameters for budget 2027, we are very much closely monitoring developments. All changes to the current rate of payment for contributory and non-contributory payments will be considered in a budgetary context but with a very sharp eye on the pressures our pensioners are facing.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire for that response. I absolutely welcome all the measures he outlined that were contained in budget 2026 and that had a good impact on the State pension and those in receipt of it. However, what I really need to stress is that we are not living in ordinary times. There is a war raging in the Middle East. It is affecting everyone across Europe and in Ireland. There is no end in sight. What I am hearing from State pensioners in Carlow and Kilkenny is their worry and anxiety about what the winter is going to bring and how they are going to manage. We are all aware that people who are in receipt of the State pension, be it contributory or non-contributory in nature, have contributed to this country. They paid into the pot in the hope that they would be able to sustain themselves in their latter years, not in the context of living any kind of extravagant lifestyle but just so they would not have to worry about paying household bills and everyday expenses. If it is not going to be possible to increase the pension, what will it be possible for the Department to do?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am not saying that it is not going to be possible to do anything. We are obviously not in the budget situation yet, but I am very aware of the pressures people are under and that those pressures will increase during the winter. That is why, in the context of our initial €750 million response, we have made it clear that we may have to produce further responses. However, it is important that we give ourselves the ability to be in a position to respond, and do so quickly, if this energy crisis continues through the winter.

I had a very good discussion with Deputy Colm Burke earlier around the fuel allowance and the living alone allowance. I am going to be particularly focused on the living alone allowance because, for many older people who are left alone by being widowed or through separation, their expenses and the cost of running large houses remain but their income has been halved. I am going to be very focused on the living alone allowance as well as looking at how we continue to use the fuel allowance on in a targeted manner to support those most at risk of energy poverty, which includes our pensioners.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the Minister's focus on the fuel allowance. It is a very good scheme but is not agile enough to cope with the increases that are going to happen.

The Minister said, "if this ... [war] continues". It will no doubt continue into the winter and it might still be with us this time next year. That is what I understand and feel, and our State pensioners are feeling that too. They would like more communication and a chance to know what measures might be possible to alleviate the worry and anxiety they are feeling. Bear in mind that said worry and anxiety are then passed on to their adult children, which means that entire families are concerned about this. It is also really important to recognise that these State pensioners, and pensioners in general, are on fixed incomes. They do not have any option or any other avenue whereby they can supplement the income they have. In fact, I sat with a lady last week who was in tears because she is dipping into her savings - money she thought she would be able to give as an inheritance to her children and grandchildren. Now she is utilising it for everyday cost-of-living expenses. I appreciate the work the Minister is doing, but I would love it if we could have some communication to allay the fears of our older generation, the people who helped to build this country.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree, particularly in relation to the fixed nature of pensioners' incomes and the challenges they face. They will be a priority for me in the context of budget 2027. I assure the Deputy of that, not just in the context of 2026 but also with regard to the increased energy costs they will face. I am very much aware of their need to have security.

In respect of information, unfortunately, we will not be able to do that until budget day, but the Deputy should be very aware that I look forward to working with colleagues across the House in relation to providing them with security and support. They should not have to have that worry at this point in their lives. They have given enough. They have done and worked hard enough for this country and we should give them comfort and security now that they are in retirement. As Minister for Social Protection, I will certainly continue to invest in our pensioners - not just in the weekly rate but the supports and other payments that are available, such as the living alone allowance, the fuel allowance and access to other payments.

As I have said throughout the morning, we have done a lot of work in recent weeks to give information to Oireachtas Members about additional needs payments and community welfare supports that are available. I encourage Members to use those supports.

Parental Leave

14. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Social Protection in the context of the programme for Government commitment to examine the extension of parents' leave and benefit, whether he will outline the current status of this examination; the options under consideration to extend the duration of parents' leave and benefit beyond the current entitlement; when he expects to bring proposals to Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30628/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: I am very glad that since I had my twins nine years ago, a Fine Gael Government introduced parents' leave, which now stands at nine weeks for each parent. As we know, the take-up of this leave, particularly by dads, is exceptionally low. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, last year showed that awareness really is part of this, as well as the low level that both parents will be receiving social welfare payments at a time when costs have

hugely increased. The Minister might please give us an update as to what he is doing in regard to extending parents' leave and the rate at which it might be paid.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Boland for her question. As she acknowledged, parents' benefit provides nine weeks' paid leave to parents during the first two years of a child's life or following adoption. Any proposal to extend the period of leave is a matter for Deputy Foley, who has legal and policy responsibility for family leave as Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. My Department has legal and policy responsibility for the payment of the associated benefits.

Parents' leave and benefit were introduced in November 2019. The Government has provided over €123 million for the scheme in 2026. The scheme provides each parent with nine weeks of non-transferrable leave to be taken within two years of the birth or placement, in the case of adoption, of their child. The nine weeks can be taken in any combination of minimum one week to a maximum of nine weeks' leave. The 2019 Act is in line with the EU directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers. It provides that the nine weeks' leave is non-transferrable between parents. That is in order to promote the equal participation of men and women in the workplace and in caring roles. The leave was extended from the original two weeks in November 2019 to five weeks in April 2021, seven weeks in July 2022, and nine weeks in August 2024.

The number of applications for parents' benefit by both men and women has steadily increased. Our Department's statistics for quarter 4 of last year show that 40% of all applicants for parents' benefit were men and 60% were women. In providing nine weeks of non-transferrable leave to each parent, parents' benefit in effect ring-fences leave for fathers and it is hoped that this approach will encourage fathers to avail of their leave entitlement.

While Ireland is atypical among EU member states in paying a flat rate for all family leave benefits of €299, it provides one of the most generous durations of maternity leave, with 26 paid weeks and 16 unpaid weeks available to new mothers. I will certainly take Deputy Boland's proposal on board in relation to awareness around parents' benefit, particularly for men.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister. There is a real issue with awareness and we need to have a concerted awareness campaign. Fathers simply do not know that they are entitled to take this leave.

In regard to increasing the rate of payment, we know the projected child benefit payment this year is actually going to be down €320 million on what was paid last year. We should be looking at supporting families, particularly around payments for family leave. There is money there. We are going to be down €320 million on child benefit last year and I think we should look at increasing the rate at which we are paying for family leave.

The Minister might give us an update as to whether that has been costed or looked at.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government has a commitment to introduce pay-related parent's benefit. We are looking at that. We introduced pay-related jobseeker's benefit in March 2025. That has just finished its first year of operation

and I am undertaking a full review of it. We will learn from the lessons of pay-related jobseeker's benefit what we can do before we carry out a consultation later in the year in relation to parental benefit.

We introduced a very specific child poverty package of over €260 million this year looking at families on lower incomes. We have a very specific focus on children who are at risk of poverty and on reducing that rate to zero, ideally. No child should be at risk at poverty. I take on board the Deputy's suggestions and proposals on the need for greater awareness, particularly for fathers, around the supports that are available. We will engage with the Department on that.

Deputy Grace Boland: In terms of looking at people and children at risk of poverty, for a mother who is availing of maternity leave at €299 or of the 16 weeks' unpaid leave, and a dad who is also taking parent's leave at a rate of €299, the two combined payments are exceptionally low in terms of actually being able to avail of this leave. It means the people in lower socio-economic positions are simply not able to avail of this leave because of the rates of pay. I appreciate pay-related rates being looked at, but at the same time it is people at the bottom who are really going to be most affected because they simply cannot afford to take the leave. We need to look at that and how we can support everyone at all socio-economic levels.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree and I think we have done that. This year, the fuel allowance has been extended to those on the working family payment. It is the first time the fuel allowance is available to those who are also working. That means that 50,000 extra people now qualify for the fuel allowance payment. We also ensured that it was backdated to 1 January so that the 50,000 or so families with children would receive a lump sum payment in the beginning of March for January and February and were now getting the payment up to the end of this week to assist with the energy crisis at the moment.

We are going to look at the experience of the pay-related jobseeker's benefit's first year and how it worked and then apply the lessons to forming a consultation document on parental leave. The Deputy has raised it with me and Deputy Currie and colleagues across the Government are relating to me that we need to look at those payment rates. The point I always make about jobseeker's pay-related benefit is that it is people's own money being paid back to them. They have paid PRSI and they have paid into the Social Insurance Fund and that is what it is there for.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Road Safety

96. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is taking to improve road safety; the reasons road deaths have risen by 31% since 2019 while road deaths across the EU dropped by 15% over the same period; the measures he is taking to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31157/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: What measures are being taken to improve road safety? Clearly, road safety and fatalities on the road are moving in the wrong direction, and quite dramatically so.

An independent report said that there had been a very worrying recent increase in fatalities and serious injuries. Since 2019, road deaths have risen by 31% in Ireland while across the European Union they have fallen by 15%. What steps are being taken to address this?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important matter. Any death on our roads is one too many. I am always conscious when talking about numbers that behind these numbers are people and families. We have to continue working to improve road safety. One element of it is the continued investment in our roads. Physical infrastructure is critical, as is the safety framework.

The current framework for road safety is set out in the Government's fifth road safety strategy, which has the target of reducing road deaths and serious injuries by 50% this decade. My Department published the phase 2 action plan under this strategy last July for the period 2025 to 2027. That plan comprises 12 primary transformative actions and 77 supporting actions. Delivering the action plan is a collaborative effort involving my Department, the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, An Garda Síochána, the Road Safety Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, the National Transport Authority, NTA, the Courts Service, and right the way across the board. The Deputy will note that there are many experts across a range of partners collaborating on taking action and delivering positive road safety outcomes, and I would like to assure him that progress is being made.

Key deliverables for this year include passing the National Vehicle and Driver File Bill to allow local authorities to resume accepting and processing collision data. We are also addressing the long-standing issue relating to repeat renewal of learner permits, with regulations coming into effect later this year in November. Yesterday, I published the first national safety camera strategy, which provides a framework for increased deployment of cameras across the road network in urban and rural locations. The use of cameras has been proven to reduce speeding and improve driver behaviour, and I am confident that implementation of this strategy will help us achieve our road safety targets.

The Deputy might wish to know that, this year, €14 million has been allocated under the low-cost safety improvement scheme to support small-scale engineering measures to address identified road safety issues.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister mentioned that there had been progress on all actions but, unfortunately, that is not seeping down into the road death figures, which are going in the wrong direction. It is not the Minister's brief but I want to refer to the number of gardaí on the roads. It is a consequence of inaction by the Government. There are 400 fewer gardaí on the roads than there were 15 years ago. The number of gardaí in that Garda unit has halved since 2009. We received a briefing the other day from Alcohol Action Ireland. There are some very worrying statistics in its brochure. It said that, in 2025, there were 4,800 arrests for drink driving. That compares to almost 20,000 in 2007. The rate of breath-testing among licensed drivers is only 5.3% whereas in other countries it is multiples of that. The consequences of that are that while 14% of driver fatalities in Australia, for example, have a positive toxicology for alcohol, that figure is 35% in Ireland.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Undoubtedly, we have seen an increase over the last number of years from a lower base. When you compare Ireland to the rest of Europe, the statistics - this is not to mean the road fatalities themselves - compare favourably and we are still in the upper quartile in relation to prevention of road deaths and the number of road deaths. Again, I say this on the basis that I do not like talking about numbers because there are people behind them.

On safety cameras, 390 new safety camera zones became operational from 1 January this year. This brings the total number of safety cameras nationwide to 1,901. The Deputy raised a point and I would say to him that enforcement is unquestionably critical. It is something that my Department discusses with the Department of justice. I continue to engage with the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. We have the road traffic (amendment) Bill coming in later this year. Driver behaviour is critical, though, and that is why education is important. We all see it, we all drive around the country and see some outrageous driver behaviour. It is unacceptable, by the way, for anyone in this day and age to get into a car when they have had alcohol.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Whatever level of enforcement is there, personal responsibility really needs to be brought to the fore. We all agree on that. There is only so much a Government can do. We need to do more - I am with the Deputy on that - but personal responsibility is critical.

Deputy Pa Daly: Unfortunately, personal responsibility is corralled or dictated by the chances of getting caught.

When the number of arrests, the amount of enforcement and the number of gardaí on the road have decreased so hugely and the number of drink driving arrests is down by 75% since 2007, people are more likely to get into cars. That is just human nature.

I want to ask about the flip flop on the disbanding of the RSA. An independent report was commissioned, done by Indecon. It said the dual role of the RSA in delivering operational services, such as driver testing and NCT, is a distraction from the more important role of national road safety policy, education, which the Minister spoke about, and campaigns. It undermines the ability to respond to rising fatalities.

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

Deputy Pa Daly: Is the Government even at this late going to allow the RSA to do what it is supposed to do and deal with operational services in a separate body?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The RSA is very well resourced to carry out the functions it is charged with. Splitting up the agency would have a detrimental effect. It would take too long. It needs to focus on road safety and education. NCT and driver testing are also important. That feeds into the road safety piece. I will counter the Deputy on one particular thing he said. Driver behaviour and personal responsibility are critical. We all want to see more gardaí enforcing this. Measures have been taken around specific bank holiday weekends when we

still see shocking numbers of people driving under the influence or drink and drugs and speeding at excessive and dangerous rates. Enforcement is critical to catch these people and put them off the road - it is as simple as that but more needs to be done. I outlined some of the safety measures that have been brought forward. The number one priority is road safety to reduce road deaths.

Electric Vehicles

97. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport to report on the zero-emissions heavy duty vehicle purchase grant and zero-emissions heavy duty vehicle infrastructure grant schemes, including the number of applications received and funding drawn down since their inception; the steps he will take to encourage and increase uptake among those in the haulage and farming sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31741/26]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I would like to ask the Minister about the electrification of our heavy goods vehicles fleet and for a report on the zero-emissions heavy duty vehicle purchase grant and zero-emissions heavy duty vehicle infrastructure grant schemes, including the number of applications received and funding drawn down since their inception; the steps he will take to encourage and increase uptake among those in the haulage and farming sectors.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is an important area and we have to look to electrify it. Heavy goods vehicles is one of the more challenging areas to electrify. We are committed to transitioning to a low-carbon economy by 2050. The transport sector has a significant role to play in that. The decarbonisation of heavy duty vehicles will be a key mechanism in achieving this objective within the sector. To promote the decarbonisation of HDVs, we launched the alternatively fuelled heavy duty vehicle purchase grant scheme in March 2021. That scheme was intended to help bridge some of the difference in purchase price between conventional HDVs and those powered by alternatively fuelled powertrains. In line with changes to the state aid regime, the Department amended the scheme to focus on zero-emission vehicles and launched the ZEHDV scheme in 2024. The scheme is administered by TII and funded by my Department. It awards grants to assist companies and enterprises that wish to buy zero-emission heavy duty vehicles instead of the diesel equivalent. In November 2024, the scheme was expanded to include purchase grants for recharging infrastructure. The total funding available under this grant scheme since 2024 to date is €11 million. Almost €4 million has been drawn down to support 76 vehicles - not a massive number - all of which are electric and include large HDVs, refuse trucks, large vans and buses. Using this scheme, the Department of Transport is also supporting businesses at the planning stage through the EV fleet assessment grant. This offers fully funded expert assessment to help companies understand how electric vehicles can operate within their existing fleets. In February, we published a new national EV charging infrastructure strategy for the next three years in line with the programme for Government commitment. This strategy includes a specific set of measures to support the transition of the HDV sector, taking account of a recent report, the HDV Electrification Pathway Report, which brought the haulage sector and my Department together to determine an appropriate and viable pathway for the sector.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I ask this question in the context of the €500 million package with no strings attached announced for the haulage and farming sectors. While we recognise the need for these packages, we also have to recognise this exists because of fossil fuel dependence in those sectors and it is in many ways a subsidy to the fossil fuel industry. As part of a just transition, we must make this choice easy for hauliers in particular to decide to purchase zero-emission vehicles. The figures are not great. In 2025, of 2,564 HGVs purchased in Ireland just 1.09% were zero emission. The grants available are not availed of to the full extent either - about 50% are not being availed of. What will the Minister do to encourage the use of them?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a fair point. The road transport support scheme is not a subsidy. It is a cost reduction measure and a viability measure for our supply chain. I do not see it as a fossil fuel grant or incentive for the use of fossil fuel. That said, it is clear the haulage sector in particular and others in the agriculture sector are heavily dependent on fossil fuel, especially heavy goods vehicles. A lot of white van vehicles have changed to EVs and hybrids. It is down to the weight carried. We had 162 electric HGVs registered at the end of 2025. Compressed natural gas is another renewable fuel. We had 157 registered in 2025, a 5% increase. Also, to be fair, in the haulage sector many firms use alternative sustainable fuels and biofuels like biogas and HVO. This is an area for which substantial grants are available but we need to create confidence in that sector that there is an alternative in using electric instead of diesel in the heavy goods vehicles space.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: No country is doing particularly well in this area but even across Europe 4.5% of HGVs are zero emission and we are only at just over 1%. In China, it is up to 25%. It is leading the world in this regard. The charging infrastructure grant is important because hauliers say to us they cannot avail of this not only because of the cost of the vehicles but also the lack of infrastructure. My understanding of that grant is that €1 million was allocated last year, less than €200,000 was spent and €188,000 of that was on administrative costs. I think only one grant was availed of in that whole infrastructure scheme. Improving that has to be looked at. I ask the Minister to increase the price differential in the purchase grant scheme to 100% to incentivise, so there is no cost differential between a diesel or electric vehicle purchase. At the moment, there is still a cost to the haulier in making that decision.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy's point is well made. In the private fleet and private cars, there is a substantial increase in EV registrations. There are over 230,000 EVs on our roads. In the first quarter of this year, there was a significant increase with about 40% of all cars purchased being EVs. Heavy goods vehicles is a more complex area. Confidence needs to be instilled in the sector that there are alternatives. The Deputy is right that the level of drawdown is low. The scheme was reworked at the end of 2024. It is kept under review. I have met officials about it. We would like more supports deployed to this sector to bring the transport sector onto a more sustainable and climate-friendly footing. That can be done but the Deputy rightly pointed out it is a challenge across Europe not just here. I take the Deputy's points on board. We are keeping this under review. We will change the offerings if we can see that by changing them more people will access them. There are substantial grants and savings for businesses if they pivot to electric.

Rail Network

98. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the new Irish Rail traffic management IT system; the measures he is taking to address cost overruns and delays; when he expects this system will be delivered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31154/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I want to ask the Minister about documents recently released to the Committee of Public Accounts relating to cost overruns in the IT system that was supposed to regulate train movements across the State. Under the initial proposals, the traffic management system was targeted to be commissioned in 2024 with an associated target cost of €19 million.

However, over €31.5 million has apparently already been spent without the first phase having been completed. Has the Minister of State any statement to make?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and acknowledge that this is an elongated process. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has been engaged with the process on behalf of the Department and twice met the people involved. The Deputy can take it from our side that we are not happy with progress, and I will come back on that further in the supplementary.

The national train control centre, NTCC, project aims to deliver a modern, safe and efficient rail traffic management system that can effectively meet the needs of a growing railway service in the coming decades. The NTCC building near Heuston was completed in November 2022, close to its initial target date and budget despite the significant disruption to the construction caused by Covid during its development. Bringing the centre into full operation has been delayed by slower-than-projected progress in developing and rolling out the new traffic management system, which is the software that integrates a range of complex railway systems, such as signalling and communications. As a result of these delays, the Minister met the NTA and the contractor responsible for the traffic management system, Indra Sistemas, last August and later on to express dissatisfaction with the rate of progress and emphasised the importance of project delivery. The Minister met them again in January at the opening of Indra Group's office in Dublin, which marked an important positive development for the project in terms of Indra's permanent presence in the Irish market and reiterated the importance of successfully progressing the project.

I understand that Iarnród Éireann has been actively engaging with Indra and testing software ahead of a major release in July, with commissioning phase 1 covering the Rosslare line targeted to go live in 2027. The timeline for future commissioning phases will be informed by phase 1, and the Department and the Minister will continue to keep the project under close review with a view to bringing its benefits to railway users as soon as possible.

It is important to note that traffic management is continuing to operate out of Connolly Station and there is no impact on railway safety as a result of delays in the introduction of the new system.

Deputy Pa Daly: There may not be difficulty with railway safety at the moment, but to say that progress has been slower than anticipated when €31.5 million has been spent without the

first phase having been completed is surely the understatement of the year. I understand that there are between seven and nine phases to it and we have not even reached phase 1 despite that kind of expenditure. I do not need to go into the history of bike sheds, children's hospitals and so on but is there a danger that something similar will happen, given the snail's pace of this progress? It was presented as a flagship project. It was going to be the brain of the railway network and the NTA said it was a critical component of the national train control centre, but we cannot hide from this. The costs are massive, and people are keeping an eye on this at the moment with the cost-of-living crisis. I do not think that the progress, answers or reviews are good enough. The Department, the Minister and the wider Government need to take action.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Government has taken action. The Minister has been proactive and the Department has engaged. The payments under the contract are directly linked to the costs incurred by the contractor and are based on standard international engineering projects. The Deputy presents it as black and white. To be fair, it is not, and I respectfully challenge him. This is a complex matter and it takes time. It is going slower than we would like and we recognise that, but we must get it right and we must be prudent in the management of the project to be delivered. I take the point that it will make a great headline on the news tomorrow that we are running behind time and it is costing X amount, but the costs are incurred by the contractor. We are determined on the Government side, on behalf of all of us, to ensure that the project is delivered. It is taking longer to deliver, but it is still a flagship and it will still be this model that will ultimately deliver for all of us.

We have seen, if the Deputy looks at the depth of the questions on rail, that there is a growing use of rail. I assure the Deputy that there are no commercial agreements that will cost further, as of now, for the State. We will work with everyone to ensure that we deliver the matter on budget.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister of State is correct to say that there is a growing use of rail, and we support that, but its development and broadening out are at serious risk with projects like this. The minutes of Irish Rail board meetings are publicly available. The chair of Iarnród Éireann and the project director have expressed serious reservations about the direction and delivery of the project as well as concerns about the contractor's ability to deliver all phases of the project. The failures of this project also raise massive concerns about the contractor's ability to deliver the new €269 million-plus contactless transport ticketing service, the contract for which it also has. We are in a situation where there are electric buses parked up. They are not being used and there are serious concerns about the ability to deliver next generation ticketing. We are lagging far behind the progress that we see in other countries.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We share the Deputy's concern. The Minister has met Indra twice and it now has an office in Dublin. The Deputy is not correct about the buses he refers to. They will be used. Two per week are being unveiled as we speak. All I can say to the Deputy, and I think he will agree, is that there is an extensive safety process that must be gone through. With safety approval stages, you cannot just tick a box and hope it goes away and that you get away with it. That is why the software package must be proper and robust and must stand up to testing and have a quality mark.

The Minister has been actively engaged with Indra. The Deputy is right in one regard, in that Indra has to step up to the plate as well. It is the operator. It is the genius, if you like. We can only do so much. I concur with the Deputy on that. That is why the Minister and the Department have been proactive and the Department has been engaging with Indra.

At the end of the day, notwithstanding that it is behind time, which we are unhappy about, I think we will have a project that is fit for purpose, will be a flagship and will serve us well in time.

Public Transport

99. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware that the DART will not be operational again this May bank holiday weekend for the VHI mini-marathon, an event that attracts up to 30,000 participants each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31200/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for the question. As she knows, essential maintenance is being carried out and there is inconvenience for people, but I will put this in context. The majority of maintenance works on the rail network take place overnight or in a way that will see little or no disruption to services. In some instances, however, this disruption is unfortunately unavoidable, such as for the upcoming May and June bank holiday weekends. I genuinely understand that while it is frustrating, it is an essential part of maintaining our rail network. To support the maintenance of our rail network, we are investing close to €2.1 billion over the period 2026 to 2030. This year alone we will invest over €350 million in resilience and upgrading of tracks and network. The annual investment will increase year on year to almost €465 million by 2030.

Disruption to services occurs when Iarnród Éireann is replacing or improving essential infrastructure like tracks, bridges, signalling and overhead lines or assisting third parties with major works. We do this to ensure that, at peak times when more people are travelling, the network is robust and we will not see outages in the system. The company is also currently engaged in the multi-annual programme of overhead line renewal and track renewal across the DART network.

Iarnród Éireann chooses bank holiday weekends to undertake projects of significant scale. The extra weekend day allows them to achieve more progress more efficiently, avoiding impacts across multiple weekends and weekday passengers. It is standard international railway practice for bank holidays to be used in this way. I know that when events like the VHI mini-marathon are on, which will see approximately 30,000 people coming in, additional bus services are put on. However, I will be honest and say that, that looking through the details, the buses will serve major stations and not every station. I think that is an area that can and should be improved on. People get that we have to maintain our lines and make sure that they are safe and upgraded.

I will come back with more information during supplementary.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Approximately 30,000 women take part in the VHI mini-marathon. It is the world's largest all-women 10 km race. It raises approximately €10 million

per year for charities and it has raised over €255 million since it began. This is a hugely important event. Tens of thousands of women and their families participate in it and it raises money that charities across the country simply cannot do without.

People understand the need for track maintenance, know it has to happen and appreciate that days that are quieter, like Sundays, are the ones for maintenance. However, on weekends where we have such a major event it does not make sense to stop the DART from running when there are so many people who need it. I ask the Minister to reconsider this policy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is an operational matter. I do not direct Iarnród Éireann as to when it maintains its lines. I recognise there will unquestionably be inconvenience to people. Bank holiday weekends allow engineers to work continuously for 76 hours on the line and get extensive work done that does not have to be spread over other weekends. Fortunately, there is very rarely a weekend where there is not a major event on in this country and in our capital city. That could be sport, concerts, mini-marathons or whatever. That is good because it is a vibrant city and a lot of people use the city. DART services will operate on the southern line from Greystones into the city. It is the northern line that will be impacted. There are additional bus services put on that line. During the June bank holiday further work will happen. All those details are pre-announced and they are all up on the website. It is also advertised that there will be disruption when lines are closed for maintenance. There is no easy way of doing this. There is only so much work you can get done during night-time hours because we are running earlier and later trains, so the gap for maintenance at night is shorter. That is why if we can get 76 hours of continuous work done, that is banked and we do not have to do it over successive weekends.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister. I understand, and everyone understands, there is no easy way of doing it but there are certain weekends where the demand is so high it warrants running the DART. Perhaps it could just be for that individual day and the works could be done at other points in the weekend, which is what used to happen. Last year there were no additional Luas services provided on the weekend for the VHI mini-marathon and no additional bus services. I have been contacted by people who ended up arriving late to the entry point and were not allowed run the marathon. This is hugely disruptive to people. Just because there is low commuter demand on a bank holiday weekend does not mean there is low public demand. These are public transport services, not just commuter services. Relying on bank holiday weekends, especially ones when there are large-scale events, is the wrong way to go about these works. There has to be a way of doing this and managing this better.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is significant advance notice given. We need to improve the additional services that are there. I can tell the Deputy there are additional bus services this weekend serving the northern line. There is no easy answer to this. Lines need to be upgraded. Overhead lines, railway tracks and embankments need to be worked on. That all needs to happen. I cannot tell the Deputy we can avoid doing work on the May or June bank holidays. You can get a significant amount of work done on a continuous basis. That is the advantage to the workers who are carrying out that essential work. I appreciate it is disruptive and I take the point. I will bring the Deputy's feedback to the company to see if there is a way of just using the Monday. Large events are taken into account too but fortunately there is rarely a weekend

that there are not major events in the capital city. I take the point the mini-marathon is a staple in our national calendar and I will bring that back.

Bus Services

100. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to end the 70 bus route resulting in people in the Littlepace area having to change buses to go to Dublin city centre; if BusConnects gives consideration to the impact on bus users with mobility issues when cutting direct routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31156/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The 70 bus that connects Dunboyne and Littlepace to the city centre is going to be cut under the BusConnects plan even though it is the most direct route many people in Dublin 15 have. This is also going to hit people who are not very mobile. It is incredibly ablist to force people to get off a bus and to route everything through Ireland's busiest shopping centre in Blanchardstown. Nobody wanted this and the BusConnects planners have not listened.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising the matter. In the overall context BusConnects is important. She makes a point about the listening piece. I know from my constituency in Cork there is an obligation and a real need to listen and engage. I will bring the Deputy's comments back as well.

As she has said, the 70 bus will be replaced by other bus services as part of the implementation of BusConnects Dublin. These new services will include the L64, which will provide a frequent service between Dunboyne, Clonee and Blanchardstown, and the P64 which will provide a direct bus service to Dublin city centre for commuters. Since the start of BusConnects, a core objective has been to provide a network of more frequent bus services with reduced wait times for all passengers. This sometimes requires transfer between frequent services. Opportunities will exist for transfers to very frequent bus services on the B spine to and from Dublin city centre. Connections with Dunboyne rail station, for rail services to and from Dublin city centre, will also be available. I would also like to highlight the benefits of these new services in the Littlepace area. These will include the introduction of significantly better all-day frequencies, not just during peak commuting hours, and better network connectivity options with the 90-minute Leap fare.

On bus users with mobility issues, I note that all buses are fully low floor wheelchair-accessible and bus stops at the L64 transfer point will also be fully accessible. I assure Deputy Coppinger the distances between bus stops will be kept to a minimum where interchange is required.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes, but most buses only have a place for one wheelchair and one pram, so I do not accept the idea everybody is going to be able to transfer like that. Let us start with the reality. Who wants to have to get off a bus? Nobody. Once you are on a bus you want to stay on it. However, for some reason BusConnects planners and the NTA are fixated on the idea of routing everything through the Blanchardstown centre, which by the way, coincides with the potential introduction of car parking charges there. That fits in nicely and BusConnects is being cited as the reason to fleece the local community.

There is currently a bus that runs from Dunboyne and Littlepace directly onto the N3 with a bus lane and for some reason the planners want to take it away. From 6 a.m. it is every 20 minutes and then from 7 a.m. it is every ten minutes until 8 p.m. when it becomes every 15 minutes. It is perfect. It is one of the buses that actually works. In 2018 when this was discussed there was a raft of complaints, public meetings and petitions. Why does government not listen?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I think the Deputy is incorrect regarding the buses because there are many buses and the new ones will have more than one wheelchair access point.

The other point is we have almost 5,500 people working in Blanchardstown Shopping Centre, which is a massive number.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Tell me about it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is that a problem?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Is that a positive or a negative for the area?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Would she rather they were not working?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Would she prefer they were not working? In fairness, they are providing. The Deputy can shake her head at me but she is meant to represent-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Just answer the question.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is about the 70 bus.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: She raised the shopping centre. Does she want the people to work or not? Does she want them to be unemployed? Let us be fair now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Minister of State just address the question?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The fundamental point is BusConnects offers greater connectivity, higher frequency, better connection and a more direct route to the city. We can disagree on some things but I genuinely take the Deputy's point that if BusConnects is to succeed there must be meaningful engagement with residents and people in areas that are affected. The point she made there is right. I have it in my city, as I said. It is important planners engage and listen. The overall point is this is a good news story for people, in that there is an enhanced offering of bus services.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The reason I was rolling my eyes is I campaigned and marched to get that town centre built. I know how important it is and family members have worked there. My point is that does not mean everyone wants to sit in traffic in it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: That is why we are doing BusConnects.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes, but nobody wants to sit on a bus and be dragged through Blanchardstown centre. The Minister of State does not seem to know the area, with all due respect. People are often delayed there for 20 minutes. With the original BusConnects plan there were roughly 28,000 complaints. Some 914 of them originated from Blanchardstown and most of them were about the 70 bus route. One third of respondents said there would be a loss or reduction in the existing service. Roughly one third said they did not want to have to get off the bus to transfer into town and one third referenced the requirement for new infrastructure and a new interchange. I do not know how frequent the L64 the Minister of State mentioned is going to be and it is not clear how many P64 buses there will be either, but at the moment the service is perfectly adequate at peak times and people are losing this. Government needs to listen to what people are saying sometimes.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I listen. I am a public representative and I represent people.

11 o'clock

It is important to recognise that the new L64 network will run between Dunboyne and the Blanchardstown centre. The new peak-time route, the P64, will run between Dunboyne and the city centre and both will serve Littlepace. Both services will also lead to Dunboyne. Equally, detailed timetables will be issued and will be set near the time of implementation so that we can take account of the comments the Deputy has made here this morning. There has been engagement with residents. Concerns have been raised not just by the Deputy but also by other local representatives in the area and changes have been made. I look forward to further engagement by the NTA. In the interests of fairness, BusConnects is a good news story. It will enhance frequency, enhance connectivity and enhance the passenger experience for the commuters who are asking for more buses that are on time and that are frequent.

Public Transport

101. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the DART+ South West project; the progress to date; the way in which the project may be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31714/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I ask the Minister for Transport to give an update on the DART+ South West project, the progress that has been made to date, the way in which this crucial infrastructure project for my constituents in Dublin Mid-West may be expedited, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As part of the wider DART+ programme, DART+ South West will provide an extension of electrified DART services from the city centre to Hazelhatch and

Celbridge. I know this is a project the Deputy has supported from its genesis and he continues to do so. A major milestone was cleared in November 2024 when the project secured full planning approval from An Coimisiún Pleanála. Preparation for procurement for DART+ West and DART+ South West is progressing together. I want to be clear about that. Design and build pre-qualification questionnaires were issued in May 2025. Funding allocated under the national development plan sectoral investment plan, which was published last November, will see construction of the DART+ programme begin. I expect DART+ West will enter construction before the end of 2027. DART+ West is a critical enabler for the wider programme and must be advanced first, as it will provide an additional depot location and capacity for new fleet as well as the requirement enhancements to city centre rail capacity to support future services. I will return to this.

Funding from the sectoral investment plan has also allowed compulsory purchase orders for DART+ South West to commence in February this year. Procurement for DART+ West is progressing in a way that ultimately assists with DART+ South West, in that it is intended the framework contracts being established for DART+ West will also be used for DART+ South West. I want to see this being done in tandem. In addition to sectoral Exchequer capital allocations, which the Deputy has been pushing for and on which we met on a number of occasions, my Department will continue to explore opportunities to advance this and bring it forward. DART+ West is an enabler for DART+ South West.

Within our sectoral ceilings we do have some flex and I believe we can bring this project forward. We need to get the compulsory purchase order, CPO, work done and we need to get DART+ West started in 2027. I believe that with continued work on this we could see DART+ South West starting in 2028. Both of them interact with each other, as the Deputy knows, and I will be working with the Deputy to ensure that we do.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I welcome that response. The Minister's successor as the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, was in the constituency this week in Clonburris and Adamstown. He saw the scale of housing being delivered and the importance of the infrastructure that enables that housing. One such project is DART+ South West. Coming from a commuter constituency the Minister will know full well that commuters in my constituency who use stations like Kishoge, Adamstown, Clondalkin Fonthill, and Park West are the people who want to use public transport in the morning. Carriages are full so we know the demand is there. DART+ South West is something we must prioritise. I welcome the movements made on the CPO work being rolled out. I welcome the work being done to ensure that procurement will not be delayed if and when funding becomes available for this. I also welcome the Minister's commitment to bring this forward as far as we can to ensure that those commuters who do not want to sit in traffic on the roads around Lucan and Clondalkin are served well by a train station. I will work with the Minister to continue doing that but I will also fight the corner for these commuters who need a good, reliable and, crucially, a frequent train service to enable their commutes and to get the congestion off our roads.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree completely with the Deputy. The work that is happening now is critical to advance the project. In fairness, the Deputy has been working directly with us on this and advocating for his constituency. Deputy Moynihan is right. Given the number of houses and the development that is happening out there and in Adamstown the whole area

has grown substantially over the last years and this needs to be supported by DART+ South West. Working with the Deputy, we will ensure that we do that. DART+ West is critical, as is DART+ South West because they do interact with each other. I believe we can bring this project forward and I want us to do that. We have allocated the funding we need in order to do what we need to this year and next. It is about bringing it into construction. I am confident we can do that. I want to get over the milestones of the CPO. We want to get to the commencement of the enabling works as well, which will be happening too. We will see construction start in 2027 on DART+ West. Shortly after that, with movement in our sectoral ceiling that I think we can do, we can get DART+ South West into construction in 2028.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister. For the record of the House, I have seen the work being done to advance the CPOs and the enabling works. The Minister has outlined the important step, which is crucial, that procurement for DART+ South West and DART+ West is done in tandem. We cannot afford to lose any time in this if and when funding becomes available. I want to thank the Minister for his personal commitment to try to bring the funding forward for this. I will work on this directly with the Minister.

I will take a moment to point out the additional benefits of the DART+ South West project not just for my constituency in Dublin Mid-West where will it be a crucial enabler, but also for intercity trains coming from the western part of the country. The four track system that this will enable on the line will reduce the bottlenecks at Athlone and Heuston. They are all crucial pieces of infrastructure and investment that we need to do. The key point for me remains that we need to get this over the line as quickly as we can for the commuters who want to get out of the traffic that is already congested all around the roads in my constituency, and for those people who use stations like Kishoge, Adamstown, Park West and Clondalkin Fonthill, and all the commuters in Lucan and Clondalkin who are relying on this piece of kit who want to use public transport. Let us respond to that demand and put a strong service in place to deliver it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In the national development plan one in every four euro being invested between now and the end of this decade, between now and 2030, is being invested in transport. We are investing in public transport like has never happened before. It is very much focused on our rail network because it is good particularly for commuters, good for quality of life, good to reduce congestion and good for climate. We are seeing record numbers of people using public transport and record numbers of people using the trains. I know from being out in the constituency with Deputy Moynihan and from meeting his constituents that there is an absolute desire and imperative to deliver this project. We are delivering it and we have started those enabling works now through the CPO work. I believe we will be able to bring this very shortly after, with construction on DART+ West and DART+ South West. I will work with the Deputy on it. The Taoiseach has spoken to me directly on it too. He is fully supportive of the DART+ programme. Obviously there are also the other elements such as DART+ Coastal North and so on, but these two will be first. We will work together to make sure it happens.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move on to the next question, I welcome all of the students in the Public Gallery. It is great to see you here this morning. I hope you enjoy your day in Leinster House and your visit. I particularly welcome the students from the Christian

Brothers College in Kilkenny and their teacher, Mr. Murphy. You are all very welcome. Enjoy your day.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Bus Services

102. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the roll-out of the planned inner orbital O route as part of the BusConnects project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31313/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Kilkenny is well represented in the Chair this morning. I wish to ask the Minister for Transport for an update on the roll-out of the planned O route, which is the inner orbital route, as part of the BusConnects project in Dublin.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I join with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in welcoming the students from Edmund Rice College, Carrigaline, who are here today as well. I wish them a very pleasant visit to Leinster House.

I thank Deputy O'Gorman for the question. BusConnects Dublin is a transformative programme of investment to provide better bus services to more people across the capital. The Department of Transport is providing significant funding to support the roll-out of new bus infrastructure, fleet and services. We have already rolled out the first seven phases of the BusConnects Dublin network redesign so far, with the most recent one being the F spine serving Finglas to Tallaght in October 2025.

The National Transport Authority is progressing all necessary works required to facilitate the introduction of the O route, which will provide an inner orbital operating on the North Circular Road and South Circular Road. The €940 million in public service obligation funding provided in budget 2026 allows the NTA to operate the bus network on a sustainable basis and to prioritise changes in line with operational capacity and passenger needs. The focus this year is on consolidating and strengthening the current network, while progressing improvements already under way. Unfortunately, it is not possible this morning to confirm an exact date for implementation of the O route. I am assured, however, that the S2 route from Heuston Station to Irishtown, which entered service in 2023, serves a part of the O route currently.

The Department is also providing funding to advance the core bus corridors elements of the BusConnects programme.

Contracts have now been awarded for both the Liffey Valley to city centre and the Ballymun-Finglas to city centre schemes, with a view to both entering heavy construction this year. I look forward to working with the NTA and our Department to continue the roll-out of BusConnects in Dublin in the years ahead.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: One of the most difficult things to do in public transport in Dublin is get across the city rather than in and out of it. That is why those orbital routes are so important. The BusConnects O route will connect communities across Dublin city centre, from

Infirmery Road in the west and North Strand in East Wall to across the Liffey and around the South Circular Road back to Heuston Station. Running in both directions, it will be the first true orbital route. It is the circuit that will link all the different spines of BusConnects together.

When I asked the Minister and the NTA last February when it will roll out, I was told it would be in quarter 3 of 2025. There was no sign of it in quarter 3 of 2025. When I asked the Minister and the NTA about it in February 2025, they could not even give me a roll-out date. The reply stated that, "Commencement of the new O-Route is subject to confirmation of sufficient PSO funding to support its operation, and hence a precise commencement date cannot be provided at this time." When will the O route be rolled out? Will the Minister of State work to speed it up?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is correct; it is difficult to get across the city. The orbital routes are important. In fairness, the Deputy's former colleague and former Minister, Eamon Ryan, introduced them. We have seen some being rolled out and we are doing more in that regard. The Department of Transport and I will engage with the NTA to ensure we get a date. There is ongoing engagement around the planning of all necessary works for the route about which the Deputy spoke. I will bring his feedback back to the officials.

While I cannot provide a date this morning, I can say that the sectoral plan of the national development plan has allocated significant funding to the NTA to progress BusConnects routes in Dublin, Galway, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, the Department and I share the Deputy's commitment in this regard. I take the Deputy's points on board. I do not have an exact date but I will bring his remarks back and engage with the officials in the Department.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We are missing an opportunity if we do not speed up the introduction of this O route. Running buses in both directions in a circuit around Dublin city centre will change the way people get around the city.

There is one point about which I am concerned. My understanding, from comments an NTA official made to me, is that the roll-out of the O route might be split into two semi-circles, with only the southern portion being introduced first. That absolutely misses the point of an orbital route. It would also be unfair on communities in Dublin's north-inner city that would benefit from a high-frequency service running in both directions along the North Circular Road. As with so many other public transport projects, it is clear that a lack of funding is causing the delay. The Minister needs to back this project and ensure the O route is rolled out soon on both sides - north and south - from the outset.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We all share the commitment to enhance the public transport offering. It is not correct to say there is a lack of funding. In the budget, the Minister received an increase of 46% in the PSO allocation. What we are doing - I think the Deputy will support us in this, being a former Minister - is building resilience and sustainability in the transport system and network for the future. We are planning new routes in a way that is sustainable for the future and will avoid the need to have to go through supplementary measures every budget and cycle. As the Deputy knows, people want certainty, reliable information and on-time buses.

We will engage further with the NTA to ensure that process of planning is in place so that we can deliver.

The Deputy is right that this is transformative. I assure the Deputy that all of us in the Department of Transport are committed to this. We want to see it happen. As I said, we have increased the PSO offering. It is now about making sure we continue to roll out BusConnects routes not just in Dublin but in the city of Cork as well. I hear the Deputy's views.

Air Services

103. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the timeline for the long-awaited restoration of the Derry to Dublin airlink. [29785/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We have been without this crucial Derry-Dublin airlink for 16 years. It was removed by the Government at the time. If we look at the map of Ireland, we see there is no motorway or train link directly to Derry, Donegal and the north west. The restoration of this airlink is key. I welcome that it has been agreed to by the Government but we need clear timelines.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy that this is a critical route. I am happy to provide him with an update. It was a programme for Government commitment, as the Deputy knows, to re-establish the route. I thank the Deputy for his continued interest in this matter. We are committed to supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland where people can live, work and connect. The Deputy has made that point validly with regard to the north west. Many stakeholders have recognised that the north west is an area that is relatively under-served by transport connectivity. We are improving that but it needs to be improved further.

Government-funded PSO air services previously operated on this route for a ten-year period up until 2011. In this context, and in line with our objectives on building a shared island, the Government committed to engage with all relevant stakeholders to establish air connectivity between Dublin and Derry city airports. I met with officials in the City of Derry Airport and Derry Chamber as well as with the Deputy's colleagues in Donegal County Council.

Last year, we decided that, pending progress on the A5 motorway upgrade, preparatory work to reintroduce the PSO air service to establish air connectivity between Dublin and Derry airports in 2026 would be progressed. We are fully committed to the reintroduction of a PSO service on this route, which will be funded through the shared island fund. As announced in budget 2026, the Government has doubled the resources available under this fund out to 2035.

My officials are progressing the preparatory work necessary to establish this service. That work is now well advanced. On 22 December 2025, we published a market-sounding survey. Views of stakeholders, including those who might avail of the service, were sought on the service. It is important we do that. This survey includes the specifications that would potentially best meet the requirements of the PSO air service, such as aircraft type, capacity and frequency of services. Engagement on this survey was positive. Over 700 responses were received, confirming the interest and recognised benefits of the PSO air service for stakeholders in Derry and the wider north-west region.

All things being equal, it is expected that following a two-month tender procedure, a contract will be awarded for the commencement of services this October. This will align with the winter 2026 airline scheduling season. We are looking forward to it. It is on track.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously, I will have many back-and-forth battles with the Government but this is welcome news for the north west. It is a tribute to both Letterkenny Chamber and Derry Chamber. They work together for the region. A total of 40% of the passengers who use the City of Derry Airport come from Donegal. For people elsewhere in Ireland, sometimes that geography can be lost. Essentially, Derry serves the entire region, including north Donegal. It is a crucial link. We have been devastated with the delays and legal challenges to the A5, so this is one project that gives people hope. I ask the Minister to ensure the October timeline does not slip. I am advised it is critical for the overall package of the airport. As the Minister knows, it connects into Heathrow Airport and various airports in England, Scotland and other countries. This is part of this package to continue to build confidence in the north west and show that we are rebalancing with the rest of island.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I, too, share the Deputy's disappointment with regard to the A5. We are still committed to delivering it whenever legal challenges and planning issues are dispensed with. In the meantime, this is critical. This route is viable and needed. We will support it with a public service obligation. The timelines I have provided are robust. I very much expect this service to be up and running in October. Both the awarding of the contract and a commencement of the service will happen in October, aligning with that winter 2026 schedule. Not only will this service provide connectivity between Dublin and Derry but it will provide onwards connectivity as well.

Certainly, from a geographical perspective, it is critical for the north west. It will drive investment. I met with the chambers of commerce on both sides of the Border, as well as with Derry City and Strabane District Council. On the Letterkenny side, there are substantial land banks for further investment and employment growth. There would also be a good tourism offering for people there. I am looking forward to it. We are watching it. I am confident in the timelines I have provided. I thank the Deputy for his support for this project.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I welcome the Minister's firm commitment today. It is good news for the City of Derry Airport. I also commend Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council. They created the vision of the north-west city region. They speak with one voice. This is good news for Donegal, Derry, Tyrone and the wider north-west region. I will leave it at that. I appreciate the firm commitment.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is another project that shows the benefits of the shared island initiative.

It is bringing people on the island of Ireland together and normalising future relations. It is a fantastic example of how local authorities and chambers of commerce work together. The Border does not exist, and that is critical. People are working together and bringing in investment. People work on both sides of the Border.

The shared island fund is an important enabler. The Taoiseach is incredibly supportive of the project. We are happy to work with it. The fund has been a constructive partner, as have Donegal County Council, Derry and Strabane and the chambers of commerce. To be fair, politicians across the House, including Deputy Mac Lochlainn, have been very supportive of this. I look forward to it opening. Maybe we will take a flight up there together.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Sounds good.

Public Transport

104. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport the public transport options to Dublin Airport for the people of Dublin Mid-West; if additional routes are being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31351/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: It is an ordeal to get from Dublin Mid-West to the airport. What public transport options are available to Dublin Airport from Dublin Mid-West for the residents of Clondalkin, Lucan, Palmerstown, Citywest, Newcastle, Saggart, Brittas, Fettercairn and Rathcoole? Are additional routes being considered?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The NTA is critical in the context of the planning and provision of services and continues to keep public transport connectivity, including access to Dublin Airport, under ongoing and active review. As the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, mentioned in a previous response, there was a substantial increase, about 46%, in the public service obligation in the budget to enhance and improve our services. While there is no direct public transport from Dublin Mid-West to the airport, a range of convenient and flexible travel options are available. Many travel by rail into the city centre and out from there.

Looking ahead, the NTA is continuing to invest in additional orbital bus services which will provide more options to reach Dublin Airport by public transport. For example, route W4 which currently operates between Tallaght and Blanchardstown will connect with the planned new route N8 at Blanchardstown which will serve Dublin Airport via the M50. A further welcome development is included in the Dublin Airport Authority's planning application currently under consideration to increase passenger numbers to 40 million per annum. As part of this proposal, the DAA has sought approval for a new ground transportation centre which will consolidate airport bus services in a single location and, where possible, segregate general but traffic from pedestrian movements. This would provide priority access to bus stop facilities and increase bus bay capacities, supporting the continued growth of public transport use to make journeys to the airport.

In addition there is MetroLink, which will start construction by the end of next year. It is fully funded under the national development plan and will integrate directly with Iarnród Éireann services at Glasnevin, thereby significantly improving public transport access to Dublin Airport.

Deputy Moynihan asked for an update on DART+ South West. We are committed to that and are doing it as a Government. It will be a critical enabler of improving public transport services in what is a major growth area. There has been significant housing development in

the area and new families moving in. We have to ensure that the public transport offering is commensurate with population growth.

Deputy Mark Ward: There was a private operator, the Airport Hopper, in Dublin Mid-West until February 2025. It provided an economical route to Dublin Airport for residents of Tallaght, Lucan and Clondalkin. The operator closed because the service was not financially sustainable.

The Minister mentioned public service obligations. I understand when a privately run service stops, the State can take it over through the public service obligation. This essentially means that the route would remain in place, but would be operated publicly by the NTA. I received a response from the NTA that it is not considering a public service obligation. Instead, it will begin a new service between Blanchardstown and Clongriffin. I am delighted for my colleague Deputy Donnelly in Blanchardstown and Clongriffin, but that is no good for people in Clondalkin, Lucan and Tallaght. Can consideration be given to taking the Dublin Airport Hopper under the public service obligation in order that we can have at least one direct route to the airport?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank Deputy Ward for asking the question. As he knows, I asked a question about this matter a few weeks ago and have engaged directly with the Minister on it. The suggestion I put forward is that there be airport-bound routes going through Dublin Mid-West, like the Expressway service from the western part of the country. I have written to the NTA and hope to get the support of the Minister to allow pick-up and drop-off for residents in Lucan and Clondalkin on airport-bound routes outside of Dublin in the interim. I will work with the Minister and hope to secure a public service obligation for some sort of airport link. We can apply some interim solutions until then.

I welcome the support of the Minister in working with the NTA to mandate operators to provide additional pick-up and drop-off points. It is uneconomic to drive from Lucan, Clondalkin or Palmerstown as I have said on the floor of the House and with the Minister privately. I encourage him to support encouraging people to use public transport in as direct way as possible. I mean no disrespect to the response of the NTA, but it described a circuitous route to the airport when people need to get onto the M50. I would welcome interim solutions.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Moynihan asked a question about this on a previous occasion. The cessation of the Airport Hopper was a disappointment. It was a direct route for people. On foot of the questions asked a few weeks ago and Deputy Ward's question today, I will ask the NTA to move forward and see if something can be done within the public service obligation. There was a substantial increase in public service obligation funding. We have also seen a substantial increase in routes and additions to routes. Last year, 365 million public service obligation transport journeys took place across the network, a record number. Journeys are growing by about 6% or 7% per year. People respond when they have the choice and opportunity to use public transport. One can see from the questions Deputies Ward and Moynihan have asked that there is a gap regarding which needs to be filled in the interim. I am aware of the issue and will engage with the NTA to see whether we can bring forward the service and provide interim services solutions in advance of that. I will keep the Deputies informed.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the fact that the Minister is going to have a conversation with the NTA regarding the consideration of interim solutions. If I were to travel from Neillstown, where I am from, to the airport today by public transport, I would have to take three buses. If I travelled via Adamstown I would need to take a train and bus, that is, if I was lucky to be able to get on a train. DART+ South West was mentioned. That needs to be built as soon as possible.

Many people in my area, myself included, have no choice but to get taxis to the airport. I checked prices before coming into the House and discovered that the cost of getting to the airport from different parts of my constituency by taxi ranges from €50 to €90. It is often the case that the taxi fares people pay are more than what they pay for the flights they are taking out of the country. I urge the Minister to consider interim options. I take the point on the Citylink service from Galway to Dublin, which comes down the M4 and does not stop on the way. A stop would help some people along the way, especially in Lucan, Palmerstown and parts of Clondalkin.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That point has been well made by both Deputies. I will engage with the NTA and keep both Deputies fully informed. There could be an interim measure we can take. There is a longer term plan and continued investment in the public transport fleet, including DART+ South West, which everyone is supportive of and which we will bring forward. The Government has started work on that. I will keep Deputies Ward and Moynihan informed of progress.

Public Transport

105. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide funding for increased car parking facilities in Carlow and Muine Bheag train stations in Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31281/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Is the Minister considering providing funding for increased car parking spaces in Carlow and Muine Bheag train stations in County Carlow, particularly in light of the ongoing fuel crisis in Ireland as a result of the war that shows no sign of abating, to try to give 7,000 commuters an alternative to taking their cars to work?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Students from Edmund Rice College Carrigaline are in the Gallery. I welcome them and wish them well. I hope they have a very good visit. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: They are all welcome.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: By allowing drivers and passengers to complete part of their journey by car and part by public transport, park-and-ride sites have an important role to play in generating a mode shift towards public transport, cutting emissions and reducing congestion in our urban centres. To support this work, Iarnród Éireann is currently updating its national carpark strategy report to establish the capacity requirements for car parking, bus connectivity

and active travel at all 147 train stations across the rail network. It is anticipated that the strategy will be complete and an updated report issued to the NTA for review later this year.

The Department of Transport has allocated significant funding to advance public transport projects, including park-and-ride facilities, through the national development plan sectoral investment plan, which was published in November. The NTA is now progressing a more detailed implementation plan within this overarching Exchequer funding envelope. The implementation plan, which will be published in the coming months, will provide details of projects to be progressed within the funding available over the period 2026 to 2030. This implementation plan, together with the report being prepared by Iarnród Éireann, will inform which park-and-ride sites are advanced in the medium term.

I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of Muine Bheag. It is not her first time to do so. She has been very articulate about the need for both car parking spaces in Carlow and enhanced connectivity. Carlow is a growing town, as the Deputy said. There is expeditious growth east and west. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and look forward to engaging with her further.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: The Minister of State is correct. Carlow is a thriving university town. I have also been calling for increased train services from Carlow - actually from Waterford all the way through Kilkenny to Dublin and *vice versa*. We need to have a change of focus. I welcome the report that has been done by Iarnród Éireann and the desire to have park-and-ride facilities throughout the country. However, in the current geopolitical environment, the Government as a whole needs to have a greater sense of urgency. While I appreciate all the measures it has brought in so far, in Carlow and Kilkenny there are approximately 7,000 people who commute by car and whose journeys to work and back home last more than 60 minutes. What is happening is that commuters are arriving at Carlow train station with the desire to take the train and there are no car parking spaces available. In that light, this is an immediate and urgent call I am making.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am fully aware of the situation in Carlow. I am very familiar with the town. When you come off the motorway from Dublin, you can see cars parked along the road as you go into Carlow in an area where there could be a need for a park-and-ride facility. The Department and I are very much committed to having an overall strategy. We are looking at a change in focus. That is why we have BusConnects, why we will have the light rail system for Cork, and why we have the strategy whereby a modal shift is being further assisted and supported by Irish Rail with the Department of Transport in the context of park-and-ride facilities. Stations are prioritised using a multi-criteria analysis that takes into account the capacity, current and projected demand, the number of potential spaces gained and lost and everything to do with planning and programme risk. From my own observations, Carlow would be well placed on the relevant list. I know the Leas-Chathaoirleach is also familiar with this matter. For the Department, this is about the modal shift, enhanced connectivity and getting people out of their cars onto public transport.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I really welcome that very positive response and the proactive and ambitious plans for the future for rail networks through Carlow and into Kilkenny. I attended a meeting in Mullinavat this week. This is kind of separate from my

question, but while I have the opportunity, I will mention that there is an disused train station in Mullinavat. It would be very interesting to explore whether we could recreate a stop there to help alleviate the pressure that has been experienced due to the reduction in the service of Expressway route 4.

When we talk about car parking spaces in train stations, will the Department consider multi-storey car parking for train stations like the one in Carlow or in Bagenalstown that are short on space and that do not really have the capacity to expand into the surrounding area? There are a number of schools around Carlow train station. If that was possible, we might consider putting solar panels on our car parking spaces, as happens in many other European countries.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy makes an interesting point. On the other, broader point, digressing from her subject matter of the question, from a geopolitical point of view, we need to look differently at rail provision. She mentioned Mullinavat. I could throw in the Middleton to Youghal line in Cork as an example. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle could have a couple in Kilkenny as well. We have to look at the whole thing differently now given what is happening in the world around the uncertainty in the Middle East and then moving away from fossil fuel dependency. The Department and the Government are committed to progressing the modal shift from cars and to buses, to Bus Connects, to a national rail strategy around commuter rail and to the Luas and the metro in Dublin and Cork.

I will certainly bring the fundamental point the Deputy makes back to Iarnród Éireann and to the Department. She is right though; it is about looking at how we can create that sustainable piece. What we are trying to do is to build reliance into our rail services. Part of our discussion, not just now but in the future, is about the points the Deputy has made here this morning.

Electric Vehicles

106. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of the findings of a research paper (details supplied); if he has engaged with the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31152/26]

Deputy Réada Cronin: Is the Minister for Transport aware of the findings of a research paper from the school of physics in Trinity College Dublin entitled Why Rural Ireland holds the key to transport decarbonisation? Has he engaged with himself, as the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, on this matter?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I talk to myself every day. It is good having two Departments because you can ask permission from the other Minister. There are good synergies between both though, to be fair. It is a good question. As Minister for transport and for climate, energy and the environment, I am aware of the report in question. I thank Deputies Cronin and Daly for bringing it to my attention. I have also reached out to Professor Brian Caulfield to arrange a meeting to discuss his research. It is very timely. We are firmly committed to achieving a low-carbon economy by 2050. The transport sector will play a pivotal role in that. Fleet electrification is expected to continue to provide the greatest share of emissions abatement in the short to medium term for the transport sector. Rural motorists are often in an advantageous position to make the switch to an electric vehicle, due to the large number of dwellings in rural

Ireland which are suitable for home EV charging. Home charging is the primary charging method that most Irish EV owners use as it is convenient and cheaper for the consumer, as well as assisting in the overall management of the grid.

According to data provided by TII and the charging point operators, over 3,200 publicly accessible charge points are now available nationwide. We are finalising a data strategy in line with the programme for Government commitment, which will enhance the Department's ability to monitor infrastructure roll-out, capacity and usage, so we can more accurately assess that data with the ultimate objective of delivering on EU requirements. We are going very well on the EV roll-out, and we have seen a really substantial jump in quarter 1 of this year. We have close to 240,000 EVs now on our roads and we are seeing that increase. I want to be able to deploy more EVs and ensure that people, particularly in rural areas, are assessing them. The data we have from last year shows that there is a good regional split. The need to focus on this has been raised by many Deputies and, indeed, Sinn Féin's transport spokesperson, and we will. I intend to meet Professor Caulfield in the coming weeks to discuss his research.

Deputy Réada Cronin: That is great that the Minister has engaged with this and that he will be meeting Professor Caulfield because the need to decarbonise and move to green energy has never been clearly, especially with the illegal wars in Iran, Ukraine, Lebanon and everywhere. The Minister can tell Michéal Martin that we do know about it. People in rural communities depend on their cars and are feeling this the most. One obvious way to protect them from these price shocks is to make electrical vehicles more accessible. The paper to which I refer suggests that this is not really that straightforward. While the good news is that the uptake of EVs in rural areas has been good, many of the people who are reliant on them are charging them at home. This can cause huge spikes in demand that our grid simply cannot handle. Even if people do want to switch to EVs, the grid infrastructure is just not there and that leaves rural communities stuck for the foreseeable future. What has been done to make sure rural areas have the grid capacity that they need so we can get on with the decarbonisation?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is a very good question. That is why PR6, the capital investment programme into our grid infrastructure between now and 2030 is so critically important. We will be investing up to €18.9 billion in our grid. It is needed to improve grid resilience, grid capacity and distribution. That will be about adding more renewables to our grid too and storage to be able to deal with curtailment issues too but capacity issues in certain parts of the grid. The capital scheme encompasses about 520 projects right the way across the country. This will give that improvement our grid needs to be able to expand further, allow more people, businesses and homes to access the grid, and to facilitate further EV charging. That work has commenced across those projects and it will be the most critical grid upgrade that has been done since electrification in this country.

Projects like the north-south interconnector are encompassing it. That is critically important for grid resilience across the island of Ireland.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am grateful for that because this is critical. When Russia invaded Ukraine, it should have been a wake-up call for us. We should have accelerated investment in renewables and energy security straight away. We have to accept that geopolitical instability is going to be part of the world - certainly for the next few years - and plan for that. Short-term

supports certainly are a help but they do not go far enough. This paper offers solutions. We need long-term solutions, such as investing in the grid, expanding renewable energy, and easing pressure on the system. I encourage the Minister to look at a moratorium on data centres. It comes up all the time at the climate committee that the grid has increased and the first come first served system just does not work in regard to data centre.

We do not know how long these conflicts are going to last. We do not know when the next crisis is going to come. We have to make sure that we are prepared. I ask the Minister after his engagement with the professor to write to the climate or transport committee. It would be appreciated.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is a good idea. I am happy to do that. In relation to renewables and the acceleration of renewables, we need to continue to reduce our dependence on fossil and imported fossil. That is good for climate, our economy and people's pockets. The good news is that we have doubled our wind capacity in a ten-year period. We now have over 8 GW of renewable energy connected to our system. We have about 1.4 GW of solar on rooftops. Solar is growing at a significant rate. In March of this year, 50% of our electricity was generated by renewables. We need to accelerate that further. We are doing that. We are doing that through measures like the Planning and Development Act.

Earlier this week I visited Bord na Móna's Derrinlough wind farm, which is one of the largest wind farms in the country. Bord na Móna is generating over 1 GW of renewable energy. It was a fossil-based peat company that has transitioned fully to green energy. In its pipeline of development and planning, it has over 5 GW of further renewable sources. On the offshore renewables, we need to get them into construction this decade. Regarding the horizon, the outlook is positive. I agree with the Deputy that we need to accelerate it. I will write to the transport committee post my meeting with Professor Caulfield.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I appreciate that.

Public Transport

107. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will seek substantial additional investment in public transport so that more services can be rapidly rolled out in response to the fuel crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31435/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: In response to the fuel crisis, other countries are rolling out additional services. Some are making public transport free, which we have called for for a long time. The Government did not provide any funding for new services in this budget. Will it reverse that decision in light of the fuel crisis? Will it provide additional funding for new services to be rapidly rolled out to alleviate the fuel and cost-of-living crisis and to enable us to get off the reliance on fossil fuels as quickly as possible?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. As Minister for Transport, I fully recognise the pressure that people and businesses are under due to rising fuel costs. Public transport has a particularly important role to play at times like this by providing a more affordable and sustainable alternative for many people. We are seeing public transport usage increase year-

on-year. Last year, we saw a record 365 million public transport journeys. In that context, I am keeping under close review how the public transport system is equipped to respond to current pressures. My Department and the NTA remain in close contact with operators to monitor demand and operational impacts as the situation evolves. At the same time, it is important that any such measures are carefully considered and aligned with available resources, so that they are effective, sustainable and can deliver real benefits.

The immediate priority has been to protect existing services and ensure continuity across the network within the resources allocated in the PSO programme. In the PSO, we secured an unprecedented allocation of €940 million. That was a 43% uplift on the previous budget. I want to get us to a sustainable footing in relation to the funding of public transport services. Where it previously had been, where additional routes were added and at the end of every year a supplementary budget was sought for transport, is not the way to plan things. It is not the way to plan things going forward.

To further support the sector, we approved a range of measures to mitigate rising fuel costs, including the transport sector through the road transport support scheme. That will support bus and coach operators providing TFI Local Link services and school transport. If we look at our charging structure in Ireland for public transport, it compares very favourably with our European counterparts. We have broadened free services with children up to the age of nine getting free travel, the senior free travel and the companion pass, which is being rolled out. We keep the fare structure and the fares under constant monitoring. We review it on a regular basis.

Deputy Paul Murphy: To respond to the climate crisis and the cost-of-living and fuel crises, we need to rapidly roll out as much public transport as quickly as is possible. That is not what is currently happening. Dublin Bus is sitting on 50 new electric buses. They are expensive and very good quality presumably but they are sitting there not being used because of a lack of appropriate infrastructure. The oldest new electric bus has been sitting there since November 2023. We have owned this bus for two years and five months. It is not on the road. It is not being used. Why? One reason is the lack of charging infrastructure and Broadstone buses cannot be charged during the day because the grid is overloaded. Can the Minister not say to his Government colleagues that we should be prioritising charging our electric buses instead of giving all of our electricity to the data centres?

Each time we add one of these electric buses to the fleet, we are taking one diesel bus out. Why on earth are we taking buses, regardless of what fuel they are, out of the fleet when we should be adding capacity? Regardless of what fuel they are, it is much better for people in public transport rather than sitting in individual cars.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Let us turn to some facts.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes, please.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There are more people using public transport than ever. There were 365 million public transport journeys last year. That is a 6% increase. Our fare structure is affordable. We have many free fares across the system, which we will continue to maintain. On the other issue in relation to the electrification of our fleet, Limerick and Athlone are fully

electrified. There were additional buses purchased in the previous Government term which are still being deployed at the rate of two a week. All the additional electric buses will be deployed across Dublin by this year and the remainder of them in quarter 1 of next year. There are two a week going into service now. I visited Broadstone to see that. It is not about grid capacity, although it was. There were issues with charging infrastructure. The Deputy is correct. I have addressed that. This is a matter that I inherited that we are dealing with. Bus Átha Cliath and its drivers have been really good in that regard. A lot of people are getting used to the use of those EV buses. We will continue to roll them out. There were issues. Those issues are being worked on and addressed. The remainder of those buses will be rolled out over the course of these few months. They are being rolled at a rate of two per week.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Minister to give me a date for when all the electric buses will be in use. I would like that. I will hold him to it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Excellent.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There are 50 brand new electric buses still not being used. The issue that the Minister did not come back to is that each time we add one of the electric buses, we are withdrawing a diesel bus. Why on earth are we doing that? Why are we not having more buses in the system? That is what we need. We need a lot of more buses. Why are we scrapping routes? We introduced the BusConnects routes. That is fine. Why are we withdrawing other routes as a consequence of that? For example, in my constituency, there is a campaign to reinstate the 49 bus, which was cut when the F1 Busconnects route was introduced. It is a downgrade for a lot of people. It is taking people commuting to work to the city centre from Tallaght, Firhouse and Knocklyon an extra 20 to 30 minutes each way, which is ridiculous. It is driving people back into cars as a result. In response to the fuel crisis, why not reinstate the 49 bus? There are examples from other parts of the city. We should be expanding routes and buses, not swapping one in for another.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We actually are. We are expanding services across the country. The numbers bear that out. To answer the Deputy's question directly, to be fair to my predecessor, he had bought additional electric buses because the capital was there. They were purchased forward. They were not all going to go into use over the course of a month or two. It has gone on longer than it should. We are looking at about 10% of our fleet in Dublin being electrified. That is a good thing. Limerick and Athlone are fully electrified. We are investing €1 in every €4 in this NPD between now and 2030 in the transport sector. It is just short of €25 billion to deliver projects like MetroLink, BusConnects and the quality bus corridors, which we are starting. I mention Ballymun-Finglas to the city and the Liffey Valley to city. Both of those contracts are signed and both will be in construction this year. We are in the delivery phase.

The Deputy is right that there are deficits. I am not painting the picture that everything is perfect - it is not. We have a growing population. We have growing housing and had good news on housing again this morning - a 33% increase in housing completions in quarter 1 of this year. That is the type of sustainable progress we will continue to make across housing, transport and education.

Taxi Regulations

108. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of ongoing reports of wheelchair users being refused service by wheelchair accessible taxis in Dublin, particularly at night; the number of complaints received and penalties issued; the way in which drivers who received public funding under the wheelchair accessible vehicle, WAV, grant scheme are held accountable for refusing passengers; the immediate actions being taken to end this discrimination and guarantee equal access to taxi services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31296/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the huge investment in and development of private wires and look forward to the private wires system helping electrification and contributing to the solution to the issue Deputy Murphy raised regarding electrical infrastructure. The private wires Bill can reduce timelines for the installation of renewable projects and electric infrastructure.

I come to my question on the WAV grant scheme. I have been contacted by people in my constituency who are wheelchair users and are being refused by taxis despite the fact the taxis have received grants for wheelchair accessibility.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities and his good work with Ciarán Delaney, whom we both engage with. If there are complaints, I encourage the Deputy to ask the people affected to log them and we will take it up. It is important we have that data.

The regulation of the small public service vehicle, SPSV, sector, including the compliance, enforcement and administration of the wheelchair accessible vehicle grant scheme, is a matter for the independent transport regulator, the NTA, under the provisions of the consolidated Taxi Regulation Act. The Minister and I have no role in the matter.

The Department has been informed that, in relation to Dublin, the NTA has received 13 WAV-related complaints in the last 12 months, with 11 received in the previous 12-month period. Any person who receives a WAV grant from the NTA must complete mandatory disability awareness training. It is a condition of receipt of any portion of the grant that the proposed driver of the WAV must either undertake the free half-day SPSV-specific disability awareness training provided by the NTA or provide evidence that they have completed a SPSV-specific disability awareness training course during the three years prior to the application date for a WAV grant.

Not all WAVs are grant aided. In 2024, 346 non-grant-aided WAV taxi and hackney licences were added to the SPSV fleet, alongside WAV grants given to 372 new SPSV licenceholders. To support all licenceholders and not just grant recipients in providing WAV services, the NTA extended free training to all SPSV licenceholders at the start of last year. Operators can undertake the training as often as required, free of charge, to ensure that they are confident to provide such services to a high standard for passengers. There will be no ambiguity from us. The passenger experience must be to a high standard. There can be no obfuscation. I encourage wheelchair users to log their complaints.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank the Minister of State for his engagement on the matter. I have constituents who are left waiting hours for wheelchair accessible taxis that will take them.

In response to a parliamentary question I submitted last July, the NTA acknowledged what the Minister of State just said. It stated it was giving training for the safe use of lifts and clamping systems and that, since that January, the training had been provided free of charge. I welcome that but the most common excuse given to constituents who have contacted me is that drivers are saying they are unable to operate the lift. That does not stand up to scrutiny. All holders of wheelchair accessible licences have a statutory obligation to provide the service. This issue has been raised with me and my former colleagues on Dublin City Council, including Councillor Nial Ring and Councillor Kevin Breen, who are working with local residents.

How many complaints have been received and penalties issued? Are drivers who received public money under the WAV scheme being held to account if they refuse passengers? It is not acceptable that we are giving money to drivers through a grant to make a vehicle accessible but they are not taking people with disabilities.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I concur with the Deputy that that should not be the experience of people. The NTA has been working to make it easier for taxi drivers nationally and locally to increase the numbers available to passengers.

The last year for which statistics are available is 2025. The NTA received 1,815 complaints regarding SPSVs compared to 1,713 in 2014. Complaints related to the condition of the vehicle, driver behaviour, hiring matters, as the Deputy articulated, and fare matters. The majority of complaints, 976, were fare matters, while driver behaviour accounted for 368 and 396 were hiring matters.

I will come back to the Deputy on fixed-charge notices. My information is that four were given, which might seem small in the overall scheme but the percentage of complaints is quite low, given the number of taxis we have and journeys undertaken. I would be happy to engage with the Deputy further on the matter outside the Chamber.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I will send it over to the Minister of State's office. I can give cases of constituents with physical disabilities who have been refused collection by taxis. There are also taxi drivers who have built up records and submitted them to the NTA showing how many people with physical disabilities they collect but who then did not get the grant. I ask that when the next grant comes out for accessibility or renewal of the lift in the back of the taxi, taxi men and women with a proven record of doing the job the grant is given for are prioritised, rather than it being a lottery scheme. If that is already being done, will the Minister of State show me the steps? I will send him correspondence from the NTA stating it is not doing this currently.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I think there was one fixed-charge notice fine this year. The range of fines has gone from €80 to €250. Around 20% of the fleet comprises wheelchair accessible vehicles; I think it is about 4,836. It is an important matter and deserves the attention the Deputy gives it. If a person has a complaint, they should log it so that we can follow through. We must make it easier and we are providing training and that accessibility peice for the taxi driver. I take the Deputy's point on board. We are on a journey and must continue that journey.

It is because of people like the Deputy that we are seeing that mindset being changed. I commend him on his work.

Question No. 109 taken with Written Answers.

Public Transport

110. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to improve public transport connectivity in County Offaly, particularly in rural areas where services remain limited; whether there are plans to expand bus routes or increase service frequency under the Connecting Ireland programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31116/26]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. Rural transport is an important point. In the context of the budget, the Minister and I are aware of the role that enhanced connectivity plays in supporting communities in Offaly. I commend the Deputy on the work he does in that regard.

In the budget for this year, the Department of Transport secured €940 million of funding for PSO and TFI Local Link services, providing a significant 43% uplift from last year. This package includes a dedicated €31 million for rural transport service provision, representing a 38% increase on last year's funding. As the Deputy knows, people will use the service if they get it.

Offaly and Laois have been well served and seen significant investment in rural transport in recent years, with funding increasing by 36% between 2024 and 2025 to over €5.5 million. Passenger numbers are also increasing. The timetabled services in Offaly and Laois saw a 52% increase from 2024 to 2025.

Our public transport system is at an important juncture. To be fair to him, the Deputy has been advocating for it. We are experiencing growing passenger numbers and increasing demand. There is also the challenge, about which we have heard this morning, in parts of Dublin and Cork concerning congestion and getting enhanced and more frequent bus services to allow people to travel to and from work more easily.

In the interests of providing citizens with a high-class service, my focus as Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport is to stabilise the PSO position, ensure we have resilience and the routes we have now are functioning, reliable and sustainable, and progress improvements that were already under way.

12 o'clock

With the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the other Minister of State in the Department, Deputy Canney, we will work with everybody to ensure new routes are provided and accessibility and connectivity are enhanced. I will engage with the Deputy further on the matter. I thank him for raising it.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the progress being made under the Connecting Ireland programme. I acknowledge the excellent work being carried out by Local Link services

across the country. In rural communities in counties such as Offaly, Local Link has made a real difference in connecting people, particularly those who may not have access to a car. It has helped to address isolation and has provided vital links to services, employment and education. However, despite this progress, rural isolation remains a very real issue. There are still many areas where services are limited, infrequent or simply not available at the times people need them. For people living in rural Ireland, access to reliable public transport is not a convenience; it is essential. Will the Minister of State outline what further expansion is planned under Connecting Ireland to increase frequency and coverage in rural areas, and specifically how counties like Offaly will benefit from those improvements?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is right in that access is not just an option; it is important not just for employment but also for connectivity, going to hospital appointments, going to medical services and even going to the local village. That is why we review local transport provision under the programme for Government commitment. The Minister and I are very much committed to ensuring we see an uplift again in the provision of transport links. This is critical.

The TFI Local Link rural transport programme has worked right across the country, east, west, north and south. I join the Deputy in congratulating and thanking those who administer and run the programme. What we are committed to doing through the programme is connecting the missing pieces. It will take time. We will be in the Estimates process seeking further support from the Department of Finance and the Department of public expenditure. I hope that will come because the Deputy is correct that it is the regular rural service and the demand-responsive element that have been critically successful. The proof of that is the number of passenger journeys.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 38. I call Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Leas Cheann-Comhairle. He will indulge me in welcoming the páistí ó Scoil Náisiúnta Chnoc na gCaiseal in the Kingdom, County Kerry. They are very welcome to the Dáil today to witness proceedings as guests of Deputy Pa Daly.

Tá daoine ag labhairt amach le míonna anuas go bhfuil siad ag cuardach cuidithe. Tá cuidiú de dhíth orthu. Tá siad ag rá nach féidir leo a gcuid billí a íoc. Tá oibrithe, teaghlaigh agus pinsinéirí ag déanamh gach rud i gceart ach go fóill tá siad ag titim siar. Maidin inniu, dhearbhaigh an ESRI an rud a bhí ar eolas againn, is é sin go bhfuil an ghéarchéim seo go dona, go forleathan agus ag éirí níos measa. Bhí deacracht ag suas le 30% de theaghlaigh a gcuid billí fuinnimh a íoc. Is í an fhírinne, áfach, ná go bhfuil sé seo i bhfad níos measa mar léiríonn an tuairisc tréimhse ina raibh na creidmheasanna fuinnimh ar fáil agus nuair a bhí costas leictreachais níos ísle. Anois, áfach, tá siad i bhfad níos measa.

People have been crying out for months for help. They have been telling the Government that they cannot pay their bills. Workers, families and pensioners are doing everything right and they are still falling behind. This morning, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, confirmed exactly what they had been saying. The crisis is deep, widespread and getting worse. The real picture is even starker, however, because the report reflects a time when energy credits were still in place and electricity costs were lower. The crisis has got much worse since. The Government's response was to withdraw energy credits. At the very moment families needed help most, it took the supports away and made a bad situation worse. That is not just wrong, it is indefensible.

This report does not stand alone. On Tuesday, we learned that 317,000 households could not pay their electricity bills. People already falling behind are now being pushed further and further. Yesterday, in another report, the Central Statistics Office, CSO, told us that grocery prices were rising again, piling pressure on already stretched households. Bills are going up while supports are going down. This crisis is so severe that families with two incomes can no longer afford to pay their bills. This is not marginal; it is a social emergency.

Report after report, warning after warning, are telling the Government the same thing: the crisis is worsening and the Government is standing idly by. How many warnings is the Government going to ignore before it acts? This is not about statistics on a piece of paper. This is about people's lives. It is about people living in cold homes, parents skipping meals so that their children can eat and older people afraid to turn on the heat in their homes. It is about people rationing heat and cutting back on essentials. It is about living with constant anxiety over the next bill that is going to come through the door. All the while, the State runs multibillion euro surpluses, so there is no excuse whatsoever for inaction. The State has the money but it is a question of why people have never felt under so much pressure. Instead of addressing this, the Government has allowed this crisis to deepen, forcing families into impossible choices every week: heat or food, electricity or rent, keeping the lights on or falling into arrears. This is not inevitable. It is a political choice, and it is the Government's choice. That is why this is happening.

Sinn Féin has set out a clear alternative: an emergency budget to cut costs and support households right now. That is what is needed. It includes reinstating the energy credits that the Government withdrew and providing direct, immediate relief for families under severe pressure just to get by. The Tánaiste might not understand this, but out in the real world, people cannot wait for next year's budget or for the Government to get its act together in October. They need the supports now. It is now that bills are rising and that pressure is mounting, so they need the supports now.

How many warnings does the Government need and how many stories does it have to hear before it finally acts, introduces an emergency budget and restores energy credits for households that cannot wait any longer?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Of course, the Government has not waited to act. It has introduced what is either the largest or second largest package of supports in the EU. It was announced on the floor of this House around two weeks ago, and I am pleased to say it is having an impact. While

diesel and petrol prices are still too high, people have seen them lower at the pumps than they were before the intervention. People see that with their own eyes because we took the decision to reduce the excise on diesel, even going beyond what was allowed under the energy tax directive to reduce it further. We also took the decision to reduce petrol and green diesel costs. Yesterday, we announced two significant support schemes for crucial sectors of the economy - farmers, fishers, farm contractors and hauliers. I certainly heard words of welcome for those schemes, and I am sure the Deputy must have, too. I heard them on the radio and television. Farmers and their representative bodies said the schemes would help and make a difference. The scheme for farmers and farm contractors will open as soon as next Tuesday.

The Deputy is right to highlight the issue of inflation because the war against Iran - the bombing of Iran - has caused inflation to increase, but it is also true to say that the economic analysis of the package that we have introduced has shown it is suppressing inflation. The chief economist in the Department of Finance believes that the package we introduced will not just benefit farmers, fishers, hauliers and people at the pumps, but will also suppress inflation by around 0.6% per month. This will benefit people, by comparison with what they would otherwise have experienced, in the supermarket or local shop as they go about dealing with the cost of living.

The ESRI report did not fall from the sky. It was commissioned by the Government itself because it is always good to have an evidence base. The report states many things. It notes that the number of people at risk of energy poverty or of not being able to warm their homes nearly halved between 2013 and 2024. In 2013, in the depths of a financial crisis, 25% of households in Ireland were struggling to heat their homes. The percentage was still too high at the end of 2024, when it was down to 14%. The report also found that the fuel allowance scheme was very effective. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, his predecessors and this and the last Governments have not sat idly by since the end of 2024. In fact, in the two budgets since then, we took measures to increase the fuel allowance further and extend it to more people. We have seen it extended to more older people and to 50,000 more low-income families. We have seen the amount of the allowance increased also. The war has had a real impact, and that is why, in addition to those measures, we decided to further supplement it by €77 million, extending it for another month, benefiting 470,000 people.

The report refers to the need to help people to warm their homes and ensure they are more energy efficient. I am pleased to say that we are also taking measures in this regard, with record funding this year to help to upgrade people's homes, make them more energy efficient and make them warmer so they will be cheaper to heat, allowing us to move away from the over-reliance on fossil fuels. We have seen an increase in the application rate for these grants of 186% as a result of decisions made by the Minister for housing, Deputy O'Brien, and Government colleagues.

Grants for windows, doors and heat pumps are all up hugely on last year. Since 2019, over 250,000 home energy upgrades have been delivered thanks to Government funding of over €1.7 billion.

This is not a question of anybody having to wait for anything. This is a Government acting beyond the government of any other European member state to try to make real progress. The Deputy may like to put forward a narrative but people out there know that we have taken

measures to reduce the price of diesel and petrol, help key sectors of the Irish economy and suppress inflation, and they know that we stand ready to take more in the months.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: With respect, the Tánaiste not understand the scale of the crisis in people's homes. Does he really believe that what he has just said here makes a blind bit of difference to any one of the 317,000 families-----

The Tánaiste: Wow.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: "Wow"? Listen to this. Does that make a blind bit of difference to the 317,000 families that cannot pay their electricity bills now? The Tánaiste is talking about extending the fuel allowance. That ends today. He is talking about stuff that has already happened. They still cannot pay their electricity bills. That is the problem. Does the Tánaiste know what he is telling them? He is telling them to wait until next year's budget. The bills keep on rolling in, the prices keep going up, the pressure is mounting, the billions of euro keep on rolling into the coffers and the Government will not give Irish citizens the support they need at this point in time. We need an emergency budget. The Government needs to restore the energy credits that it withdrew from those families in last year's budget. It made a massive mistake and has plunged families into crisis - 317,000 families. Just picture that. How many children and adults-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: These families cannot pay their electricity bills. They need support now. What the Tánaiste has said does not cut it for them because he does not understand the scale of the crisis. That is his problem.

The Tánaiste: It is quite extraordinary that after 16 years as the Opposition spokesperson on finance, the Deputy still believes that a cost-of-living package of €750 million does not help. Of course it helps. It helps reduce the cost of diesel and petrol; it extended the fuel allowance; it is making people's homes warmer; it is helping the farmers, fishers and hauliers; and it is helping to suppress inflation. The Deputy wants to ignore all of that because he has this narrative of telling the Irish people that the Government is refusing to act. The Irish people are not stupid. They know we are acting.

A Deputy: The Tánaiste is treating them as stupid.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty is trying to convince them of a false narrative, but the Irish people know something else, too. He Deputy does not want "an" emergency budget. He wants one a week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I do-----

The Tánaiste: He came in here about two weeks ago and asked me to bring forward a package of measures that would have cost €1 billion. Last week, Sinn Féin held its Ard-Fheis

and said, "God, we had better come up with another plan - €3.2 billion". Sinn Féin's policies are not sustainable. We will have no options left in the winter if the Deputy continually comes in here every week and says "another billion, another billion, another €3 billion" without even bothering to target the measures. Under Sinn Féin's plan, the Deputy would get an energy credit. He does not need an energy credit. Sinn Féin has not even done the level of detailed policy work-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government has had four years to target energy credits.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Every week with the Deputy, it is another emergency budget. He wants to spend a surplus that would not even exist if he was in power. We are acting. The Deputy is making it up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let us walk down the street together and talk to ordinary people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste needs to get out of his bubble. It is no wonder he is going down in the polls. Seriously.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty is making it up as he goes along-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to Deputy Gannon.

The Tánaiste: -----and it is more about the tensions in Sinn Féin than here in Parliament.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gannon, with respect.

Deputy Gary Gannon: When the shouting stops.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When they cool down.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Tánaiste leads a party that identifies itself as the party of law and order. Fine Gael's website says, "Fine Gael is the party of law and order" and "We are the party that will ensure your family, your community, and our country is secure from crime". After 15 years of Fine Gael in government, for 14 of which his party held the justice portfolio, could he stand in Ballymun today and tell those he meets there that his party has ensured that their community and the families who live there are secure from crime?

At 3 p.m. on Tuesday, a child of 11 picked up a loaded gun that had been discarded during a Garda pursuit and fired a shot into the air. It is by the grace of God that this child or another child in the vicinity was not killed. That is a truly terrifying incident and should be a watershed moment because this problem is much deeper than what happened in Ballymun and has been

shaped by long-term policy choices on housing, public services and community investment. Since 2021, there have been over 2,500 recorded incidents of drug-related intimidation across this State. Arson attacks linked to drug debt have quadrupled in four years. Debts are sold between gangs so that families who pay once are forced to pay again. Of those 2,500 incidents, just 4% have resulted in prosecution. This is not law and order, but the absence of it.

This is no longer just an urban problem. A Garda sergeant and a crime prevention officer in Galway told a community meeting that decent hard-working families across rural Ireland were being targeted to pay off the drug debts of their children and that drug intimidation had become more lucrative for dealers than selling the drugs themselves.

Teenagers are being used to distribute drugs the length and breadth of this country. The four national Greentown reports since 2015 captured this. The Montague report on Ballymun and the Connolly report on Dublin South-Central found that criminal networks in Ireland deliberately and systematically recruited children below the age of criminal responsibility not just because they could not be prosecuted, but because the conditions of their birth made them vulnerable to exploitation; that once the child complies even once, the obligations deepen and a refusal is met with violence and intimidation; and that children embedded in these networks are from the most deprived communities in the country. Up to 1,000 children at any given time across the State are under the coercive control of criminal adults. Clare O'Connor, one of the researchers behind the most recent Irish Penal Reform Trust, IPRT, report, put it to me simply. She said that, above all else, poverty was the one consistent factor in the grooming of children into crime. Poverty creates conditions, deprivation removes the options and the sole focus on criminalisation compounds the cycle.

The Tánaiste cannot continue to claim that his party is one of law and order and avert his gaze from the factors that have led to children in this State being exploited and groomed into the most exploitative forms of criminality. Given what we have heard about the level of child criminalisation and exploitation and the level of crime in rural Ireland, can the Tánaiste still tell us that Fine Gael is a party of law and order? What is the actual plan to break the cycle of crime and deprivation, not only in marginalised communities, but across Ireland?

The Tánaiste: I join with Deputy Gannon in acknowledging the huge sense of trauma, fear, disgust and shock being felt in the community of Ballymun and by people right across this country, but nowhere more acutely than in Ballymun. As the Deputy rightly said, on 28 April, a man armed with a handgun was seen near Ballymun Garda station where a second man was being detained. Both are suspected of being involved in an ongoing feud. Gardaí approached the man with the firearm. He ran away, was pursued and threw the gun into bushes as he made his escape. That gun was then subsequently picked up and fired by a child of around 11 years of age. Thank God, nobody was injured in the shooting, but as the Deputy says, it was for the grace of God that nobody was injured. A short time later, two men arrived on an electric bike and took the gun away but the weapon has still not been recovered in spite of intensive searches by gardaí, including armed units.

I am conscious that two males were subsequently arrested - a man in his 20s and a teenager - in connection with the incident and both have been detained under section 30 of the Offences Against the State Act. That is law and order. When a crime or an alleged crime is carried out, people should be detained, arrested and questioned. I believe the man in his 20s is still being

questioned in connection with the incident while the teenager has been released without charge, pending a file being issued to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

I know that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been briefed by the Garda on the circumstances concerning the incident in Ballymun. I am obviously aware that there have been arrests and I do not want to comment too much on that part, but I join with the Deputy and everyone else in this House in asking anybody with any information in connection with the investigation to come forward either to the local Garda station in Ballymun or to the Garda confidential line where any information they have will be treated with the utmost confidence.

I want to say to the community in Ballymun that at the end of February, 268 gardaí were assigned to Ballymun district. Of those, 160 were assigned to Ballymun Garda station. Since 2024, 34 probational gardaí have been assigned to Ballymun. To tackle some of the deep-rooted issues that have existed over many years in the community, the Ballymun Implementation Board was established in 2024 by my colleague, the former Minister for justice, Deputy McEntee. The board is led by an independent chair, hosted by Dublin City Council and brings together relevant social services, providers and the Garda to work together with community leaders and local business leaders. We have provided funding of €200,000 through the Department of justice to help with the running of the board. It would be useful for us to have further engagement with it as a Government in terms of concrete steps that we can take.

We changed the law with regard to children being coerced into crime. For anybody to solicit or coerce a child is a particularly disgusting and heinous crime.

While the Deputy makes the point this is often the most deprived communities in Ireland, drug use is often not in those most deprived areas. It is happening in so-called middle-class areas - middle Ireland - where people are snorting a line of coke at the weekend, not thinking of the devastating consequences it is having on communities, and that action should be called out too.

Deputy Gary Gannon: What happened in Ballymun on Tuesday was absolutely shocking but I chose in my opening remarks to widen it beyond simply Ballymun because I recognise the pattern. There will be an incident that captures public attention in a particular area, and then we will talk solely about that one community as if this is happening in isolation. I am not sure if anyone in Fine Gael reads the *Irish Farmers' Journal* anymore-----

The Tánaiste: We do.

Deputy Gary Gannon: -----but in March, for example, farmers were forced to sell cattle to pay drug debts amid rising rural crime.

What is happening in this State with drugs, drug-related intimidation and the exploitation and coercion of children into that crime is an absolute failure of this Republic. It will not simply be addressed by Fine Gael stating it is a party of law and order on its website. It must look into the underlying causes of the crime, the cycle that brings children into criminality and into the prison systems and to have that repeated *ad nauseam*. Also, why is this happening in communities that never felt it? There is something deeper happening and I do not believe for

a second that the Tánaiste's Government is aware of it or has the means by which we can actually police it. We do not have enough gardaí in this State to police the level of crime and criminality that is happening, and we certainly do not have the understanding to appreciate what causes that crime.

The Tánaiste: First, I fully appreciate the Deputy is making a point that is broader than Ballymun. I just wanted to acknowledge the trauma in Ballymun and point out there is a structure there that Government should harness to try to support the community at this time of particular acute challenge.

We have taken a number of initiatives to try to tackle deprivation in the country. I can think of one as recently as last month, with the rollout of DEIS plus, targeting schools in our communities that are not just the most disadvantaged but the most disadvantaged within those most disadvantaged. The Deputy is right on the broader point of something going on in society. It is not just in a certain small number of communities. Drug use is now widespread. I hope we can join across the political divide in making that point but there needs to be an understanding in society, in everyone's home, in every community, pub and social setting in Ireland that the taking of illegal drugs in your community is not a victimless crime. Somewhere along that chain, before you snorted that line of coke or took that pill, there was potentially a child being brought into a life of crime. We cannot avoid or sugar-coat that anymore by just thinking this is an issue confined to certain communities.

Nearly all communities are now complicit in this harm and we need to have a much less tolerant approach to the casual taking of drugs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: As the Tánaiste knows, 7,000 students marched in UCD at the beginning of March in support and solidarity with a student who had been drugged, raped, had image-based sexual abuse used against her and, unfortunately, became pregnant and lost her place on her course. I know the Tánaiste is well aware of the issues. It was very positive, in an era of an epidemic of gender-based violence and where the manosphere is being promoted, to see all genders and students there. They wanted justice for this student and they wanted her reinstated onto the course. They also wanted an end to the multiple sharing of image-based sexual abuse. Unfortunately, those things have not happened. The student has not successfully been reinstated and there have been further images of image-based sexual abuse. The Government's role in this is that it has a duty to make colleges safe and to have good procedures and practices by authorities.

I want to raise the academic issues first, and getting this student back to her dream of becoming a doctor and allowing her to salvage something from this horrific trauma. It has been a month since the dean of medicine responded to the medical student after the talks that took place. She was assured they would reply after Easter but that has not happened. This is going against the thousands who marched and is also a rebuke to that student who put her faith in the process. As she said to me, it was difficult and upsetting to be let down and then have to re-engage. We have an unprecedented situation here and an unprecedented response is called for. I know there are issues with academic qualifications and I am absolutely not saying this is

straightforward but I ask the Minister to intervene with the college even more directly, and I know he met the student. It is absolutely vital we do not have a rapist continuing on and the rape victim being the one who suffers.

I also want to mention the culture in UCD. A number of people were emailed this image again, not on the UCD server but to people connected with the protest and the president herself. President Feely was sent this image since this was raised publicly. This person is clearly saying "F you" to everybody else - the brazenness of it. However, this comes from the top because the UCD legal team characterised a rape disclosure as dropping a bombshell. Those were the words it were used. This 21-year-old was crying on the stand. When she reported text messages she received last year, she was told she might be better to continue her studies in a different college year. These ideas are coming from the top. A medical student wrote to me about the dean of medicine coming into the college, putting up a big QR code in the lecture hall and going through what happened in the court. This student said to me it bordered on victim-blaming and it was shocking to see somebody talking about a rape victim like that. We have real problems still in our colleges.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising this issue and this case again, and I say that sincerely. I know the intense and constructive ways in which she has been engaging to try to support this student. I say that before I say the next piece, which is I am genuinely not 100% sure how to answer this question, for the reason that I am conscious, based on what she has told me now and what she has said previously in this House, that there are parts of this that may require due process. There are very clear laws in this country, quite rightly, regarding rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual violence. An Garda Síochána are the people who enforce those laws and no part of Irish society, no matter what kind of governing structure anybody has or academic autonomy or anything else, is independent of or separate from those laws. I need to be very conscious of that, and I am not being in any way critical of the Deputy, but when it comes to referring to a rapist or a rape victim, there are places outside of the Dáil where, quite rightly, importantly and appropriately, those issues should be determined and established.

I join the Deputy in commending all the students who stood up and spoke up for zero tolerance when it comes to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The Deputy made the point that it was not just women or female students at that protest but it was also men because men cannot recuse themselves from this huge epidemic in Ireland as regards sexual violence. I fully agree with her in a broad sense that every college, workplace and educational setting has an absolute duty to be a safe environment. I remember from my own time as Minister for higher education a significant body of work that was under way in the universities in that regard. Therefore, I am concerned and disappointed - and it is an understatement - to hear some of what the Deputy has told me here today.

I am conscious the Deputy has also said some of this is not straightforward in terms of the academic piece. I acknowledge that and I know the Minister, Deputy Lawless, had an engagement with the student, quite properly, on foot of the Deputy raising this issue here. I will speak to the Minister again and perhaps there is an opportunity to engage with the governing authority as well as the college. I will ask the Minister to come back to Deputy Coppinger directly.

The final thing I will say is that this House has quite rightly taken serious action in recent years on the sharing of intimate images, or indeed even the threat of sharing intimate images under Coco's Law. That law is very clear and robust on that and I expect the laws of this land to be applied without fear or favour. Clearly, if there are any breaches, complaints or allegations of a breach of that, An Garda Síochána should investigate it fully.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I wonder should the Minister ask for himself or one of his team, if you like, to be engaged in those discussions with the college and the student because it does not help when the dean of medicine walks into lecture halls, spends half an hour undermining a student and is then the person taking part in the discussion around the academic issues. This medical student told me that a significant number of students now perceive the supports available as performative and not something they would engage in because if you speak out, you are going to be ostracised. This is a male student by the way. He said that many of them felt their colleague's credibility and the reputation of the student were being undermined in front of their own eyes and that they would not talk about a rape patient in that way.

There are problems in the culture, and I am sure it is not just UCD but other colleges too. UCD has a DEI Athena Swan Award for its great ability to be inclusive but that is not reflected in reality. Just to say, a rape did take place, regardless of the person not reporting it.

You can see why. They tried to get on with their life. We know that from the image that was shared after, in any case.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude now.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am asking the Tánaiste to get the Minister to intervene as much as he can.

The Tánaiste: I am not in any way, shape or form undermining or implying any doubt in regard to what the victim has said to the Deputy and others. I am simply respecting the role I have versus the roles others have in society. There are obviously processes outside of here that have to establish fact. I do not say that to be in any way lacking in empathy; it is just to be factual. On the broader point the Deputy makes around the Minister and asking whether the Minister can provide any further assistance, guidance or linkages with the governing authorities, it is certainly a point I will discuss with the Minister, Deputy Lawless. I know the Minister already met with the student and was eager to do so.

A broader point I want to make - I made this point when I was Minister for higher education - is that there is an epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Irish society. Our colleges and universities are not immune from that and, therefore, there was a very strict programme of action that they were all meant to undertake. To hear the Deputy - and I accept she said it in good faith - use the word "performative" is something I know none of us would like to ever see, so I will ask the Minister to reflect on that broader point too.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Leas Cheann-Comhairle. I might beg your indulgence for a couple of seconds before my Leader's Question. I would briefly like to say "Thank you" to Brigid McGlynn, who is finishing in the Dáil today. I wish her the very best and thank her

for all her work and kindness to us all down through the years. She has been here since 1980, so we can only imagine what she has seen and heard in these corridors during that time. We want to say, "Thank you" to Brigid on behalf of everyone in the Dáil.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Hear, hear.

Members applauded.

Deputy Michael Collins: Energy poverty is not a theory. It is a reality in kitchens and sitting rooms across the country today. This morning on "Ireland AM", it was stated that households need an extra €480 a year just to exit fuel poverty. That figure is now backed up by new ESRI research published today, which tells us that 14% of Irish households, one in seven, cannot afford adequate warmth or to pay their energy bills in full. When broader measures are taken into account, up to 30% of households are experiencing some form of energy affordability crisis. I acknowledge the packages that have been given out but the pressure is not easing on families; it is getting worse.

As of February of this year, almost 317,000 households were in arrears on their electricity bill, with the average debt approaching €500 per household and over 190,000 families trapped in arrears for more than 90 days. This is no longer short-term difficulty; it is systematic energy poverty. At the same time, the ESRI tells us that €480 a year would be enough to lift a household out of fuel poverty. That is less than what many families already owe. Yet, instead of being helped out, they are being dragged further under.

We hear the phrase "choosing between eating and heating" so often in this House that we risk becoming immune to it. People are dreading the ESB bill landing on the mat like a stealth bomb, not knowing how they will cover it. That bill never arrives alone. It arrives the week parents are trying to pay increased school transport charges. It arrives when the car is due for the NCT and needs money spent before it will pass. It arrives the same week someone in the household gets sick, costing €60 for a GP visit and €100 for medication.

The Government repeatedly tells people the solution is to move away from fossil fuels but let us be honest about that and what it costs an ordinary family. To install a solar system capable of covering heating, hot water, everyday electricity and charging a car can cost up to €20,000. The grant is a measly €1,800. That is simply not enough to encourage anyone to change over. Then comes the electric car. Any vehicle capable of a real family mileage is around €50,000. Even with grants, that remains totally out of reach for households already struggling to pay their electricity bills.

The reality is that for a normal family to fully transition from fossil fuels, the up-front cost is close to €70,000, and that is before the cost of a home charging unit is even considered. That is not a transition; it is an impossible one. My question to the Tánaiste is, will the Government increase the solar panel grants? Will the grants for heat pumps and electric cars be increased, and what is the Government going to do, in real, targeted, affordable terms, to help citizens of this country to exit fuel poverty rather than simply endure it year after year?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins. I join with him in wishing Brigid McGlynn all the very best. I was not aware of that. I say it from a position of affection and respect that she has

been part of the furniture around here in all the time I have been here. She is quite an institution in and of her own and I wish her and her family all the very best, and indeed the best, as the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins tells me, with their Dublin Hills goat's cheese venture as well. I wish her all the very best and every health.

I thank Deputy Collins for acknowledging the package that has been put in place. We can always have a debate in this House around more, and we should, and what else can be done. The package we have put in place for farmers, fishers, farm contractors and hauliers, and the engagement we will have with contractors in the construction sector, is all an effort to recognise that, yes, a fuel and energy crisis impacts everybody in our country but there are some sectors of society and some industries that are heavily dependent on fuel and that it has a greater impact on. I welcome the generally broad welcome that there has been across those industries for these packages. Of course, it is important we keep them kind of simple and non-bureaucratic and that we get payments out as quickly as possible. I am pleased that the farm scheme will open, I think, next Tuesday as well.

I already referenced in an earlier engagement the report of the ESRI, a report we commissioned. We commissioned it as a Government because we always want to monitor what can be done in this area. It did find the fuel allowance to be effective and it talked about targeted measures. That is why I think the trajectory we are on, under the leadership of the Minister, Deputy Calleary, of expanding the fuel allowance, making sure more people than ever before are accessing it and the increases to it in recent years are all measures that make real differences to people. I have been in the homes of many people where they will tell you the difference that makes as well.

I welcome the fact that the Deputy has also referenced what more we can do. He would be the first to remind us that there are certain sectors of society that it is harder to transition away from diesel and fossil fuel. I get that, but there are also lots of people in the Deputy's constituency and mine who are trying to do the right thing by their own home and their own lives to save a few bob too. We have already made a number of changes to try to help people with electric vehicles, EVs, solar panels, windows, doors and heat pumps. In fact, the changes made by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, only in recent weeks are already seeing a big benefit. There has been about 186% of an increase in people looking for home upgrade grants.

I have made the point - and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, myself and everybody in Government shares this point - that we have to be constantly restless to do more in this space. One of the areas we are looking at in the time ahead, as well as having discussions about what we can do in the here and now to help people with the bills, is whether there is more we can help people do to break that cycle around being so reliant on fossil fuels and being in homes that can sometimes be cold, drafty or the likes. In the next couple of weeks, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will be updating Cabinet on the work of the national energy affordability task force. In addition to that, my Department of Finance is doing some work on energy economics and what the right levers are to pull to try to address energy poverty. I will be very happy to update the Deputy when we have those two pieces of work completed.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. If the system was working, 317,000 households would not be in electricity arrears, with average debts close to €500 and

190,000 families stuck in long-term arrears. That is deep-rooted energy hardship and when the ESRI tells us that just €480 a year would lift a household out of fuel poverty, it is indefensible that people are being allowed to sink further into debt instead of being helped over that line.

I see Government saying in the past week that it is forecasting a €9.2 billion surplus. Great news, and we have a rainy day fund. In 2023, it was estimated at €6 billion. This is a rainy day. It could not be wetter out there for the people of this country, besides the sun over my head right now. The point is that rainy day fund should be put back into people who are struggling badly. The surplus needs to be focused on families who are at home, scared of the electricity bill coming in the door and not being able to pay the bill. Those are the facts of the matter. People cannot heat their homes on announcements; they need targeted supports.

The Tánaiste: I would make a couple of points on the surplus. First, it is better to have one than not have one, and it has enabled us to bring in a €750 million package of supports, one of the largest in the European Union, and not have to borrow for it. If you look at our nearest neighbours in the UK, they brought in a smaller package for their citizens per head of population. They had to borrow and were charged around 5% on the market for that as well. We are using the fact that we have a fiscal buffer to the advantage of our citizens in being able to have a larger package in place but also not having to borrow and pay interest for that package as well.

To reassure people, I would also make the point that the €9.4 billion is not sitting in the Department of Finance getting dusty. This is a projection as to what we believe the surplus could be by the end of the year. It has not come in yet. This is the month of April; it is what we believe the surplus could be by 31 December. I think that sometimes gets missed in this debate. There is not €9.4 billion of a surplus sitting over there now.

The third point I would make, and I say this respectfully, is that in the past perhaps people talked of rainy day funds. We do not have any such fund in Ireland any more. We have two funds that are very clearly actively being used, one around infrastructure, climate adaptation, capital projects, metro potentially and for other things, and another called the Future Ireland Fund, for demographics, including a population that is going to get older in the Deputy's constituency and mine. We do have options in terms of being able to do more in the time ahead but the politics and the facts of the surplus are a little more complicated than is sometimes presented.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Paula Butterly: I want to raise the ongoing and deeply frustrating situation facing retired CIÉ pensioners in County Louth and across the country, many of whom have not received any pension increase since 2008. These are men and women who have worked for decades in public transport and who often kept the wheels turning in both good times and bad. Last May, after 17 years, CIÉ and the trade unions finally reached agreement on proposals that would allow for a long-overdue pension increase of up to 5%. Employees voted on these proposals in August and both pension schemes accepted the changes. On foot of these ballots, pensioners were told that the increase would be implemented before Christmas. Imagine their shock that instead of having something nice in their stockings, all there was was a lump of coal.

Payments did not come through. It was only after Christmas that they were made aware of the additional requirements that might be familiar to the Tánaiste and me, but mean nothing to the ordinary man and woman on the street. These requirements were a business case from CIÉ, sign-off across three Government Departments, approval from NewERA and input from the Attorney General before the Minister could even put the draft statutory instrument in place. The expectation of a payment before Christmas did not arise.

A delay like this may seem bureaucratic but it undermines the credibility of those who make the promise and, as time flies, time for pensioners is truly precious. The increase involved is modest. For most people, it amounts to between €500 and €1,000 a year. However, there are pensioners struggling with rising costs for energy, food and healthcare for whom this is urgently needed. It is also important to state clearly that this increase applies to those who retired up to the end of 2022, people who have already given their working lives to public service.

My ask is quite simple. I ask the Tánaiste to call on the Ministers to expedite all remaining approvals, progress the statutory instrument as a matter of urgency, and ensure that retired CIÉ pensioners finally receive the increase they have been promised and have waited too long for.

The Tánaiste: I thank my colleague, Deputy Butterly, for raising this matter. I accept her challenge and request in terms of seeking progress and expediency in relation to this. I am also conscious of CIÉ pensioners who are probably watching this and thinking there has been nothing expeditious about it. I am conscious of that as I say it. I did speak with ministerial colleagues on this during the week and I know there is a shared sense of urgency to get this done for once and for all in the interest of these pensioners. I thank the Deputy raising it today.

Factually, issues in relation to CIÉ pensions are primarily a matter for the trustees of the pension schemes, which is the CIÉ group and their employees. The CIÉ group operates two defined benefit pension schemes, namely, the regular wages scheme, RWS, and the 1951 superannuation scheme. As I know Deputy Butterly knows, between 2008 and 2022 both schemes did not meet the statutory minimum funding standard which is required by the Pensions Authority. At the end of 2023, those schemes did meet that standard. The most recent CIÉ pensions proposal in 2025 was negotiated across a number of months between the group and the trade union group. I thank them for the work they did on this with the aim to ensure the stability of the scheme while crucially ensuring there was no reduction in benefits, and providing overdue increases, which is the nub of this issue, for CIÉ pensioners. A ballot on the proposal ran, I think, from 11 July to 15 August last year. The ballot passed both schemes on 19 August. Since then, and I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien on this, the Department of Transport has been working with its own financial and commercial advisers, including NewERA, to engage with all relevant stakeholders, whether that is the Pensions Authority or the Department of public expenditure, on the next steps to progress that agreement and bring CIÉ pensions onto a more stable footing for the benefit of active and retired scheme members. We do not want to see this ever happen again. As part of that, they are also reviewing all the relevant statutory instruments and of course the matter of increases to pension payments.

I am pleased to tell the Deputy that there has been very positive engagement between the Department of Transport and the Department of public expenditure and reform on the policy issues. Everybody is working now to really get the proposal reviewed and the relevant

ministerial consents in place at the earliest possible time. I am struck by the point the Deputy made around proper communications in relation to this, though, being honest and blunt with people and not giving them a sense it is going to be on a particular date and then it ends up being at a further time. I will engage with Ministers and more broadly with the system in relation to that. I know it is something the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, would also feel strongly about. The main thing I want to say to the Deputy today is that there is very sincere, very intense engagement to try to get this matter resolved for once and for all, as expeditiously as possible, but also to make sure it is done in such a manner that it is stable going forward and we do not find ourselves in this situation again.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I am encouraged by the Tánaiste's words and by the fact that the Ministers are taking this very seriously. Time passes very quickly and the older you get, it passes even quicker. For a lot of these pensioners, what they are looking for is very modest but it will make a great difference in their daily lives. Time, for them, is really of the essence. I take the Tánaiste's point about communication. Fundamentally, that is the point here. They were promised that they would see it at Christmas but that probably was unrealistic. We have to be better at that. We always talk about the fact that we want to reward people who work hard. We should never forget and we must reward the people who have worked hard. They are essential. They are the reason the Tánaiste, I, the Opposition and everybody else are here today. They should be taken care of. Essentially, when we make a promise, we must keep the promise.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right; time does not stand still. There are real people waiting for this increase, and waiting longer than they ever expected they would have to and longer than we would have wished. I acknowledge that. I also acknowledge that they are people who worked bloody hard in public service for the good of our country, through a great and proud tradition of working in CIÉ. Many of us know people in our community who served in CIÉ in our public transport or railway network over many years. We all want to get this resolved. To them today, I want them to know that there is real ongoing, active work on this between all of the relevant Departments, most crucially the Department of Transport and the Department of public expenditure and reform. I know everybody wants to bring this to a conclusion as expeditiously as possible. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to write to Deputy Butterly and keep her updated on the matter.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I too want to be associated with the words about Brigid McGlynn and thank her for her many years of service to this House and to all who served here.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are presiding over a serious immediate crisis in cancer care. Of the 23 radiotherapy machines in our health system, 80% require immediate replacement. There is no structure for planned replacement in place. These are life-saving machines that are breaking down frequently. They need constant maintenance and new parts. The health committee heard this week oncology experts outlining the impacts of the breakdowns on cancer patients. They talked about missed treatments, delayed treatments, longer treatments, delays that reduce the chance of survival for people. Imagine what that means to somebody when

they hear that, when they are fighting for their life. Imagine what that means to the family of that cancer patient. How in God's name has the Government allowed this situation to develop? How has it allowed vital radiotherapy machines to get so old that they break down so often? Cancer experts have called for an urgent replacement programme. Is the Government listening and will it act? Why has it been allowed to get to this crisis point?

The Tánaiste: We are listening, we are acting. It is an important and serious issue. We have made a lot of progress in relation to improvement to our cancer services over a sustained period. Under the current national cancer strategy, we have already allocated €105 million to support our cancer services and an additional €120 million in direct investment in radiation oncology centres in Cork and Galway to address the radiotherapy equipment needs. Funding has been allocated in this year's capital plan to progress a linear accelerator replacement programme under way at St. Luke's radiation oncology network in Dublin as well and I expect progress on that very shortly.

My understanding is that the Department of Health and the HSE are developing a strategic infrastructure programme to plan for replacement and expansion at public radiation oncology services.

Deputy George Lawlor: Last year, the N25 around the area of Glenmore in County Kilkenny was the recipient of a much welcome static speed camera. However, because of inadequate and poorly placed signage, this camera is penalising even the safest of drivers. Literally thousands of drivers have been caught by this static speed camera because there is no adequate signage. People driving at 100 km/h have to drop to 80 km/h when they see the sign but given that they come into the camera's zone within 50 or 60 yards, they have no chance to adjust their speed properly. I spoke to a woman recently who received three penalty notices, in other words nine points, in the space of a week as a result of the poor and inadequate signage to which I refer. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will probably agree, this has energised the people of south Kilkenny and Wexford. One hundred tickets a week are going to Wexford people who use this road, which is the main Waterford to Wexford road. Can the relevant authorities be asked to improve upon this? People are suffering and being penalised rather unfairly.

The Tánaiste: I rarely disagree with the Deputy, and I do not mean to be argumentative, but that woman in Wexford received penalty points because she was speeding not because there was a lack of signage. Speed kills. I encourage people to put up correct signage, but we are living through a road safety crisis. Static cameras are an effort to try to assist people. Nobody likes to get penalty points. If you obey the rules of the road, you will not get penalty points.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Some 14% of Irish people are unable afford to heat their homes or pay their energy bills and 317,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills. This is only going to get worse. The Social Democrats have called for a targeted energy credit scheme for households earning less than €70,000. That is a short-term measure. Obviously, we need longer term and more sustainable measures to deal with the energy crisis. The Tánaiste has spoken about heat pumps and electric cars, but these are out of the reach of many people. The biggest bang for the State's buck would be the use of solar. One million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar. Using solar would reduce people's electricity costs by 40%. The Social

Democrats has a Solar for All plan. We call for a doubling of the grants for all households, a €1,000 grant for batteries, free panels for those eligible for the warmer homes scheme and the rolling out of plug-in solar across the country. I ask the Tánaiste to consider that as part of the upcoming package.

The Tánaiste: Before answering, I would like to welcome the young people in the Gallery from the Youth Advocate Programme, Foróige and Springboard Family Support Project, all of whom appeared in front of the Joint Committee on Children and Equality. Deputy Keogh, the Chair of the committee, asked me to say that. They were before the committee in respect of the topic of online safety, which, I assure them, is something we always discuss here across the political divide. Listening to young people's voices is an important of that. Go raibh míle maith agaibh for your contribution.

In the context of this crisis, we cannot afford say we are the Government and this is our idea, you are the Opposition and they are your ideas and because they say it, it is a bad idea and because we say it, it is a good idea. Some of the ideas the Deputy's party has put forward around solar panels merit serious consideration. It has been a constructive contribution to the debate; I say that sincerely. We believe we are doing a lot more to try to help people make the transition. The figures show some progress, and there has been a 186% increase in people accessing grants. However, solar is an area we can go further on. If the proposals of the Social Democrats are constructive in relation to that, they will get proper consideration by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Government as a whole. I know that, and I know that the Minister has engaged constructively in respect of this matter.

On energy credits, I have to keep making the point - because I really believe it - that an energy crisis in the winter is very different to an energy crisis in the summer. We are not ruling out further interventions that may be required. At this stage, however, we are not quite sure where the energy situation or the war will be. We continue to keep the matter under review.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The programme for Government contains a commitment for the creation of more jobs in the regions outside Dublin. However, IDA Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment seem to have a blind spot when it comes to County Laois. Despite Portlaoise and Laois being located on the crossroads of Ireland at the N7, N8, N77, N80, the performance of IDA Ireland and the Department in Laois is dismal. There are just 156 IDA Ireland-backed jobs in the county. More than 12,000 workers commute out of the county every morning. Some have to drive long distances and can find themselves sitting in traffic for two hours. The Leprino cheese factory, which has only been there for three years, is due to close very shortly, with the loss of 132 jobs. I raise this because we do not seem to have got anywhere with it over the years. People have been raising it for three decades. The figures say that 156 jobs have been created but that 132 are going. What is being done by IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland to get replacement industries for the Leprino plant?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: What is being done to develop the 60-plus acres owned by IDA Ireland outside Portlaoise-----

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

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----and get industry onto those sites? Will the Tánaiste take this matter up with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and his Department and ask them to urge IDA Ireland to act quickly in respect of this matter?

The Tánaiste: The short answer is that I will speak to my colleague the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, in relation to this. Thankfully, we live in a country that has had full employment for 16 consecutive quarters, but we are not in any way complacent in saying that. We are seeing a churn, for want of a better phrase, in the jobs market. There is no room for complacency. That is why IDA Ireland, which had its most successful year ever last year, and Enterprise Ireland are receiving a lot of Government support.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Not in Laois.

The Tánaiste: On the Deputy's point about the need to have a plan for replacement jobs in Laois and the use of IDA Ireland land is a fair on, as is that which he makes around people's quality of life and traffic congestion. We believe passionately in balanced regional development. On foot of the Deputy raising this matter today, I will ask the Minister to speak to IDA Ireland and to come back to him directly.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Tánaiste will not be surprised that I am again raising the issue of rare diseases. In the coming weeks, RTÉ will be broadcasting a "Prime Time Investigates" programme on this topic that will highlight the difficulties patients with such diseases have in accessing drugs here. The Tánaiste was Minister for Health in 2017, so I know he is aware of this matter. Back then, he described the system as broken. The system has not changed one bit in the intervening nine years. There was a bit of transparency in the form of an online tracker, but, fundamentally, the process is the same. I have got to know a lot of people, as has Deputy Aird, over the past few months like Emily Felix, who suffers from Friedreich's ataxia, and Craig Coady, the parent of two boys who also have that terrible and debilitating disease, one of whom passed away, unfortunately. The end for the second child is inevitable because we continue to bury our heads in the sand. We in this House are participants in this because we continue to oversee an overly bureaucratic process that blocks patients from accessing treatment. In some cases, people are travelling to America for treatment that is funded by means of GoFundMe. When are we going to cop on to ourselves and initiate an early access scheme similar to those that obtain right across the EU? It is consistently said that we are laggards. We know this, but we continue to bury our heads in the sand. I ask for early access for these people now.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue again and for acknowledging Deputy's Aird's interest and work in this area as well. I am very sorry to hear of those extraordinarily painful, difficult and sad situations regarding children. I will seek an urgent update from the Minister on the specific drug and the condition to which it relates and on the Deputy's broader point regarding early access.

I am taken by the point the Deputy made in respect of the process, particularly as, quite frankly we are now in a vastly different situation, from a funding point of view, in relation to new drugs than we were when I was Minister for Health. The drugs budget now is €4 billion a year-----

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Half a per cent goes to rare diseases.

The Tánaiste: I take that point too. I think €1 in every €8 in the health budget is now spent on drugs. The Deputy's particular point about rare diseases and the need for Ireland to significantly up its game in terms of an early access programme is serious and sincere. I will ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to come back to him directly. Considering that this matter comes up too often in the House, perhaps we could facilitate time for a proper detailed debate on it in order to hear everyone's ideas.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I wish to raise two issues regarding the housing assistance payment, HAP, in the context of constituents in Dublin Bay North. The first is HAP discrimination. Is the Tánaiste aware of cases of landlords refusing to take tenants who are on HAP? While this practice is illegal, it is still happening routinely across Dublin Bay North. The other issue is the thresholds that apply. Constituents are being refused HAP support on the basis of their average net income over 12 months. If you lose your job or face a financial crisis, your income falls off a cliff but you are still assessed on the average of the previous 12 months. It is unfair and does not reflect the reality of the situation for those people.

I o'clock

What can we do to better help people who experience sudden and devastating changes to their lives to access those HAP supports? What can we do to deal with those landlords who are refusing access?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue with the housing assistance payment. As he rightly says, the law is clear about people not being able to refuse a tenant on the basis of HAP. He is also right to highlight the fact that there are sometimes people trying to skirt the law in this regard. I will bring those comments to the attention of the Minister for housing. The second issue he raised about rent limits is important and I am pleased to tell him the Department has now undertaken a review of all the existing HAP rent limits to ensure there is sufficient support under the HAP scheme to assist eligible households to access accommodation in the private rental sector. It is intended that the review process will conclude before the end of quarter 2, so this summer. We will have an opportunity to consider what to do about reviewing rent limits at that point.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Dublin City Council's financial contribution scheme allows homeowners over 60 to sell their home to the local authority in return for making a financial contribution to the council, which then provides senior citizen accommodation to the homeowners. Dublin City Council has been told by the Minister that there is no funding available for this scheme. There are a number of people on a waiting list who wish to avail of this scheme, which can also deliver badly needed housing to the community. Are there any plans to resume funding of this much-needed scheme?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue about the financial contribution scheme and Dublin City Council's view that it requires funding for it. Truthfully, I am not sure of the next steps but on foot of the Deputy raising it, I will speak with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and ask him to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Tánaiste referenced the voice of children, and I want to speak on behalf of two children in Ballymun, aged 11 and 6, who this week came across a discarded loaded firearm, discarded by gangland criminals. Like any children who come across a gun, they fired that gun. It is scary to think how close we came to a tragic accident. Ballymun is a fantastic community but for several months it has experienced significant gangland events. A number of firearms have been discharged since December and last year a man was murdered by a speeding car. It is an extraordinary community, and fantastic work is being done on the ground. I acknowledge the work being done by John Costello with the implementation board. However, we need to ensure this incident is discussed at Cabinet level. These people are undermining the State and are using guns to do that. We need an emergency response to them. Lots of communities want more gardaí. My community needs more gardaí. When gardaí are allocated later this month, we want to see more in the Dublin north region.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising an issue that I know has been harrowing for his community and constituency this week. On a human level, there is the trauma and loss of childhood innocence for an 11 year old and the other child the Deputy rightly referenced. For that child to come across and fire a gun, it is but for the grace of God that nobody was seriously injured. That is not to take away from the trauma and the real shock and fear it has caused in the community. I will ensure this is discussed across Government, and I know it will be. Our colleague, the Minister for justice, is keeping in close contact with An Garda Síochána. I know there is an active investigation. I take the broader point about Garda numbers and resources. I can point to some positivity in the Deputy's area in the past while but I will speak to the Minister and ask that he liaise with the Commissioner. We must then support the Ballymun implementation group to do its work. We have invested a lot in setting up that structure and bringing partners together around the table. Perhaps now might be a timely opportunity for the Government to take stock with that group about what it believes should be the next steps. I am happy to discuss that.

Deputy Joe Neville: I welcome the students and teachers from Confey College. I was on the board for ten years.

Today I raise a fundamental local issue in Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth where we had another water outage this week. We have had a number of water outages affecting over 10,000 houses and 25,000 people. Indeed, the students in the Gallery, along with those in other schools, were not able to go to school on Monday because of the outages. This year we had outages on 24 February, 3 April and 27 April combined with six or seven last year and the previous year. I have raised it as a councillor and as a TD and I take the opportunity to raise it again today. Unfortunately, this impacts the most vulnerable in our society, including the oldest and the youngest people and our businesses. I was in contact with one business that only opened six months ago and has had to close for five days. We have given significant money to

Uisce Éireann. We need to build houses but we also need to look after those people who have houses and ensure they have the vital infrastructure.

The Tánaiste: I join with Deputy Neville in welcoming the students from Confey College. Before I get to the seriousness of the water burst, if you got a day off school for that and a day in the Dáil, it is not a bad week, and there is a bank holiday on Monday. They are welcome and it is great to have them in Leinster House.

The point my colleague and friend, Deputy Neville, makes is a serious one. I know it is one he has been campaigning on and highlighting for quite a while. We have rightly resourced Uisce Éireann to a significant degree. It is now important that it engages with communities to come up with solutions. I know it is committed to solving and replacing the necessary section of the mains water network that the Deputy has highlighted and there is now a funded capital project in place to address that issue. I am told the project is at design stage and that it is a somewhat of a complex design process owing to the challenges in reinforcing an existing pipe or routing a replacement given the congested nature of the route. It obviously needs to do this while trying to maintain capacity to meet present and future demand. A number of solutions are being investigated but in the interim, immediate steps have been taken to respond to bursts in the area and to try to manage supply interruptions. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will ask that Uisce Éireann come back to him directly.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I raise an important issue in my constituency. I have been contacted by principals in two of the main schools in my area, namely, St. Aidan's primary school and St. Senan's primary school in Enniscorthy. St. Aidan's school has 861 pupils and St. Senan's has 435 pupils, operating seven special classes and four special classes, respectively. Both schools have expressed utter dissatisfaction at the unprofessional conduct of the NCSE. Both St. Aidan's and St. Senan's primary schools sought a review and asked for the rationale of the decision prior to their appeal as advised and advocated by the NCSE. They have both contacted the NCSE on numerous occasions for clarification of the rationale behind its initial decisions. Without this information, neither school can support a comprehensive and accurate detailed account to back their appeals. I ask the Tánaiste to contact the CEO and the head of inclusion support services of the NCSE to supply St. Aidan's and St. Senan's primary schools with the requested rationale behind its allocation of SNAs to both schools.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of St. Aidan's and St. Senan's. I thank them for all they do to meet the needs of the young people of the community and people with additional needs in Enniscorthy. I also acknowledge that for them to be able to do that in the way they want, and the way people expect them to do it, we need to work with them to support them. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will ask that the Minister, Deputy Naughton, speak to the NCSE and that it or the Minister make direct contact with him to follow up.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Last Friday Poland announced that it will file a complaint against the EU-Mercosur trade deal at the Court of Justice of the European Union. As I understand it, this is the first member state to take this step. This follows the European Parliament's earlier referral, which I welcomed as a rare victory for common sense and prudence. Irish beef farmers have been warning for years that this agreement threatens their livelihoods, our food standards

and our national interest. Yet, Government opposition has too often looked like political damage limitation rather than principled action. Today I call on the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and the Minister for foreign affairs to follow Poland's lead immediately and lodge Ireland's own challenge today at the ECJ and use every legal and diplomatic lever available to protect our primary producers before provisional application begins on 1 May. Our farmers cannot afford another EU deal that puts free trade above food security and food standards.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I make the broad point that this country, including Irish farmers, benefits hugely from free trade. Most of what we produce in this country in the agrifood sector is sold abroad. We are a better and more prosperous nation, and farmers are better and more prosperous, as a result of free trade. However, we had specific concerns about Mercosur because level playing fields, common application of standards and environmental issues matter too. That is why we did not vote in favour of the Mercosur deal and agreement. I know the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade was in Poland this week meeting her counterpart. I will seek an update from her as to whether they discussed the issue of Mercosur and whether there are any plans for us to take further action.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I raise with the Tánaiste Loreto College in Swords, a State school that was not included in the roll-out of 105 new projects to progress to tender or construction earlier this year.

This omission is not without its immediate consequences. Existing students and staff will continue to work and learn in overcrowded conditions. Most pertinently, up to 16 girls will be unable to take part in transition year during the upcoming academic year. Transition year is crucial in the context of people's educational and personal development. I know that from personal experience many years ago. Every opportunity must be taken to support this school, these families and these girls. Will the Department make direct contact with the school with a view to resolving this crisis and finding a solution? The school feels let down by the Department and the parents feel let down by the school. Ultimately these girls will be let down if they are not allowed take part in transition year and are obliged to go straight to senior cycle.

The Tánaiste: On foot of the Deputy raising this matter in relation to Loreto College Swords, I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and ask that she engage with the Deputy directly to see if a solution can be found. On education capital more broadly, I would say that the list is not the final word from Government. There will be further allocations made in the time ahead in relation to building more school projects. That is really important. The Deputy's point is that in the here and now, 16 young women cannot access transition year. Let us see if a solution can be found. I presume that if people work together it can be found, but I will ask the Department to engage and the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There is a crisis of community safety in Ballymun in my constituency. This week, an 11-year-old boy found a gun with live ammunition in a public space and discharged it. It is a miracle that a child was not killed or injured. This must be a watershed moment for Ballymun. What happened is utterly unacceptable. I have been consistently raising ongoing community safety issues and the need for increased visibility of gardaí in Ballymun directly with the Minister for justice in the Dáil. He committed that he would act and would

fund the Ballymun Implementation Board. However, the reality is that people in the community are scared to let their children out to play. They are being intimidated. This was not an isolated incident.

Five years ago, the Montague report set out a clear plan to tackle the issues of antisocial behaviour and crime via an increase in the number of gardaí and by means of early intervention. However, the recommendation in this regard has still not been implemented. Will the Government give the Ballymun Implementation Board sufficient funding? There is a threat of the board being wound down. That is what has been expressed. It needs sufficient funding to expand and do its work. Will the Government commit to new initiatives on Garda visibility being rolled out in the coming weeks and months in order to ensure nothing else happens and increased funding for early intervention, local community services and the implementation of the Montague report?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Hearne for raising this issue in relation to Ballymun and the absolute horror his community experienced this week when that young child found and discharged a gun. As the Deputy quite rightly said, it is a miracle nobody was seriously harmed or even worse. I take his point that this is not an isolated incident and that there are broader issues in respect of community safety in Ballymun. Similar to my response to Deputy McAuliffe, I assure the Deputy that I will speak with the Minister for justice on this. The Ballymun Implementation Board, from what I can see, is doing very good work, so there is a need for us to further support it. I am very open to facilitating conversations in that regard. It is not for me to tell anyone their business, but perhaps, in the first instance, the Deputies in the constituency could come together and meet the Ballymun Implementation Board and then meet the relevant Ministers to discuss how we can take this forward.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I want to raise the ongoing works by Uisce Éireann or its agents at James Larkin Road. These works are causing severe disruption to residents of Raheny, Kilbarrack, Bayside, Howth and Sutton. Tailbacks on the road are a mile long and, most frustratingly, residents are seeing little or no activity on the site of the works. They regularly report to me that there is plant and equipment lying idle on the site and that these vehicles are parked along vast tracts of the James Larkin Road. Along with some of my Oireachtas colleagues, I put various suggestions to Uisce Éireann, including a tidal flow on the road, but nothing seems to have been accepted or worked on by the company. It is not acceptable that residents in the areas to which I refer are being completely held to ransom by contractors that do not seem to be working with any sense of urgency or of the inconvenience they are causing to the very people who are funding their activities. We all accept that the works are necessary, but Uisce Éireann needs to react.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brabazon for raising this significant issue of annoyance, concern and inconvenience for his constituents on the James Larkin Road and in the surrounding areas. As he says, all of us and our communities expect some degree of disruption when works have to be carried out. However, we also expect that these works will be completed in a timely manner and that there will be an awareness and an understanding on the part of those charged with carrying them out on behalf of the taxpayer that they would be done expeditiously. On foot of the Deputy raising the matter, I will speak to the relevant Minister

and ask that he make contact directly with Uisce Éireann and encourages it to come back to the Deputy directly to see if this can be speeded up.

Deputy John Clendennen: In the first instance, I want to acknowledge the commitment of the Government to the local improvement scheme, LIS, which has made a real difference to the lives of rural dwellers since its reintroduction in 2017. This is a really important scheme for households, farmers and community amenities in the context of the maintenance and enhancement of access. The funding provided is not meeting the level of demand, however. Following a recent meeting with the area engineer in the Birr municipal district, Brian Keenaghan, I learned that there is a 12-year waiting list. These are applicants who will never benefit from public lighting or roads, but they need this. They are rural people who are willing to make a contribution and who are willing to pay in relation to this scheme. I ask that the Government to consider the provision of supplementary funding for areas where there are long waiting lists. A 12-year waiting list is simply unacceptable.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Clendennen is absolutely right. I love the local improvement scheme. It works really well. It makes a real difference to rural communities. As he said, people in rural communities who are always looking to get on and help themselves but sometimes are looking for just a little support as well. It is also clear that people like the LIS, and that is why there has been such a demand. We have seen that across the Deputy's county in places like Birr in the context of the carrying out of works on non-public roads that are not normally maintained by local authorities at all. Since 2020, Offaly County Council has been allocated more than €4.5 million in LIS funding.

I have discussed this issue with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, who has responsibility for this. He has confirmed that during the course of the year, spending trends across the Department will be monitored and that it will look to reallocate any savings which may arise to schemes such as the local improvement scheme. I am hoping that there may progress on that throughout the course of the year whereby if we see that there is an underspend in one area, we can reallocate the money to an area like County Offaly where there is acute demand. I will keep in touch with the Deputy on this.

Deputy Ann Graves: The Government has to deal with the crisis relating to school places in Fingal East. What is happening is very serious. I have a 13-year-old boy who is non-verbal and who has ASD. He is meant to be starting first year. His mother is a single parent and she will be forced to give up her job if she cannot get a place for him in September. In Loreto College Swords, 16 have been left without places for transition year. Their parents are at their wits' end. This is causing serious upset and anxiety for the girls in question. In Portmarnock, there is a serious shortage of school places, particularly in St. Marnock's primary school. Hundreds of houses have been built, which is welcome, but the number of school places does not match the demand that exists. There is an urgent need for expansion of capacity in the school. The Minister sent a standard reply to parents which stated that the demand for primary school places has reduced in recent years and is projected to continue to reduce, but this is not true. The Department indicated that it reviewed demand based on child benefit statements in 2025, but that is clearly not the case because the evidence needed would be there in black and

white. We need to do something serious, particularly in light of the growth happening in the area.

The Tánaiste: I am conscious that Fingal East has one of the youngest populations in the country and is one of the fastest growing areas in the country. We are seeing more houses being built and more people moving in, and they require school places. Sometimes the Department of education can be right on the macro and wrong on the micro. It needs to take a look again at specific parts of the country, including the Deputy's, where there is acute need. We made a significant additional allocation of €668 million to the Department of education about a week or two ago. That was a recognition there is going to be a need for capacity in the school system from this September, most particularly in relation to special educational needs and the provision of additional classes. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to the Deputy on the specific areas of her constituency to which she referred.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Over the weekend, the Tánaiste stated that the Government is exploring one-off payments towards environmentally-friendly measures such as heat pumps and efficient cars. I welcome that the Government is looking at how it can support householders more. My worry is by floating for potential of new grants without a timeline, there is some risk people will defer big decisions on new EVs or heat pumps until there is clarity. One comment on my social media was as follows: "Yep, we were about to pull the trigger on a heat pump; now not sure if we should wait or not". I also asked the Taoiseach about this matter during Questions on Policy and Legislation yesterday but I was not much clearer about it afterwards. There is confusion out there. Will the Tánaiste give as much clarity as he can right now? Is a scheme for more financial support for heat pumps and EVs on the way imminently?

Will the Tánaiste give us as close to a "Yes" or "No" answer on that because there are people waiting on that clarity in terms of big investment decisions they make in their own households?

The Tánaiste: The answer is that I am hoping we can do more on measures in the budget to help people adapt, and I am hoping we can do more in each budget that comes thereafter. The budget is 6 October. I know the Deputy does not need to be told this, but the point I was trying to make is that we should not reduce the conversation in here to just about a cash support right now if there are actually other things we can do that would have greater benefit for people's households. We have made a lot of changes already this year. We are seeing the numbers significantly up and we are seeing huge demand even this week in people accessing and seeking to access these schemes. I am just making the point that not just in Ireland, but also in Europe, we are going to need to continue to explore what more we can do to get away from fossil fuels beyond the conversation about how we subsidise the paying for fossil fuels.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we conclude our business, I want to join with the Members who expressed their good wishes to Brigid McGlynn and to wish her well in her retirement. Anyone who knows Brigid knows her as an extremely hard-working member of staff of this House. I am sure that the vast amount of knowledge and experience that she has over all of her years of service will be missed when she goes into retirement. She is a very

pleasant person, hard working and dedicated. I wish her the very best on her last day here and for the future in her retirement with her family.

The Tánaiste: Hear, hear.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.21 p.m. and resumed at 2.01 p.m.

Supports for Hauliers and Supply Chains: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I will be sharing my time with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the road transporters' support scheme, RTSS. I will provide more detail on the scheme and who the scheme will support. The road haulage sector is of national strategic importance in bringing essential supplies into and around the State, supporting key infrastructure and enabling the maintenance of all economic and social activity in our country. Employment in the logistics and supply chain sector is expanding with over 246,000 people working across diverse logistics and supply chain roles, including nearly 60,000 in the transport sector, according to the 2022 census data. The commercial bus and coach sector is a pillar of Ireland's public transport and tourism sector ensuring urban and rural connectivity and underpinning public and school transport networks. Both sectors have been significantly impacted by a multitude of crises in recent years, from the Covid-19 pandemic to the temporary closure of Holyhead Port. These critical transport sectors have demonstrated remarkable resilience and a willingness to collaborate with policymakers to overcome challenges.

Recent cost pressures borne out of the conflict in Iran represent a threat not just to the transport sector but indeed to our whole economy. Higher prices for hauliers lead to secondary price rises across all sectors they supply and feed into higher prices across our economy. The European Commission has stated that it is essential to contain freight transport costs to limit wider inflationary pressures. This Government has acted quickly and decisively to support our hauliers and public transport providers. On 24 March, the Government allocated €250 million in targeted supports to assist those experiencing real and immediate financial pressure including reductions in excise rates for fuels and increased repayment rates for eligible recipients of the diesel rebate scheme. On 12 April the Government agreed a new additional package of measures to further reduce excise rates on fuel and it announced additional supports for the transport sector and the farming and fisheries industries at an estimated cost of €505 million. In total, this is a package of over €755 million. This is proportionately the largest package of supports provided by any EU member state.

I am pleased to inform the House that the details of the scheme to support the haulage and coach sector have been agreed by Government. I can now provide a detail of its design and implementation. The road transporters' support scheme, RTSS, will be modelled on the licensed hauliers support schemes of 2022 and 2023. They were deployed at the time to assist

the sector given the higher fuel prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I can confirm that the RTSS will go further than the previous schemes and will be open to both licensed road haulage operators and own-account sector operators, as well as licensed road passenger operators subject to certain criteria. Supports will also be provided to operators of the TFI Local Link services under contract with the National Transport Authority, and school transport services through the Department of Education and Youth.

Passenger service operators that do not fall under the scope of the supports provided by the NTA or Department of Education and Youth may be eligible for support under this scheme. Applications for support will be considered on a case-by-case basis, which is necessary given the complexity of most passenger service providers' business models where the same operator may provide services under Local Link services, school transport services, and indeed on a commercial basis. The scheme is directed primarily at the road transport sector given its importance to the wider supply chain and to businesses and communities throughout the country. The scheme reflects the immediate need for financial support and the ongoing commitment of the Government to work with the sector to maintain Ireland's essential trade and strategic supply chains.

I commend the representatives of the haulage sector, the coach and the bus operators on the really constructive way in which they engaged with the Government right the way through the course of this year, and they continue to do so, representing their members exceptionally well.

The RTSS will provide direct payments to haulage and coach operators. Payments will be graduated with smaller businesses receiving a proportionately greater level of support. An initial payment backdated from March 2026 will be made to each qualifying haulage or coach operator. The scheme will remain in place for three months and payments will be made for April and May if the national average price of diesel exceeds €1.90 per litre in any given month. The RTSS will also offer support for operators of ferry services to and from our island communities that do not hold a government contract that includes a fuel price variation clause. My Department is liaising with the Department of the Gaeltacht and rural affairs on how to administer this support.

The combined cost of these supports for the transport sector is estimated at €40 million per month. The Minister of State at the Department of Transport and I will administer the scheme. Officials have already begun to develop an electronic application and processing system to facilitate payments under the scheme. We estimate it will take a number of weeks to complete the development of the system itself. Again, we have engaged with the sector on that and it is content with that. This will allow an efficient payment system through an online portal application, which will be a simple application with certain criteria set out around tax compliance and various things like that which are important. Engagement with the European Commission on state-aid rules is ongoing in parallel with the system development. The Department is working towards opening the scheme for applications in the next couple of weeks with payments made as quickly as possible thereafter.

I am sure Deputies will agree there has been some concern that supports will only be provided to licensed hauliers or to hauliers who are members of recognised representative bodies. I assure the House and the sector that the scheme has been designed to support the overall road transport sector to the very widest possible extent. Having said that, a key design consideration of this scheme is the need to avoid over compensation for operators with mixed

business models who could otherwise seek support under the fuel support scheme being established by colleagues in the Department of agriculture. A number of key eligibility criteria will apply and it is important to note that eligibility does not mean an entitlement to funding. I would expect that this scheme can support up to about 48,000 operators, which is up from 25,000 in the previous scheme. Each application will be assessed by officials within the Department of Transport against a common set of requirements. Payments will be made to applicants once they can satisfy the necessary criteria. Full details on eligibility criteria and the application process will be made available as soon as possible. We expect that to be within the next week but I will highlight some of the minimum requirements today. As payments will be backdated to 1 March all applicants must meet the following conditions as of that date. They must be a holder of a road haulage operator licence issued by the Department of Transport, or where the applicant is not normally required to hold a road haulage operator licence be an operator whose normal commercial activity relates to the carriage of goods by roads, or be the holder of a passenger operator licence issued by the Department of Transport.

In all cases, only vehicles registered on the Department's National Vehicle and Driver File database with motor tax paid and a valid commercial vehicle road worthiness test, CVRT, certificate will be eligible for support under the scheme. All applicants will be required to be registered for tax in this State, have a valid tax clearance certificate and be able to demonstrate that their business is an ongoing concern. Declarations and proof will be sought from all applicants and will be verified by the Department.

For licensed road hauliers, supports will be provided for all vehicles of over 3,500 kg listed on their licences as of 1 March. Licensed passenger operators will be eligible only for vehicles listed on their passenger operator licences. Some passenger operators provide services under Local Link or school transport services as well as on a commercial basis. Officials are working with the NTA and the Department of education to ensure that these providers are fairly supported, either through contractual arrangements or under this scheme. The RTSS will follow the same structure as the previous licensed haulage support scheme.

I will go through the amounts. Adjustments have been made to reflect inflation. A total of €1,350 is being given per vehicle for the first five vehicles. An additional €790 per vehicle will be given for the sixth to 20th vehicles, while an extra €300 will be allocated per vehicle for operators with 21-plus vehicles. Based on the Department of Transport's data, the average licensed haulier has 17 vehicles on their operator's licence. That business would receive a payment of €16,230. In that instance, the operator will receive €1,350 for each of their first five vehicles and €790 for each of their next 12 vehicles.

I will shortly hand over to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who will provide more detail on some of measures. Before I do that, however, I wish to reassure the House that the support package has been carefully considered following ongoing engagement that the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, officials and I have had with representatives of the haulage and passenger services. One must take this scheme in the context of the other measures it is coupled with, such as the significant excise duty reductions, the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy pause and the increase in the diesel rebate scheme, which is administered by the Revenue Commissioners and runs until the end of July.

By any fair assessment, and to be fair to the sector, this had been broadly welcomed. This is a robust and significant support package for a sector that needs and deserves our support because it is critical to our economy and supply chain.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, for sharing his time with me and for the information he has provided to the House today. I reiterate my support for the sector and thank the representative bodies for their ongoing commitment to address the challenges we are facing in a spirit of constructive dialogue and collaboration. The Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, the Coach Tourism and Transport Council, CTTC, and Freight Transport Association Ireland, FTAI, have been working diligently with us and our officials over a long number of weeks to ensure that this support package is brought in and targeted.

As the Minister said in his opening remarks, the haulage sector is of national strategic importance and the road transport sector faces a challenging operating environment. Higher prices for hauliers add costs for each and every person in our country. In the four weeks from 2 March to 30 March, diesel prices at the pump rose by approximately 25%. According to industry data, operating margins in the supply chain sector were about 6% in 2025, with fuel costs accounting for approximately 47% of the operational costs for a typical 46-tonne articulated vehicle. When looked at in this light, even a marginal, sudden increase in fuel costs can represent a significant challenge to the liquidity of operators in the haulage and supply chain sectors. This may be even more pronounced for smaller operators, with nearly half of licensed road haulage operators only having one vehicle.

Small and medium operators constitute the lifeblood of the road haulage industry. As a result, rising fuel costs mean increased costs for everyone in the supply chain. It is vital, therefore, to minimise the impact of these costs on end consumers. The support scheme will support hauliers and transport operators to absorb some of these additional costs and continue to play their vital role in our economy. By helping our road transport sector, the scheme will also help protect consumers who otherwise would face increased costs across a range of everyday goods and services were the transport sector forced to pass on fuel cost increases to their customers.

I know that Deputies want to ensure that nobody is inadvertently left out of the scheme. That is a priority for me and my Cabinet colleagues as well. I will outline those eligible for the support scheme. The scheme will be open to both licensed road haulage operators and the own-account sector, subject to eligibility criteria, where the vehicle is used for the carriage of goods by road. Someone will be able to submit an application for heavy goods vehicles weighing over 3.5 tonnes in their fleet, provided the vehicles were in their fleet on 1 March 2026. All operators looking for support will need to be registered in the State, compliant and operating as a going concern for the duration of the scheme. There is no limit to the number of vehicles for which they can apply for support, but verification checks will be conducted to ensure that applications are only made in respect of vehicles that are actively used by operators in the course of their commercial activities. Verification will also be undertaken to ensure that the commercial activity is related to the carriage of goods by road and that the vehicle is roadworthy and compliant with all motor tax requirements for the duration of the scheme.

As the scheme is primarily directed at the road transport sector, it will not be open to farmers or the construction sector in respect of machinery used as part of their operations that are fuelled by marked diesel oil or green diesel. They may be eligible for support under the RTSS for other vehicles in their fleets if the vehicles are used for the carriage of goods by road and meet all the eligibility requirements. However, I welcome the €100 million allocated for the fuel subsidy support scheme, FSSS, that is being implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers in managing the increased cost of marked gas oil. As a rural TD, I know how higher prices have impacted on these sectors. This scheme will support those people to maintain their essential work across the country. Further information on the eligibility criteria will be made available by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and it is expected that applications for support will be possible in mid-May, with payments to follow thereafter.

Although the RTSS is aimed primarily at road transporters, it is important that we also support transport to and from our offshore islands. While the Department of Transport does not look after these services, it is important that the House is aware that the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht supports island communities by providing subsidised ferry, cargo and air services between the islands and the mainland to ensure the continued viability of these communities.

In 2025, there were 25 contracts for subsidised passenger and cargo ferry services. These contracts include a fuel price variation clause, which will be activated in order to support these providers. There are also several non-subsidised ferry services to the offshore islands, many of whom operate on a seasonal basis. It is envisaged that non-subsidised ferry services to the offshore islands may be eligible for support through a similar mechanism. While the application of the fuel price variation clause in respect of the subsidised services is a matter for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, my Department will work with it to the greatest extent possible to ensure that all service providers are supported.

I will provide the House with some more detail on how we will support the passenger transport operators and school bus providers who are a critical part of our public transport system, providing essential connectivity across both urban and rural areas. These services are not operated on a commercial basis, so time-bound supports are necessary to protect service capacity and maintain continuity across the sector. TFI Local Link services are provided under the public transport public service obligation, PSO, a service managed by the NTA. Contracts under the PSO include a fuel variation mechanism to allow for additional payments to providers in circumstances such as those currently being experienced. The fuel subsidy uplift varies by month in line with the actual change in costs incurred by operators. In many cases, fuel costs for publicly contracted services will be covered, in whole or in part, through State subvention or contract pricing mechanisms.

There are three separate school transport services transporting 181,000 children and young people to school on over 8,700 buses and taxis, covering more than 11,000 routes daily. These services are typically delivered under fixed-price contracts, leaving operators exposed to rising fuel costs with little ability to adjust pricing.

To address this, a temporary fuel variation mechanism will be introduced, aligned with the approach used for other contracted services. Support will be delivered through existing arrangements with Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Youth and will target

operators which are not already compensated for fuel cost increases. Officials from our Department will assist their counterparts in the operation of the scheme where necessary.

Passenger service operators that do not fall under the scope of the supports provided by the NTA or Department of Education and Youth may be eligible for support under the RTSS. Applications for support will be considered on a case-by-case basis. This will be necessary given the complexity of most passenger service provider business models where the same operator may provide services under Local Link services, school transport services or on a commercial basis.

I want to be as open as possible that there may be some overlap between the bus and core supports and the road transport and the fuel subsidy support schemes. Any overlaps are expected to be minimal and are reasonable in the context of our transport business operates. For example, a business that provides agricultural contracting services and has haulage operations may benefit in respect of different vehicles for the road transport support scheme and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine fuel subsidy support scheme. A licensed passenger operator providing bus services to and from piers for island ferries may benefit from the road transport scheme and Department of Rural and Community Development supports.

Licensed passenger operators who provide commercial bus services as well as school transport services may be eligible for support from both schemes in respect of different parts of their business. It should be noted that the Local Link services are provided through identified separate vehicles. These vehicles will be excluded from the road transport support scheme. Therefore, operators of Local Link will not receive support under the road transport scheme in respect of the licensed vehicles used for Local Link schemes.

As the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, indicated, the scheme will run for three months, from March to May. An initial payment backdated to March 2026 will be made to each qualifying haulage or coach operator. Payments will only be made in respect of April and May should the national average price of diesel exceed €1.90 per litre in either month. For the avoidance of doubt, the same payment structure and rates will apply in these months regardless of how much or how little the average diesel price exceeds €1.90 per litre. The €1.90 per litre level is a critical measure for the commercial transport sector, in the experience of the representative bodies, after which many businesses may become unviable. The development of an electronic application and processing system to facilitate payments is under way and applications are expected to commence soon.

In the meantime, my Department continues to engage with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's state aid experts on the notification of details of the scheme to the EU Commission. The European Commission is working on a state aid temporary crisis framework to support the EU economy in the context of the Middle East crisis. Ireland has provided feedback on the proposals and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, discussed the impact of the Middle East crisis on transport in Ireland and the necessary priority measures with other EU Transport Ministers on 21 April. As such, I will provide further information on which state aid framework the road transport support scheme will operate within once officials in our Department and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment have had the opportunity to review the Commission's forthcoming temporary crisis framework.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that the Government is acutely aware of the challenges faced by the road transport sector in recent months. The transport support scheme is a wholly necessary support for an industry that is a crucial employer and underpins the broader economy. Together with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and officials in my Department, I will continue to engage constructively with representative bodies not only on recent cost pressures but on other challenges, including driver shortages and decarbonisation. I am grateful for the opportunity to share details of the scheme today. I look forward to confirming the opening date for applications in the coming weeks and I welcome the contributions of Deputies on this important topic.

I would again like to reiterate that the engagement we have had with representative groups started the week that the crisis in Iran began, and has been ongoing since and will continue. It is important that that dialogue creates a basis by which we can face the challenges going forward because the challenges will change as we go along. The other issue is that the complexity of transport, coach and education delivery involves complications in each area. We have developed a scheme that is simple and easy to operate. All of our officials will work together to ensure that the application process can happen as quickly as possible and funding can get out to keep cash flow going for those who need it most.

Deputy Pa Daly: The haulage industry is essential to Ireland's economy. It is not just about moving goods; it is about keeping local economies alive. Every shop shelf, building site and farm relies on a local driver and business to keep moving. The sector was already under considerable strain before this crisis. When the US and Israel began their war on Iran, which spread across the region, the pressure became unbearable.

Despite this, the Government sat on its hands four weeks, prevaricating until people were forced onto the streets to make their voices heard. Only then did the Government take action. Still, it only came up with half measures and continued to overlook large swathes of our economy and society. Its measures fell far short. What about the 750,000 households who are reliant on home heating oil? Their prices have skyrocketed by over 70% and the Government had and still has no answers for them. What about the hundreds of thousands of households in energy arrears who are racking up record debt? What about the surging number of households that are having their electricity cut off? Where is the Government's answer to them? They have been abandoned and left out in the cold by this do nothing and out of touch Government.

The truth is that we are living through a moment of unprecedented crisis, with record levels of households in arrears and skyrocketing numbers of people at risk of energy poverty. Yet, with each passing day things are deteriorating. Across the country, ordinary people are doing everything right. They are working hard, budgeting carefully and cutting back whenever they can but it is not good enough. This is no longer about tightening belts because, for many people, there is nothing left to cut. The reality is simple. People are struggling to heat their homes, face electricity bills they cannot afford and are paying more every week for fuel, groceries and the basics of daily life - none of these costs can be avoided.

While all of that is happening, they are being told to wait for the next budget, even though the last did not have anything for working families. They are being told to wait for the markets to settle and to wait for help that never seems to arrive. That is not leadership; it is political failure. When people are forced to choose between heating their homes and putting food on

the table, the response cannot be half measures and recycled analyses. An emergency requires an emergency response. What we have seen so far simply does not meet the scale of the crisis.

There is a growing disconnect between decision makers and ordinary people. We hear of strong public finances, healthy balance sheets and a surplus but in kitchens and sitting rooms across the country, there is no surplus. Their economy is wrecked. There is only stress, worry and fear about how bills will be paid. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are completely out of touch. This pressure is not only crushing households; it is putting an enormous strain on people and sectors to keep our communities alive. Hauliers are the perfect example. They are the backbone of our local and national economy. Hauliers are essential to every pharmacy that dispenses medicine. A truck is necessary to keep goods moving. These are often small family run businesses, providing stable and secure jobs, especially in rural and regional areas. They support local garages, mechanics, fuel and service providers and when haulage works, communities work.

Fuel is not just another cost for hauliers. It is their livelihood. Rising diesel prices cannot be absorbed forever. When haulage firms are pushed to the brink, the consequences are severe. Jobs are lost, costs rise and ordinary consumers end up paying more. The same is true for farmers. They are under relentless pressure with fuel, electricity, fertiliser and feed costs, all of which have increased sharply. Yet, farmers have little control over the prices they receive and are being squeezed from every side. They are not just producers of food; they are the backbone of rural Ireland, sustaining local economies and, by and large, they spend their money locally. They keep communities alive. When farmers struggle, rural communities suffer and so does our food security.

It is about protecting jobs, safeguarding supply chains and keeping local economies functioning. Supporting farmers and hauliers is not just about special treatment. Acknowledgement alone will not pay the bills.

What is needed now is decisive action. That is why Sinn Féin is calling for an immediate emergency budget. The Exchequer is billions of euro in surplus but in the real world people are counting every cent to be able to afford the basics. People cannot wait until next year. We need a budget now and we have set out what clearly needs to be done. We need energy credits for households, a €500 payment for people with disabilities, a suite of measures to protect the most vulnerable and a permanent cut to the USC that puts €500 back in people's pockets. This must happen now. Ordinary people cannot wait again until the end of the year.

It brings us back to the central issue, that of political choices. A cost-of-living crisis on this scale is not inevitable but how it is managed reflects priorities. It is a choice of whether to protect those who are already comfortable or to stand with workers, families and communities under pressure. Energy affordability is a clear example. High prices are not simply the result of global forces; they are shaped by how systems are designed, regulated and taxed. If energy remains treated primarily as a commodity for profit rather than a necessity, ordinary people will pay the price. Climate action is another area where fairness matters. Measures that increase living costs without realistic alternatives do not change behaviour; they deepen hardship. That transition must be a just one that brings people with it rather than leaving them behind. The crisis is about dignity, about whether people can live decent lives, heat their homes, put food on the table and plan for the future without constant anxiety.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Hauliers, farmers and agricultural contractors are among those who only a few years ago would have been called essential workers. Coach operators, too, are essential for day-to-day life, especially in rural Ireland where public transportation options are sorely lacking. They pick up some of the slack begotten to us by the dearth of inward investment from successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments. They operate on incredibly slim margins. In the face of drastically increasing fuel prices, they are looking to the Minister of State and his Government to alleviate that burden so that they can produce food, transport it and other goods, and help ordinary people go about their day-to-day lives, get to work, school or college, or just go about their ordinary business.

The Taoiseach and the Minister of State seem taken aback when Members of the Opposition continue to raise this with them. The Taoiseach thinks people are failing to realise that the crisis has arisen due to international events outside of his control. The frustration being felt by hauliers, farmers, farm contractors, coach operators and many more is not because they do not comprehend international circumstances; it is because they looked to the Government in response to a cost-of-living crisis on which it has utterly failed them. The price shocks that are felt by the sector have knock-on effects for all ordinary workers and families, even beyond the immediacy of the energy shocks it is feeling itself. The Minister of State is failing them too with his meagre, paltry, half-baked and half-arsed half-measures. What we need now is to see real political intervention that meets the scale of the challenge that we face and that requires an emergency budget immediately. People cannot wait until October. We need to see petrol and diesel made affordable. We need to see carbon tax wiped off home heating oil and green diesel, with not one single cent in increases in carbon tax. We need the energy credits, which the Government callously ripped from people, restored. We need targeted social welfare packages for carers, pensioners and people with disabilities. Struggling businesses and ordinary people and workers need this now and it is no less than what is deserved during a cost-of-living crisis. We need an emergency budget.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What we are looking at here is insufficient action by Government to deal with the pressure people are under at this point. It is little that they are getting, but they would be getting nothing if it had not been for those protestors who went out onto the streets. I spoke to many of them. Many of those who were out in the Minister of State's own part of the world probably voted for him. I have no doubt that they voted for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in an awful lot of cases. I could not get over the fact of how let down they felt by those they had supported probably over generations. That is the reality. Who are we talking about? We are talking about hauliers, farmers, farm contractors and bus and coach operators, many of whom did not always get any wins in rebate schemes that existed previously, so I would like to think that the schemes being operated will be delivered for them.

Being left out altogether, however, are the regular Joe and Josephine; the 750,000 people who use home heating oil. Nothing is being provided for them - not a penny. We hear the statistics at the minute. Some 19.2% has been the increase in electricity bills over March and April. We know 317,000 cannot pay and are in arrears on their electricity bills. I think 25% of those are in arrears on their gas bills. The ESRI reports - this is historic - that 14% of Irish households in 2024 were unable to afford adequate warmth or energy. Think of that. That is long before we get to the place we are in now. We all accept this is down to the lunacy of Donald Trump being led by genocidal Israel and Benjamin Netanyahu. We understand there

are limits to what the international community and the Government can do on that. However, people expect sense here. They expect supports. What are we talking about in terms of supports? We are talking about energy credits to reduce electricity bills. We are talking about cuts to fuel taxes. The Government could go further in relation to petrol and diesel than 15 cent. That is before we talk about the abject failure there has been on green diesel. I cannot get over the fact that kerosene has not been touched in any way, shape or form. We need an emergency budget. Pearse Doherty has said it. Mary Lou McDonald has said it. Many in the Opposition have said it and more will be saying it into the future. We need cuts to the USC. None of this is good enough. We also need the cost-of-disability payment because they are the people the Government has really let down.

Deputy Martin Kenny: First, we all recognise the integral part the haulage industry plays everywhere across the country. In every community around the country there are so many small haulage companies that are usually working on contracts that are very tight and for which there is tight competition. Many people in this House would understand that. When the companies get that contract they have to fulfil it. Very often, if there is any difference in what their costs are compared with what they were projected to be, they are in trouble. That is where a lot of them found themselves, which led to them going out protesting and pleading for help in recent weeks. I met many of the protestors. Farmers, hauliers and ordinary people who had no connection to any of those industries were also there saying they had to get something out of this. That is the biggest problem with the suite of measures announced by the Government. We would like to get the detail of it. While a lot of it was announced-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is on the way.

Deputy Martin Kenny: -----here today, we have not seen it on paper. It would be very useful to get that. Anything that happens that benefits people is welcome, but the problem is that it has been like pulling teeth to get even this far and we have an awful long journey to go to ensure ordinary people can get any sense they are being looked after in all of this. The one thing I found when talking to people out on the protest was that the change they wanted to see was the price coming down at the pump for everybody, not just for the sectors. They thought everybody needed to get it so that the ordinary people who had to travel to work and bring their children to appointments would all benefit as well. So far there has been little for them. That is one of the problems with this package.

The agriculture industry has also, of course, been acutely affected. The first announcement, which brought down 3 cent off the green diesel, was absolutely laughable. It is welcome that there is a change in that. However, again, it is not this year; it is going back looking at what fuel they used last year and taking five months off that. A whole complicated process has been put in place, which is regrettable. The way to do it is to put it at what people buy today and reduce it for them now. That is what people wanted to see happen. That has not happened. That is one of the most regrettable parts of this. We need to see a mini budget.

We need to see something put in place that will deliver for ordinary people. The USC is a clear area where something needs to be done. It was brought in as an emergency years ago but nothing has happened since then. It has been kept. We are well past that emergency now. The emergency is at the other side to try to remove it.

I wish to make a point regarding haulage. I have had several haulage companies contact me. It is very difficult to get drivers. An awful lot of them are having to bring drivers in from abroad, particularly from outside of the European Union. The immigration portal that has been set up is an absolute disaster. People are waiting months to get processed and they are waiting months even for renewals. Perhaps that is the something the Minister will raise with the Minister for justice because it is a real problem for people apart from the other crisis that we have regarding costs.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on the supports needed for hauliers and supply chains but also the wider reality facing working people across Ireland. We cannot underestimate how vital the haulage industry is in keeping our society running. Hauliers are the backbone of our economy. They keep food on the shelves, medicines in the pharmacies and goods moving in every town, village and community across the country. When crises hit, it is often the hauliers who are the first to feel it. When global effects of illegal wars and the instability associated with the Trump and Netanyahu started war began to be felt in Ireland in recent weeks, it was the hauliers who were at the cutting edge of the crisis along with the agricultural sector. They raised the alarm early about the spiralling fuel costs and the growing pressures facing families, businesses and workers alike.

I raised this in the Chamber before the protests as in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, I have been contacted by growers who are rapidly facing increasing financial costs. I ask the Minister and Minister of State to consider supports for our growers who use gas to heat their glasshouses. For example, the heating bill of Welgro Produce in Rush will go from €200,000 to €400,000 this year, based on gas prices, which puts their survival in jeopardy. A small number of growers use it and we do not have a large community of growers left. From a food security point of view, we cannot afford to lose them.

The Government's announcement of fuel supports for the sector was necessary and welcome. Without intervention, many operators, particularly small and medium-sized firms, will be pushed to the brink. The Irish haulage industry is overwhelmingly made up small and medium enterprises. Some are family run businesses, local employers and owner-drivers who are deeply embedded in their communities. They are also highly fuel intensive by nature, which means they have been among the sectors hardest hit by the rising energy costs. The Labour Party has called for and welcomed the supports to keep exposed sectors operating during this crisis, including support for hauliers who are absolutely essential to our economy and supply chains.

While immediate relief is essential, we also have to ask ourselves a bigger question. How do we stop Ireland from being exposed to these shocks in the future? What this crisis has shown us very clearly is that we cannot continue stumbling from one emergency package to another while leaving the underlying problems unresolved. Whether we are talking about hard-pressed households or exposed industries, the lesson is the same. Short-term supports matter but long-term change is more important. The crisis has illustrated just how important investment in clean renewable energy really is, not just as a climate measure but, more importantly, at this point as an energy security measure and a cost-of-living measure. If we continue to depend so heavily on imported fossil fuels, then workers, farmers, families and businesses will continue to pay the price every time global instability raises its head and drives

up the cost of energy. That is why we must strategically invest in the haulage sector and support a just transition for workers and businesses in the industry.

We need to support hauliers in shielding themselves from fossil fuel shocks by accelerating the decarbonisation of the haulage fleet. At the moment, Ireland remains heavily dependent on diesel-powered heavy good vehicles. That leaves our supply chains extremely vulnerable, and businesses exposed every time there is volatility in the international energy market. However, this does not have to be the case. Countries across Europe and around the world are moving rapidly to electrify their haulage fleets. They understand that doing so is not just good for the environment but it is good for economic resilience, supply chain security and long-term affordability. Here in Ireland, the Department of Transport's zero emissions heavy duty scheme, which is welcome, is supposed to be the key tool for supporting this transition. While it is welcome, it could be working more effectively. If we are serious about modernising our haulage sector and protecting it from future crises, then we need to see a far greater investment in this scheme and stronger incentives for businesses to make the switch.

At present, the pace of progress simply does not match the scale of the challenge. Yet we know that where governments take the issue seriously and provide the right supports, businesses respond positively. Hauliers understand the long-term advantages of electrification, such as lower operational costs, reduced exposure to fuel price shocks and greater sustainability. Many simply cannot shoulder the upfront costs alone. They need to be supported. That is why Government leadership matters. While we discuss supports for industries and businesses, we must never lose sight of the people behind the headlines. Ordinary workers are suffering too. Families across Ireland are under sustained pressure from rising energy bills, rising rents and mortgages, rising grocery costs and rising childcare costs. For many households, every week has become a struggle to just make it through. Increasingly people feel exhausted. Working families who do everything right still find themselves falling behind. Carers are stretched beyond breaking point. Disabled people are trying to survive on inadequate supports while dealing with rising daily living costs. Low- and middle-income workers are carrying enormous pressure while feeling the Government response is too little, too late. Many of these people are simply too exhausted to advocate for themselves. That is why we must advocate for them here.

While the supports announced for sectors like haulage are welcome, there are also genuine working people, working families, disabled people and carers who are just about getting by day-to-day and desperately need targeted supports during this crisis. The Government cannot continue to rely on piecemeal and reactive measures. What we need now is a transparent targeted package of supports that prioritises ordinary people as much as industry. We need measures that genuinely reduce the cost of living, strengthen energy security and protect vulnerable households from being left behind. The truth is that a resilient economy is not just one where supply chains survive, it is one where workers, families and communities survive also. If the crisis teaches us anything, it should be that protecting our economy and protecting our people goes hand-in-hand while moving towards energy and food security.

Deputy John McGuinness: I welcome the package of measures under the transporters' support scheme being debated. It is absolutely necessary for this scheme to be rolled out quickly. I note there will be back payments and that it is a short scheme. There will be recognition of any further turbulence in relation to oil markets and the impact that those markets

may have on our economy. My background is in haulage, both in the heavy haulage end of it and the parcel end of it. I have seen first hand what is happening to haulage companies. They have gone through the experience of the crash warehousing their debt and their revenue. They have worked away to stay in business to this day. I compliment them on the efforts that they made. Most of those big companies are based on family and commitment from their employees. They are the main employers in some local communities, or they are certainly part of a network of small businesses that create a huge number of jobs in rural Ireland.

The question is whether they deserve the support, and the answer is that they do. Every time there is a price increase and that price increase is passed on, it is the end user who pays for it. It is always the customer of one company or another that has to use transport to get goods and services to the market or the bigger companies that use parcel operators throughout the country to transport their goods or services. That is why I would like the Minister of State to respond, if necessary, to the bigger just-in-time services, particularly those companies that are in Dublin and have a huge number of vans in their fleet, to ensure the parcels they receive, whether business to business, business to household or simply online purchases, are supported. It is hugely important that all those sectors that rely heavily on the cost of fuel be examined and that the State be agile in its response to any issues that might arise for those businesses. I say this because the profit margin in haulage companies is not exactly big. Their profit is heavily reliant on the stability of the cost of inputs and so on. It turns out we cannot rely on that stability any more because of the wars.

It is good to see bus and coach operators there. If we can stabilise their costs, it means those using their services will not face extra costs. It is a sensible approach in the scheme and it is addressing directly the issues that will impact on our economy and on the people who rely on these services.

Expressway formally notified the National Transport Authority that it will not be operating route 4 as and from the end of this month. That will have a huge impact on the travelling public going to hospital appointments, schools, colleges or wherever they might be going for social occasions. To think that service would end without a seamless transition to another service and another bus operator, the mind boggles. It should not be allowed to happen. I have no doubt that part of the problem for the route was the cost of putting the vehicle on the road, the cost of energy and the cost of fuel. It will now be introduced for Carlow to Waterford in terms of a public service obligation but what concerns local communities affected along the route from Waterford to Dublin Airport is the fact they might not have a service or that they may only have a part service because of the public service obligation. I want to put the Minister of State on notice that that is not good enough and we will need a response in time, ensuring the costs affecting that route in terms of Expressway's provision are addressed.

The public discontent about how people were treated during the recent protests cannot be ignored by this House. There was too much inconsiderate language used to describe those who were on the protest. The people I met on the protest in Kilkenny and Carlow were ordinary farmers, businesspeople and families who wanted to express the fact that they were suffering badly in terms of the cost of living, the cost of energy, the cost of home heating oil and so on. In Kilkenny, I saw where Philip Ireland, who organised the event, worked closely with the Garda. They provided stewards and there was no hassle. As I said in the House during another debate, it was the first time I saw kids having the space to play hopscotch on a roundabout.

There was a good feeling within that protest, yet there was a sad side to it as well. There were families who were forced to go out in that protest to get their message across to the political system. It is disappointing that those early protestors who asked politely for a meeting were not heard. I am not talking about what happened at the end of the protest. I am not talking about those who were considered to be far right or however they were described. The ones I am speaking about were ordinary people trying to get their message across. It was wrong of Government not to reach out on day one or day two to those sensible people who were making that case.

As we discuss haulage, agriculture and supports for farmers, contractors, the construction sector and others, we cannot ignore the fact that home heating oil is at a level that is hard to explain to the householder. The Government needs to provide answers to that. It also needs to provide some form of intervention as we approach summer and then go into winter to those who are marginalised, elderly or sick, so they will get the necessary supports to fill their tanks without being embarrassed about going for financial supports in different places to buy a drum of home heating oil. I delivered a drum of home heating oil to an elderly constituent. It was a sad day when that happened, to find someone who was elderly and cold in their house but could not fill their tank. If the Government is to respond to the sensible people on the protest, the ones who are really put to the pin of their collar, it needs to address that issue and address it significantly.

I have always stood up for the SME sector and the farming community in this House because they are the backbone of the economy and create jobs. They are spoken so highly of, yet we often turn our backs on them. That is not right. We need to find a way for their difficulties to be communicated directly to Government when action is required. The European Union has let us down in this area. It has not led the debate when it should have.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Every supermarket shelf, pharmacy stock-room and construction supply chain relies on trucks moving safely and affordably across the country. When haulage costs rise, we all pay the price. Hauliers face extreme cost pressures with volatile fuel costs and rising insurance premiums. They are also struggling with the increasing general cost of living alongside the rest of the country.

The Government response has been to offer direct cash payments to haulage and passenger transport operators, with payments ranging from €1,350 per vehicle for small fleets to €300 per vehicle for larger operators, backdated to March and currently time-limited until May at an estimated cost of €120 million. While any support is welcome, the scheme is not enough. It will only provide temporary relief when they actually need certainty and a plan for future-proofing. Probably most important, we have seen from the past month or so that there needs to be strengthening of the dialogue pathways for people.

This sector had to bring the country to a standstill to have its concerns taken seriously. Protest is a powerful tool and an important part of any democracy, but it should not have taken this level of disruption for the Government to listen to people and offer them support.

3 o'clock

I hope the Government takes that lesson and works on it, because the protests demonstrated that a huge swathe of our society feels ignored, let down and left behind. What also came

across very strongly to me during the protests was that even people who did not understand the pressures on hauliers or contractors supported the protests because they are also experiencing cost pressures in their own lives. They could empathise because they find themselves in similar circumstances.

Although we have these discussions about the hauliers and although the support package is welcome, we cannot proceed in isolation from the fact that many people across our communities are struggling and suffering. We are aware that approximately 317,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills, many for more than 19 months. These are not people who have mismanaged their finances; they are people who never recovered from the price shocks triggered by global energy crises. Wholesale prices are 72% lower than they were at their peak, in August 2022, but that is not reflected in retail prices.

There are serious questions, which I have raised many times, regarding the regulation of the market and the risk of price gouging. Although the Government has asked the regulator to examine this matter, the CRU has yet to produce a report on it and appears to be taking a very slow approach to transparency in the electricity sector. While this happens, people will continue to struggle to make ends meet.

At the same time, we are told there will be no emergency budget, no price controls and no price reductions. Instead, we hear about future-focused measures such as home-heating upgrades and low-cost financing for retrofitting. There is a place for these measures. They may be useful in the long term, but they will not do anything for those families who are struggling today and are choosing between heating and eating.

The EU has explicitly relaxed State aid rules, allowing targeted price interventions, income supports, tax incentives and even windfall taxes on excess energy profits, yet the Government's approach is timid. There is no serious push for windfall taxation, no targeted price intervention and absolutely no urgency. The reality is that it took nationwide disruption before action was taken. Even now, the response is reactive rather than planned. This is crisis management; it is not policy.

A report published today by the ESRI indicates that 14% of households in 2024 stated that they were unable to afford adequate heating or pay their energy bills in full, and that approximately 30% of households experienced some form of energy affordability challenge. The report states €480 in additional income is needed annually by those affected in order to exit fuel poverty. The Social Democrats have been calling for a targeted payment of €400 in the form of an energy credit for those struggling the most and households earning less than €70,000. This proposal is very closely aligned with the recommendations in the ESRI report. I ask that the Government take another look at our proposal because, if independent experts have produced a report at the request of the Government indicating that roughly €480 is what people need if they are to be lifted out of energy poverty, a targeted €400 credit would go a considerable way towards addressing energy affordability and poverty.

This crisis has seriously exposed Ireland's energy insecurity. Despite increased renewable energy generation in Ireland, Irish householders are not seeing the benefits. Much of our renewable output is being absorbed by large corporate users, including data centres, some of which are paying substantially less for electricity than domestic users. I am not sure how the Government can continue to stand over that. Investment in renewables is flowing but people

are not seeing the gains. Instead, families are usually exposed to global shocks while policy decisions are prioritising large energy-intensive users.

At the same time, we are sitting on an enormous untapped resource. One million homes in Ireland are suitable for rooftop solar. Just ten panels can save an average household more than €450 per year on electricity bills. That is pretty much the same figure that the ESRI set out as what people would need their electricity bills reduced by annually. This is clearly a very good option or solution.

The benefit of solar is that installation can take a matter of hours, not years. You do not need to carry out major works on your house or move out. It is much simpler. Solar represents one of the fastest, simplest ways to reduce energy poverty and improve resilience to energy shocks. However, there are big upfront costs to solar, and it is not affordable to everyone. That is why we in the Social Democrats have launched our plan Solar for All. This plan would double the rate of grants available to all households. It proposes a €1,000 battery grant for all householders. Free solar installation should be provided for households under the warmer homes scheme, including people receiving the disability allowance, carer's allowance and fuel allowance. We also need to see the rapid deployment of, or the ability to deploy, plug-in solar, which is very common in Germany and which has been introduced in the United Kingdom. These are very simple measures that we have put forward in our plan. They are simple, achievable and very effective. They would make such a huge difference.

Imagine if the 300,000 homes that currently receive fuel allowance could save €400 on their electricity bills every year? This really is a no-brainer. I raised this earlier with the Tánaiste and he was very positive about working on a solar plan. Indeed, the relevant Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was similarly positive. I am more than happy to work with them on this. I really believe this is the option that can quickly make a difference in people's homes.

Along with highlighting our energy insecurity, this crisis has highlighted growing vulnerability regarding our food security. Our agriculture sector is deeply exposed to global markets, particularly for fertiliser, fuel and animal feed. We saw this following the invasion of Ukraine, when fertiliser prices surged to record levels, driven by gas shortages and export restrictions. We are now seeing the same thing happen following the ongoing war in the Middle East. Around 30% of fertiliser traded globally travels through the Strait of Hormuz. Fertiliser production is extremely energy-intensive, so when oil and gas prices rise, fertiliser prices rise too. This locks farmers into higher import costs long before any ship is even deployed. These costs do not remain on farms. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Irish food prices have risen by roughly 9% to 10% overall because farmers need to be paid for the work they do and cannot absorb all the costs arising from fertiliser price increases.

While food inflation eased briefly over the past few years, international bodies expect prices will increase by over 30% this year if the disruption persists. Ireland is not a very food-secure country. We import over 80% of the fruit and vegetables we eat. At one point, these imports were of exotic fruits and vegetables that we could not grow in Ireland, but now they include crops that we can and should grow here, such as apples, tomatoes, carrots and onions. We saw a major Irish producer of carrots go into liquidation recently. That sector needs support. We cannot allow it to disappear.

Deputy John Lahart: I acknowledge the men and women who keep this country moving. The Ceann Comhairle knows all about them from a previous life. Our hauliers are not constitutive of an abstract sector in the economy; they are people who deliver every product on every shelf, every medical supply to every hospital and every tonne of gravel to every construction site. They are the ones who collect our waste and recycling material before most of us have even awoken in the morning. They drive through the day and night and in all weathers so the country can function. When they struggle, the entire country feels it. Without them, Ireland stops. It is as simple as that.

In recent weeks, we saw protests across the country. There were many voices involved and many genuine people were present. These are people who are feeling genuine pressure, who are watching their costs rise week after week and who simply cannot afford to absorb another price increase. Their concerns deserve to be heard with respect and without judgment.

I acknowledge the work that has been done by the Government, the Minister, the Minister of State and others. The RTSS and the fuel support scheme represent a really meaningful step forward. These schemes will provide relief for many operators, and I welcome the engagement that has taken place between the Department and the sector.

These schemes recognise the essential role played by hauliers, bus operators, farmers and contractors in keeping Ireland supplied and connected. However, the reality on the ground is that hauliers are still facing a perfect storm in the form of pressures that no single scheme can fully offset. On 1 January last, tolls increased again on some roads where it seems that enormous profits are already being made by the toll operators. We are talking about a 20 cent rise per journey on the M50, bringing tolls to €7.80 return, or €8.80 on other motorways. Many hauliers pass through multiple toll plazas every day. The Irish Road Haulage Association has said the average haulier now pays around €150,000 a year in tolls, with larger operators paying up to a €250,000 annually. This is not sustainable. Is it true that hauliers are legally entitled to a 10% discount under toll bylaws but in practice, they cannot get access to this very easily? Is it true that in order to claim it, drivers must stop at toll plazas every day and buy books of paper passes? That seems unsafe, outdated and completely impractical in the context of modern logistics. If true, it is a discount that exists only on paper. Applying it automatically to prepaid toll tags would be a far simpler and fairer reform that is overdue.

Then there are the new charges at Dublin Port, which include a 5% increase in container prices and a new €15 infrastructure fee together amounting to a 46% rise in the cost of moving containers in and out of the country. Hauliers tell me that this comes on top of a dysfunctional operating system and model at the port, with opening hours that push trucks onto an already congested M50. They described the system as fundamentally unworkable and out of step with major EU ports.

In spite of the measures, fuel costs remain a major pressure. The RTSS is designed to help when diesel exceeds €1.90 per litre and that threshold reflects the point at which many operators simply cannot cope. However, hauliers are not just dealing with diesel. This is a point I have raised with the Minister and I know he is sympathetic to this. Many operators want to use hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, and many operators are using it. HVO is a cleaner renewable fuel that can significantly reduce emissions. A haulier in my constituency is very proud of the fact that his company has moved to HVO, but there is no reward for the greening of either his company or his operating costs. Hauliers want to invest in greener fleets and be part of the

climate solution, but HVO is more expensive and, unlike diesel, there is no rebate mechanism to offset the cost. We really need to move on this. Operators that are trying to do the right thing are finding that they are effectively penalised for it. If we want to support decarbonisation in transport, this gap needs to be addressed.

Insurance premiums remain exorbitant. Hauliers in my constituency tell me that they have seen no meaningful progress in tackling the cost of insurance. For many operators, insurance is now one of their single largest expenses. Without reform, this will continue to undermine competitiveness and push smaller operators out of the market. Compliance costs are rising too. New EU rules require hauliers to retrofit smart tachographs across their fleets at significant expense. Operators accept the need for both safety and compliance, but they cannot absorb every single new cost without support. I contrast the support for purchasers of electric cars with the lack of supports for the essential service of haulage.

There is a shortage of drivers. We cannot recruit young Irish drivers because the testing regime has been allowed to fall into dysfunction so it is taking young men and women up to two years to get a commercial licence. Most give up and go to other countries like Australia or Canada where they can work immediately. Meanwhile, the industry is forced to recruit drivers from elsewhere. In that context, the visa process has become a bureaucratic nightmare. This is simply not a sustainable model for a sector that is essential to our economy.

I want to be clear that I support the hauliers and I support the Government in all its efforts to make the daily lives of hauliers easier. I support the workers who are doing everything they can to keep their businesses afloat in the face of rising costs. I support the small operators that are barely breaking even. I support the drivers who spend long hours on the road to keep shelves stocked and supply chains functioning. I want the hauliers in my constituency to know that their concerns have been heard and that their contribution is truly valued. I will continue to raise their issues in this House with Ministers and the Government.

The €120 million RTSS and the €100 fuel support scheme are very welcome. They will help, but will not resolve the structural issues hauliers face every day such as those relating to toll systems that are outdated, unfair port charges that are rising faster than margins, insurance premiums that are out of control, a licensing system that is driving young people out of the industry, compliance costs that keep increasing and a lack of support in respect of renewable fuels like HVO. If we want a resilient, competitive and sustainable haulage sector, and all of us do, these issues must be addressed because, as the Ceann Comhairle knows, when hauliers struggle, supply chains struggle, when supply chains struggle, businesses struggle, and when businesses struggle, families struggle. This is not just exclusively a sectoral issue; it is a national economic issue

Ireland needs a haulage sector that is strong, viable and future-proofed. I know the Government and the Minister support this. The people who keep this country moving deserve nothing less. I will continue to work with the Minister of State, his ministerial colleagues and the sector in order to ensure that the supports provided are meaningful, accessible and reflective of the real pressures that hauliers and transport operators face.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I was calling round to people's houses in Dublin Central the other night and met a woman who said to me "Everything's going up. My rent is going up" - she is a Dublin City Council tenant - "The price of petrol is going up. Groceries are going up.

Everything is going up except for my wages." She is right. Statistically, that is the case. Prices are up almost a quarter over the past five years and people are really struggling out there. The Government's response suggests that it either does not get it or does not care. After housing costs, one in five people was at risk of poverty or lived in relative poverty last year, with over 300,000 people in arrears on and unable to afford to pay their electricity bills. That was before the coming increases hit. The most incredible statistic, which I say over and over again, is the fact that four in ten parents in this country, which is one of the richest countries in the world, say that they are either going without meals or cutting back on their meal sizes so that their kids can have enough to eat it. It is absolutely scandalous. Many of these people rightly went out to support the fuel protests. There was a collection taken in the flats, and they brought down sandwiches, tea and coffee to the protesters to say "Fair play", because they said that someone was standing up to the Government and calling for action on fuel prices.

If we look at what the Government has given, with regard to the €500 million package, ordinary people get some benefit in terms of reductions of taxes on petrol and diesel with tiny reductions in terms of home heating oil. There is some benefit now, but that could be wiped away tomorrow by Trump's deepening imperialist adventures in the Middle East.

However, the other half of the package is for businesses; it is not for ordinary people at all. The lion's share of those supports will go not to small businesses, which were involved in many of the protests, but instead to the big businesses. That is who the Government is looking out for all the time.

The Government often likes to say in here that the Opposition only has criticism and we do not have any solutions but the key immediate answer to the fuel crisis is something we have been calling for well over two years now. We have had legislation for it for well over two years, which is the idea of price caps and is precisely the main demand of the fuel protestors. The problem is the original measures the Government brought in a couple of months ago were wiped out, as we predicted, by the rise in the international price of oil and what has been done recently can be wiped out again. The only way to give people security and to cut across the profiteering we are seeing, for example, on an international scale with BP, which doubled its profits in the first quarter of this year compared to the first quarter of last year, is to do these price controls. That is an immediate measure to give people security and to stop the profiteering taking place. That needs to happen.

Workers need to be on the streets to demand that happens and to say we need to have universal measures, not measures that benefit businesses. We need universal measures like price caps, a €500 energy credit to every household and funded by the data centres which are using more electricity than all our households put together and yet are paying half the price of the electricity that ordinary people pay. We also need measures to move us away from reliance on fossil fuels, which is what has put us into this position in the first place, such as free public transport, the rollout of retrofitting, solar panels, free attic insulation and so on. That would move us off the reliance on fossil fuels that the Government has got us into.

However, there is a lesson from the protests which is that unless you can cause significant destructive action, if you are not a fast-food giant, a developer or a major multinational like Google, the Government is not going to listen to you. Workers need to prepare for a massive day of action. Preparation for that will start tomorrow at the May Day protest at 6.30 p.m. at Parnell Square in town but that needs to be just the first step towards a major national day.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People power works. That is the lesson of the protests. When people get out and protest, and organise and mobilise, they can force a Government that is failing them to make concessions. Trump's war means every single working person in the world is paying an economic price for Trump's blood lust, his imperialism and his support for the Israeli regime. We are all paying now. People who supported Trump a couple of years ago who thought he was a friend of the little person should frankly hang their heads in shame because he has revealed himself for what he always has been: a billionaire property speculator, in with big business, willing to slaughter people for profit and for the billionaire class. Now, ordinary people in Ireland and across the world are paying the price and the hauliers showed us you have to respond when you are screwed by the consequences of this and a system that more generally favours the rich. That is the fact.

The Government made concessions to one group but the widespread sympathy for the hauliers was because huge numbers of other people, who got nothing from the Government's concessions, have been crucified with the cost-of-living and housing crises and are angry about it. They are right to be angry because the fact of the matter is this Government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, represent the bosses and the rich.

I decided get a few figures on the current distribution of income and tax in this country and it really tells its own story. All the workers in this country combined, and there are 3.3 million of them, earn €130 billion. In total, they pay €32 billion in tax, which is 25% of their income. There are 170,000 employers in this country. Guess how much they earn? They earn €318 billion between them, which is more than twice what all the workers earn. How much do they pay in tax? Remember the workers who earn a lot less pay €32 billion. The bosses, who earn €318 billion in profits, which is rising every year, pay €23 billion, about 8% of their income. Workers are subsidising the obscene profits and lifestyles of the rich and these people are profiteering off the cost-of-living and housing misery that ordinary working people are suffering.

That is why workers need to take the lesson of the hauliers and get out on the streets, starting with May Day tomorrow, the trades council march, and building up to the budget next year. We need to do what was done in the tax marches in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the working class of this city and across the country mobilised, fought and demanded tax justice because they are certainly not getting it from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

There is a list as long as my arm of workers who are being screwed. School caretakers, from whom I got messages this week, are first into the school and last out. They are let go at Easter, the summer holidays and at Christmas and they have no pensions. The Oireachtas TV workers, who I will mention again, the people who film these proceedings, are let go. Even though they work for the Oireachtas, they are let go at Easter and every time the Dáil is off, during the summer and at Christmas. Their average earnings are €12,000 and because they have organised into unions to fight for their rights, they are now being victimised and taken off the roster.

I have been highlighting in recent weeks the northside homecare workers who provide homecare to vulnerable sectors of our society who are out on strike because their wages were slashed in austerity in 2009 and they still have not had their incomes restored. They are fighting

for a 9% pay increase and are being victimised as well. Shop stewards were suspended this week for organising trade union action. Workers need to get on the streets to fight back.

Deputy William Aird: I welcome the opportunity to address the House on supports for hauliers and the wider supply chain sector. Global instability from the Middle East conflict continues to affect international markets. We have seen sharp increases in oil and fuel prices and households and businesses are under sustained pressure, and this has all been well debated in this House. I welcome the Government fuel support scheme announced yesterday. I acknowledge in the House today the work of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien, Heydon, Canney and Calleary, who is responsible for the islands. I wish to acknowledge all the work they have done to come up with this package that we have.

The measures announced will provide much-needed relief to those most exposed to rising costs, the haulage sector in particular, which is important in my own constituency of Laois. According to the CSO figures, there were 127 licensed hauliers operating in County Laois in 2022. Figures for own-account operators were not available but, as everyone will know, there are many in each of our counties. In my constituency in Laois, the haulage sector covers construction, agriculture and food haulage, timber transport and the essential distribution networks that keep our shops, factories and communities supplied. As costs rise for hauliers, the impact is felt beyond the industry, triggering knock-on price increases across the economy and adding to the nationwide cost pressures.

Supports for the sector are not only welcome but are critical at this stage. Hauliers have faced a series of cost pressures from increases in vehicle prices, repairs and maintenance. Often, these costs are forgotten when it comes to a crisis like the one we have at the moment, such as CVRT testing and insurance premiums, toll charges and, most recently, a rise in the cost of diesel. These pressures have eroded margins and placed a huge strain on operators, many of whom are small, family-run businesses.

Under the EU mobility package, further challenges are on the horizon. In 2026, a new version of smart tachographs must be retrofitted to light commercial vehicles. All eligible non-European nationals travelling to or transiting through the UK also require electronic travel authorisation.

Hauliers who travel to the North of Ireland have to pay a heavy goods vehicle, HGV, levy when crossing the Border. Each of these measures carries a cost, and together they are a significant burden on a sector already under pressure. Our hauliers are the backbone of Ireland's supply chains day in, day out. They and their staff work long hours to keep the goods moving, maintain employment and support economic life in every county.

The reason these people were on the streets of Ireland was because of the pressures - not because they wanted to do it, but because they were forced. A lot of them were in fear. With the rising cost of diesel, people I know did not know what their future was. A lot of these people, including fellow agricultural contractors, have a lifelong agreement, if you like - or a custom, whichever you like to say - with all of their clients, where they usually get paid maybe once or twice a year. Each year, these people would be in a position to carry that cost but the fear of the increasing price of diesel was running through their very veins, with them not knowing what was going to happen.

These people are passionate about doing the job they do and giving the service they give to people. For maybe two or three generations, they have been going in to do work on the same agricultural land for families. They found themselves in a very perilous situation. They did not know what the price of diesel was going to be day by day, not to talk about week by week. For those people, I am delighted that, at least, we are spending €750 million for them.

A Cheann Comhairle, in a crisis situation, it does not cost anything to talk to people. You must talk to people. I talk to people every day. For every public representative, it is part of the core of their job. It comes from their heart, like mine, to talk to people in crisis. Since I was 19 years of age when I became a public representative, I have been talking to people who, in their situation on that day, were facing their biggest crisis. That is why we, as public representatives, always have to put out a hand of friendship to people. Lessons can be learned from what happened and I believe in my heart that the sooner you talk, the sooner you get resolutions. I hope we have learned from that.

I am encouraged by the words that have come from the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, regarding renewables. I feel it is something we have to look at for every household in this country. It is something we can do. I do not know, no more than anybody else in this House today, what is down the road for us as regards what we witnessed in the past couple of weeks and months. We saw what happened in Ukraine. Now we have the oil crisis. We do not know what is facing us for the winter. We do not know what is going to happen in the next two or three years. However, one thing we can do in this country is invest in renewables. It would be a great incentive for everybody. It would take the burden, hardship and fear out of people if they could know that they would be in a position to reduce their dependence on petrol, oil or whatever. That is something we need to address and that we need to invest in immediately. Members can see for themselves the rewards that could be reaped from this.

I can remember the shortage in petrol and the big queues in my own town of Portlaoise when I was a very young person, especially down at Conroy's garage. Now, it is an ongoing situation. People do not know from day to day. I still have people who say to me that they wonder what is going to happen when the real silage season cuts in in the next week or fortnight. There is still a fear there. People do not know whether it is going to cost €200 or zero to €200 to put silage in a pit per acre. They do not know what it is going to cost as regards wrapping. We are not only talking about diesel, but plastic. For everything that is associated, all costs are going up.

I spoke to a person the other day who hauls cattle. In my opinion, probably the hardest job that anybody does on the road is hauling cattle. There are thousands of cattle hauled through this country on a daily basis. There is one question I need to have answered, and it is to ensure that cattle hauliers are included in this package. I also wish to ask for the sole trader drawing cattle to be included in the package. I presume they are but it is not there in black and white, and when I do not see something in black and white, I always get concerned. I would like that question to be answered here today.

Going forward, it is important, especially for our young farmers, that we try to persuade them that there is a good living to be got and it is a good job you can do. When we see ups and downs like this, I meet young farmers out there who have done their yearly calculations - or two- or three-year ones, when they are borrowing money to invest in their farms - and, all of a

sudden, you now have milk gone down to 37 cent per litre and costs are going up on the other side that they have no control over. It is very difficult.

It is very important, even when we do small steps like giving enough money forward for the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, grants, to put panels on any property available for them. That is a no-brainer in this day and age. Investing that small amount of money is something that the Government will reap bucketfuls back from.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will start by welcoming the package. There is no point in saying that the package has been announced and we are against those announcements. It took a long time. It was a huge struggle because people were bitterly disappointed that that struggle had to take place. At least, something has been put in place. I have other concerns but any recognition by the Government that fuel costs are putting serious pressure on transport operators, farmers and fishing is necessary and overdue. The funding envelope is significant and the fact that these supports are being backdated to March will be of some help.

However, welcoming a package does not remove our responsibility to examine how it will work in practice because the detail here matters. While supports are backdated, applications for the road transport support scheme will not open until May. That means operators carry the cost through March and April, paying fuel bills in real time, often on tight margins and with a limited cash flow. Timing is not a secondary issue for a small and rural operator; it is central.

There is also uncertainty about eligibility. The scheme states that the passenger transport operators may qualify. That needs to be clear. The Minister must confirm whether private bus and coach operators who are not part of the school transport scheme are included and, if not, on what objective grounds they are excluded. Artificial insemination, AI, operators have been on to me from all over the country. They are on the road every day. Are they included under some scheme?

For those within the school transport scheme, clarity is equally important. Will support be paid directly to operators or filtered through Department of education contracts? Are operators on fixed-rate contracts fully eligible, partially eligible or excluded? The same lack of clarity applies to Local Link services. Operators need to know whether supports will be paid directly or through contractual adjustments via the NTA.

This package is a step in the right direction but it must be matched with clear, written guidance so that operators know exactly where they stand. A lot of them have told me that they are very concerned this will mean extra work for the accountants. We need the money to get back out there to the people who are delivering these services and are delivering food to our tables. If it does not, the food on the table becomes an impossible task to deliver and at an impossible price.

There is a lot of clarity needed here. This is the sector coming back and telling me and this is what it needs to find out before it can make any future arrangements. Some of these people are going out of business. I know the Minister of State will say to me that the Government cannot control the price of fuel.

Brent oil was \$126 a barrel last night, which is an astonishing price. It is down to \$114 a barrel now as I speak, I think, again an astonishing price rise compared to where it was before, namely, maybe \$55 or \$60. I have heard the Taoiseach and Tánaiste say that the Government

is giving the most. It is taking the most. That is what they have forgotten. It is taking the most out of people's pockets. There is a projected figure of €9 billion going to be coming into the Government's coffers this year. There is a rainy day fund and, my God, this is a rainy day, as I was saying it to the Tánaiste earlier. Irish people and businesses are on their knees. That is what led to the protests. I know it.

I was at the protests from the moment they started. I even intervened at a protest. I noticed there on a podcast - I do not watch that rubbish but somebody showed it to me - that someone was giving out that Independent Ireland did nothing and we were trying to stop the protest. No, we knew how this could be handled but the Government was not listening and people who did not know what was going on talking loosely on a podcast were not listening either. Basically, there were over 500 people in Portlaoise and my colleague and I got up and asked for negotiation first with the Government. That was done, in fairness, by the protestors. They sent their request. I will not say their set of demands because they were struggling and were in a desperate position. Some of them wanted to go on strike that very evening and the next morning and we said, "No, hold on", and they did. That is how you negotiate. We looked for the reconvening of the Dáil. We wrote to the Taoiseach to act as a conduit with those protestors because he did not want to talk. The whole thing unfortunately spiralled out of control because there was a lack of connection and understanding, a lack of real vision by the Government to understand that these were genuine hard-working mothers and fathers, hauliers, farmers, fishers, coach operators, ordinary hard-working people. They are what Independent Ireland represents, the hard-working men and women who get up in the morning and deliver for this country. When they needed the country to just put out the hand and say it would give them something back, it was swept away from them. That is not good enough. That is just not a caring Government. I know the Government is frantic now and it is trying to create all these little mini-budgets that it said it could not do before.

I am not going to discredit them but at the same time I look across at parties that come in here with a sympathetic ear, like the Social Democrats or the Labour Party, who turn around and tell people they really want something to be done but on the other hand they want to shove on the carbon tax on top of the Irish people. For the love of God, they are talking out of two sides of their mouths. They are not on the same planet as I am, where the ordinary people get up in the morning, work hard, cannot afford an increase in fuel, cannot afford a carbon tax, cannot afford NORA, cannot afford VAT. These parties say that they are supposedly sympathetic towards them, but they have their backs turned on them. Even their leader yesterday wanted to get rid of holiday homes. Jesus, what next? Lord Christ, is it a Communist country we are heading into?

The Government has failed the country in relation to renewables. There is no point in talking about renewables when somebody has to spend €20,000 and they are only getting an €1,800 grant. That is not good enough.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is a rip-off Government. The price of petrol, diesel, home heating oil, electricity, groceries, rents, house prices and childcare are all sky-high. The Government plays a significant role in jacking up the prices on all of those. It is hitting families really hard. I know of parents who are lying awake at night trying to work out what bill they are going to be able to pay. People on good wages and in good employment are actually living month to month now on overdrafts. Many families are just one thing going wrong with their

car away from not being able to stay on top of their bills. It is not an accident. The Government is making it harder in many ways.

In terms of taxes, the Government is incinerating taxpayers' money with incredible waste. We see the jacking up of rents at the moment because of dysfunctional housing policy and the Government's immigration policies as well. Look at the semi-State ESB. It is making super-normal profits - €650 million last year - while electricity prices here are higher than in practically any other country in Europe. In terms of fuel, the Government is taxing petrol and diesel at the rate of 65% for a staple, not a luxury good, an item that people have no alternative but to use. In respect of the tolls on the M50, we found out they are now collecting €216 million, double what it was just ten years ago. I look at the pittance the Government provides in terms of home heating oil and kerosene. Older people are sitting in the cold regularly for the want of the money to fill their tanks with kerosene, and there is nothing being done. The food situation is incredible. Ireland is now the second most expensive country in the whole of the European Union. It is 15% higher than the average EU price in relation to food. Compared to just five years ago, shopping for groceries costs 40% more. A trolley that used to cost €150 is now €225. People are paying an extra €3,000 a year for exactly the same groceries. Chicken breasts were €5 in 2022, now €12.98. Steak was €10.66 a kilo in 2022 and is now €19.49. Butter is €1 more than it was just a year ago. The price of eggs has increased by 35% since 2021.

Government Members should not shake their heads. The Government has a role in this supply chain in terms of the taxes and tolls it is putting on hauliers and the fact that we have an oligopoly, a small number of supermarkets where there is very little competition in terms of the price of products.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I want to begin by welcoming these statements. They are long overdue. I commend the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and all the Ministers involved in the negotiations over the last weeks. The figures speak for themselves. In four weeks, diesel prices at the pump rose by approximately 25%. For a sector where fuel already accounts for nearly half of all operating costs, that was not an inconvenience, but an existential threat. We are not talking about large multinationals here with deep reserves and teams of financial advisers. We are talking in many cases about sole traders, owner-drivers, family businesses, people who get up before dawn, who keep our supermarket shelves stocked and make sure medicines reach our hospitals and building materials reach our construction sites. Nearly half of all licensed road haulage operators in this country own just one vehicle. If that operator cannot meet their costs, they will have to close down. When they close down, the consequences ripple outward. Higher transport costs mean higher prices for every business they supply and, ultimately, for every household in the country.

That is why acting quickly was not optional, but essential. The road transporters support scheme does exactly what good, targeted policy should do. It is graduated, meaning that the smallest of operators who are most vulnerable receive the greatest proportional support at €1,350 per vehicle. It is backdated to 1 March so that no one is left carrying the costs the State has acknowledged they should not have to bear alone. At €120 million over three months, it is a serious, substantial commitment, not just a token gesture.

I want to highlight something that sometimes gets overlooked in these debates. This scheme does not stop at main roads. It reaches Local Link services, connecting rural communities. It reaches school transport providers and ferries to our offshore islands, communities that depend entirely on these vessels for their way of life. That is a Government that is thinking about everyone, not just those who shout the loudest. This scheme complements the broader package - the excise reductions, the NORA levy adjustments, and the enhanced diesel rebate scheme - demonstrating that this Government is prepared to use every lever available to protect workers, businesses and consumers.

I encourage all eligible operators to prepare their applications when the online portal opens in the Department of Transport in May. The backdating to 1 March means that every qualifying vehicle is already accumulating entitlement. I am actually surprised at the number of small hauliers who are still unaware of the details of the scheme. It is something we need to emphasise in the next few weeks. It needs to be communicated an awful lot better from the top down.

A Cheann Comhairle, if I could mention two other issues, I know you have a long history with the haulage sector and I would be interested to hear your thoughts afterwards on a few of these suggestions.

An Ceann Comhairle: No thoughts here.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Going forward, we need to look at the tolling system if we are on about protecting supply chains. I am from Little Island in Cork, which is a large industrial area. We have dozens of haulage companies around the harbour area, coming in and out of Ringaskiddy and the city. Cork is a city that is very heavily reliant on the haulage business. We need to have a look at tolling. In certain countries, there are exemptions for HGVs at certain types of tolls. They look at the weight of the truck and so on. That is something we need to consider in an upcoming budget.

At the moment, if trucks come from Britain or Northern Ireland, there is no additional levy placed on them whereas if an Irish truck or haulier crosses the Border or goes over to the UK, there is a levy of £10 per truck, I think. Levying money on foreign-registered trucks, particularly in the UK, needs to be looked at. Our hauliers are being levied at the moment. If we are talking about preparing the next package for the next shock that will undoubtedly be felt in this sector, we need to look at other ways of being innovative and how to pay them. Such a scheme might be a way forward in how we contribute to the next package.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I wanted to assure Deputy Collins that I represent the hard-working women and men of Dublin Bay North but he ran out before I could do so.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about the supply constraints we are experiencing as a result of the fuel crisis. Brent crude is now at \$114 a barrel, down slightly from \$126 a barrel earlier this week but it remains very high. The World Bank expects energy prices to go up 24% this year, the highest level of increase since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even if the most acute disruptions caused by the war ease in May, and there is no guarantee that will happen. The energy crisis has laid bare our dependency on fossil fuels. The answer is clear - we must get away from fossil and accelerate the take-up of renewable.

While it is welcome that the construction sector is included in the Government's package, it reaffirms how vulnerable construction is to global oil price shocks. That sector must be central to the decarbonisation debate. Construction and the built environment account for over one third of our carbon emissions. Our commitment to new housing is very important and presents a significant challenge in reducing emissions across the sector, as modern building methods are very carbon intensive. Last October, our committee heard from stakeholders in construction about how we could break down barriers to meeting emissions targets in construction. The urgent need to provide incentives to decarbonise construction sites was clear. A big practical gap remains on those sites, in that heavy plant machinery and temporary power still use a lot of diesel, with electric and alternative fuel options not yet viable for smaller organisations without Government support. On-site generators run for more or less the full working day, contributing significantly to emissions. Support for EVs, battery storage systems and HVO-fuelled equipment as alternatives to diesel on site represent a positive short-term step that the Government could take to tackle rising fuel costs and meet our climate objectives.

We also had the haulage industry at the committee. The Ceann Comhairle would have a good knowledge of the haulage industry. What was really clear was that, with the exception of more efficient diesel engines, there was no clear way for long-haul haulage to decarbonise. It is vital that we find a way to do that. Batteries are heavy and have to be hauled long distances. Hydrogen was spoken about as a possibility but we do not seem to be there yet.

We need to recognise the new reality that even if America and Iran each an agreement to reopen that strait, it will take time for the oil market to return to normal. Oil and gas infrastructure in the Gulf has been wrecked by all warring parties. Even if it all stops tomorrow, it will take years for that to be rebuilt. Supply will not recover overnight and the burden on households and businesses will persist. We cannot afford to wait for the market to deal with this. The case for accelerating our transition to renewable energy has never been stronger.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am delighted to speak this evening. As a rural TD, I have always strongly advocated for the haulage and agricultural sectors, which are interwoven in many respects. The recent protests were a sign that not only was the Government moving in the wrong direction, but it had completely taken its ear off the ground. You need listening skills at all times for effective communication. That effective communication was not there, hence the protests. I stood with many hard-working, decent and genuine people at the protests in Tullamore, Birr and Cloghan where I heard directly from many agri-contractors in particular and small haulage companies trying to deal with the fact that their businesses were on a knife edge, ready to go to the wall. It was a shocking situation that should never have arisen. If the communication, as in listening skills, had been there and if the Government had heeded the warnings, it would not have come to that.

In ten years as a TD, I have never seen anything like the distress it caused to people who were really grappling with many issues. These are people who create huge employment in rural counties like Offaly. It is not fair to do that. With the direction this Government is going, it appears at times that those who work the hardest are punished the most in terms of the haulage, agricultural and construction sectors. I met people from all of those sectors on the protest lines. The Government needs to listen to them. That needs to change and be learned from this.

I commend the IRHA president, Mr. Ger Hyland, who made the case many times in here for the sector. He has also stated many times that the sector is being taxed out of existence. There needs to be a look at how business is being done. Hauliers are an important cog in the wheel of the Irish economy. They need to be supported and listened to. Timely action needs to be taken. It is important that we support the people contributing greatly to our economy. Hauliers are on the road 24 hours a day, 52 weeks a year. Their need for certainty does not disappear because of a war breaking out or a political decision taken elsewhere, yet successive Governments unfortunately waited for a crisis to emerge before taking action. There is a crisis and the Government needs to act. It needs to continuously support these sectors. They are people who create much-needed employment, particularly in rural counties. The warning signs were there in plain sight, such as the chronic driver shortage that the IRHA quantified as requiring 4,000 additional drivers over five years and the punitive toll increases now costing the sector approximately €72,792 a day, with some large operators paying between €20,000 and €35,000 per month. That is unacceptable. I met the senior management of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, last year. At that meeting, I asked about barrier-free tolls at the Dublin Port tunnel to allow trucks to move more freely. The Ceann Comhairle raised this in the Chamber many a time. I commend her for that. It is another example of the Government not listening. It should be able to intervene directly with TII. I met TII already as an Independent TD, so I ask the Government to meet it. Not only should the Government meet it about barrier-free tolls, but it should meet TII about excessive toll charges. This is not sustainable for any sector. The excessive toll charges need to be called out. There need to be immediate meetings with TII to address those issues. No business can sustain that. Hauliers are not asking for favours. They are the lifeblood of retail and manufacturing and rural economies. They pay diesel, tax, VAT, PAYE and PRSI, road tax, tolls and the insurance levy, an unrelenting burden on razor-thin margins. Is that not an example of them being taxed out of existence? When they warned that toll avoidance would push HGVs onto unsuitable secondary roads, wasting millions of litres of fuel, they were ignored - another fine example of practical and constructive solutions put forward all the time but no one listening or taking action. There has to be a change of direction. At times, it feels like the Government has moved so far left that it has left behind businesses and is divorced from reality.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss refurbishment works to school buildings across County Kerry.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss the State purchase of the Martello Tower on Sandymount Strand.

Deputy Joe Neville - To discuss the issue of the green lane schools in Leixlip being oversubscribed.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss issues surrounding animal welfare.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the financial strain on people with dietary restrictions due to a medical diagnosis.

Deputy George Lawlor - To discuss the system and mechanism of appeal of special needs assistant, SNA, allocation in schools.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned new Courtown Coast Guard building.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the need for emergency works at Scoil Assaim, Raheny.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss funding of the tenant in situ scheme in Fingal west.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the assistive technology grant scheme.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the establishment of a national radiation therapy equipment replacement programme.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss policing in Cabra, Dublin 7.

Deputies Paul McAuliffe, Rory Hearne - To discuss the increasing number of firearms discharged in Ballymun, Dublin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the status of funding for community facilities in Belmayne and Clongriffin under the national development plan sectoral plan.

The matters raised by Deputies James Geoghegan, Louise O'Reilly, Michael Cahill, George Lawlor and Joe Neville have been selected for discussion.

Supports for Hauliers and Supply Chains: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, on whose behalf I am closing this debate, for outlining the detail of the road transporters support scheme to the House. This scheme is vital to support our overall economy and trade. It is vital to support the businesses that will receive support under the scheme. That is essential when it comes to ensuring continuity and stability throughout the supply chain. I also thank all of the Deputies who contributed to today's discussion. It was a good discussion, and I appreciate the different perspectives that were put on the record and the perspectives of many people working in the industry that were put on the record by Deputies. It is a clear indication that everyone in this House values our hauliers and our bus and coach operators and the role they play in wider society, as they should. After all, these are the people who keep our country moving, who keep our shelves stacked, who bring others to and from work or school and who create jobs in their small, medium and large companies. They are the people we depend on when it comes to certain sectors being successful, like the retail sector and the tourism sector. We are dependent on them for many of the services we provide, like our healthcare sector, disability services or local authority services. The bottom line is that these people are vital to the functioning of both society and the economy.

As mentioned earlier, these sectors have faced multiple challenges in recent years, including Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, fuel cost increases that immediately followed the invasion of Ukraine and the multiple severe weather events that have resulted in increased disruption at

our ports and across the wider transport network. I start by acknowledging the resilience of the sector and I thank the people working there for working with the Minister, Ministers of State and officials in the Department of Transport to find solutions to the challenges we know exist.

The support package has been carefully considered following ongoing engagement between the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister for State at the Department of Transport with responsibility for international road transport logistics, rail and ports, Deputy Canney, and officials in the Department of Transport with haulage and passenger representative bodies over many months. The scheme reflects the immediate need for financial support and the needs communicated by the sector over many engagements. It demonstrates that the Government is listening to the needs of the sector. I thank everybody involved in those discussions, particularly the Irish Road Haulage Association. As the Minister mentioned in his opening remarks, over 246,000 people are working across a variety of logistics and supply chain roles, including almost 60,000 people in the transport sector.

While I am sure Deputies will agree that financial supports are necessary right now, I reiterate, as many Deputies did in their contributions, that this Government also recognises the need to support the haulage, logistics and supply chain sector in the longer term. It is important to address long-standing challenges such as driver shortages and to work with the sector on its transition to decarbonisation. In December 2022 the Government published Ireland's road haulage strategy, which runs from 2022 to 2031. It followed two phases of public consultation. That strategy highlights the importance of the haulage and road freight sector. It identified 39 actions as short-term priorities that are expected to be completed within a two- or three-year timeframe, and enablers for medium- to long-term progress that will ensure the delivery of policy objectives over the full term of the strategy. The implementation of the short-term actions has progressed well since publication and three annual progress reports have been published so far. A key action identified in the road haulage strategy was to establish a road freight forum with representatives from the relevant Government Departments and agencies and the haulage, freight, distribution and logistics sector. That road freight forum held its first meeting in February 2023. It is chaired by the Department of Transport and its membership includes the National Transport Authority, the Road Safety Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the Freight Transport Association, the Irish Road Haulage Association, the Irish International Freight Association and the Irish Exporters Association. That forum formalises engagement between key stakeholders and builds on the work done in response to the international crises we mentioned earlier. It supports collaboration, which is key to identifying practical and effective solutions to support the sector to maintain Ireland's essential trade and strategic supply chains. It also monitors the implementation of the road haulage strategy and that provides an opportunity for stakeholders to identify emerging challenges at the earliest opportunity.

The logistics and supply chain skills group was established in 2019 to support the promotion of careers, skill development and sustainable employment in the logistics and supply chain sectors in Ireland. This group has been making good progress to address systematic challenges with support from officials in the Department of Transport. In 2023 the group organised Ireland's first logistics and supply chain skills week to promote careers in the sector and to engage with supply chain executives on the new skills needed now and into the future. This has become an annual event, and this is year nine in terms of in-person events that have been

held this year, as well as three international and five national webinars and a sustainability competition for third level students that took place this earlier month. In addition, LogisTYcs is a flagship skills expo under the logistics and supply chain skills week and was held in the past couple of weeks in the National Basketball Arena in Tallaght. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, mentioned to me earlier that he was there and met 1,500 students as well as educators, employers and industry bodies. It is an opportunity for them to learn more about career and education options within the sector. Both the road freight forum and the logistics and supply chain skills group provide an excellent platform for structured engagement between policymakers and key sectoral stakeholders. Officials in the Department of Transport want to continue this spirit of collaboration to assist the sector to achieve the goals set out in the road haulage strategy and the actions identified by the sector in the logistics and supply chain skills group action plan. That is ongoing collaboration and is in addition to the commitment given by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to engage with the representative bodies over the coming months.

I recognise the efforts being made to improve current processes and build a resilient and skilled workforce equipped to meet the future needs of the sector. Recent cost pressures born of the conflict in Iran have highlighted the need to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels in the transport sector. The road haulage strategy provides a roadmap for how the sector can decarbonise to meet the targets set out in the climate action plan. I am going to digress from the script because I do not agree with the next sentence, so I am sure I will be killed by officials. It states here that the haulage sector is almost exclusively fuelled by diesel. That is not necessarily true. I know many operators in this sector who have utilised HVO, and Deputy Lahart mentioned that earlier. It is important that we recognise the contribution they are making to the environment by making the decision to move to HVO. I appreciate that more needs to be done in this area. However, Deputies will agree that decarbonisation will be a significant challenge for the sector over the medium term to 2030 and beyond. Several targeted supports have been provided in recent years to assist the sector on its journey to zero emissions. The zero emissions heavy duty vehicle purchase grant scheme supports the purchase of zero emission vehicles and associated charging infrastructure. HDV Electrification Pathway: Navigating the Path to Heavy Duty Electrification in Ireland is a report published on 3 March 2026. It identifies the key enablers to accelerate HDV electrification and that is really important. I agree, as was mentioned today, that we also need to support the transition to HVO and to support those who have already made that transition. The fleet assessment audit offers businesses an assessment by an independent energy adviser who will provide guidance on transition to zero emission vehicles. Two tax incentive schemes allow operators to reduce their immediate tax bill against company profits when investing in zero emission vehicles and they are already in place.

I recognise that not all businesses can afford to invest in zero emission vehicles even when they avail of grant funding. However, eco driving techniques can help drivers to reduce their fuel and emissions in their existing vehicles while enhancing road safety for all road users. A national standard for eco driving courses has been established and a range of subsidised or fully funded eco driving training courses are also available to HDV drivers. The promotion of both digital and operational efficiencies such as load sharing and logistics consolidation hubs are also being explored by the Department of Transport. Despite the cost of zero emission vehicles posing an ongoing challenge for some, the number of electric HGVs in the fleet is increasing,

with 162 electric HGVs registered at the end of last year. The number of compressed natural gas fuelled vehicles rose to 157 last year and that was a 5% increase on the year before.

Energy consumption from renewable resources such as liquid biofuel and biogases which are often used to power heavy goods vehicles continued to grow as well. It has increased from 64 kilotonnes of oil to 78 kilotonnes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. Before I move to the Topical Issue Debate, we have some very serious movers and shakers in the Gallery. They are a crowd of women from Wexford. They are the tea makers and the bakers from Duncannon FCA. I am sorry, I mean ICA. You are more than welcome. The FCA might be more appropriate.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The FCA would not mess with the ICA.

An Ceann Comhairle: It would not mess with the ICA. All our other viewers are most welcome.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Housing Schemes

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome our guests in the Gallery. I will say this because I say it every time - and I do not in any way mean this to be disrespectful of the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, as I am grateful she is here - but it is regrettable the senior Minister has not made himself available for this because it is a very serious issue. It might not be a serious issue to him but it is an incredibly serious issue to the people I am representing. The Minister of State will know well that we are in the middle of a housing crisis. In the midst of that crisis the very least we could or should expect from a half-decent government is that it would not make things worse. There is a single measure that is a homelessness prevention measure. The only measure the Government sponsors that stops people in any way from becoming homeless is the tenant in situ scheme. I am sure the local authority housing list is as bad in the Minister of State's area as it is in mine, where people have a 14-year wait for a house or any kind of accommodation. When a person gets a notice to quit, if they are on the local authority housing list and they are evicted - and there has been a 41% jump in the number of people being evicted, kindly sponsored by the Government's latest legislation - the only measure that will keep them in their home is a tenant in situ purchase.

I have two examples from Fingal County Council here, though I could paper the walls of this place with examples. The first, dated 18 February, was sent by the council to a landlord who is selling the property but willing to sell it to the council. The council said:

Unfortunately, given the number of cases progressed and the level of funding available, Fingal County Council is no longer accepting new expressions of interest in this scheme. If applications for the tenant in situ scheme reopen in 2026 it will be advertised.

That is if it reopens. There is no doubt we need it, absolutely none at all. There is another letter dated 28 April. In it the council says it is not in a position to accept new expressions of

interest in the tenant in situ scheme because it does not have the funding. If you are renting privately in north County Dublin and you apply to Fingal County Council for the tenant in situ scheme the response you get makes it very clear the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage funds the scheme and it has not funded it for Fingal County Council.

The case dated 18 February is that of a mam, a dad and three children and the one dated 18 April is of a mam, a dad and one child. I am going to spare them the embarrassment of naming them or their areas because quite frankly these people are going through enough, but both families have been told there is not enough funding in the tenant in situ scheme. It is not that their places are not appropriate but that the Government has not given the council enough money to fund the purchase of their homes, so those families will now go to emergency accommodation. I can tell the Minister of State in both cases the mams came to my constituency office and I had to tell them they will likely go to emergency accommodation. As the Minister of State and I both know, they are not renting anywhere privately as there is nowhere to rent. They are heading for emergency accommodation because the Government will not fund this scheme.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Deputy O'Reilly very much. The Minister, Deputy Browne, passes on his apologies that he could not be here and asked me to take this on his behalf.

Tenancy sustainment, which includes the purchase of private homes where a social housing tenant is *in situ*, is not a stand-alone programme or scheme. However, it is a priority category of the Department of housing's social housing second-hand acquisitions programme, which helps prevent social housing-supported households in the private rental sector from becoming homeless, as the Deputy said. Tenancy sustainment, or tenant in situ, is an option for local authorities to support households who are in the most precarious housing situations. Such acquisitions are, and will continue to be, available to local authorities for use as a last resort when other options have been exhausted. They are not the sole, or indeed the primary, option. The default first option should always be securing the sustainment of the tenancy with the landlord, securing alternative accommodation through the tenancy sustainment and place finder services, or allocating a local authority or approved housing body tenancy via a new build home or relet. Where acquisitions are deemed necessary in terms of a tenant *in situ*, local authorities have delegated sanction to pursue individual priority acquisitions without recourse to the Department of housing, where these acquisitions are in line with the broad parameters and criteria of the second-hand acquisitions programme.

Along with the clear focus of Government on increasing the supply of new build social and affordable homes, a targeted social housing acquisition programme has been and will continue to be an important policy response to priority needs. At the end of February, so about two weeks after the first email Deputy O'Reilly quoted from 18 February, the Minister, Deputy Browne, secured funding to a total of €373 million to fund acquisitions under the Department of housing's social housing second-hand acquisitions programme. That funding will be available for drawdown by local authorities and approved housing bodies under the 2026 programme priorities. Those priorities include: exits from homelessness, with €150 million allocated; AHB priority delivery to support older persons, persons with disabilities and care leavers, with €50 million allocated; and local authority priority acquisitions, which includes tenancy sustainment or tenant in situ acquisitions, with €157 million allocated. A contingency

fund of €16 million will also be retained to be there to top up where local authorities have drawn down and fully exhausted their initial allocation, because we want to continue to enable them to be ambitious and to continue to drive these acquisitions.

Fingal County Council has been given an initial allocation of €30.7 million of this funding. That is a 54% increase on its allocation for last year. This funding is now available to the council. I note the second family in question made contact with the council on 28 April, so I am not sure why it is giving them that response given it now has its initial allocation of €30.7 million of this funding. Ultimately, the delivery of new additional social homes is the only strategic solution when it comes to long-term homelessness, with allocations from new and existing local authority and AHB social homes the primary means through which social housing-qualified households should be accommodated. I appreciate what the Deputy is saying about how the tenant in situ programme is really important for many families and that is why Fingal County Council has been given a 54% uplift in this year's allocation. I hope it will use that to support families in the Deputy's constituency like the ones who contacted her.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I absolutely respect that the Minister of State is giving me the information she has but that information is not accurate. It does not represent a 54% increase by my figures but we can debate that another day. When people go to Fingal County Council looking for the tenant in situ scheme they are told it does not have the money. That email dated 28 April was actually a response to a query I had sent in. It said the council had responded to the landlord, which we know it had, explaining it is not in a position to accept new expressions of interest in the tenant in situ scheme accordingly. The council is not accepting expressions now. The Minister of State might say it should be or that it has the money, but that is not what the council is telling landlords.

In the middle of all this I have a mam, a dad and their son. The man, as it goes, happens to be undergoing some fairly heavy-duty cancer treatment at the moment. Their notice to quit expires in two months' time. I had to tell that woman that she, her husband and her son will have to go to emergency accommodation. I understand what is in the note the Minister of State read.

The Minister of State and I both know that in the real world there is no available private rented accommodation coming over the hill. The woman asked what the emergency accommodation was like. It is not good. I would not like to live in it and I do not think the Minister of State would like to live in it either. She cried her heart out in my office. I am the only TD in my area who has an office - I have two, in fact - and this may be part of the reason that we see more of these cases than others do. She sobbed her heart out and she said "But there must be a way surely". This woman works hard, her husband works hard, and her son. They are terrified for the future.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy O'Reilly for raising her constituents' experience with us here today. It is really important that everybody remembers that behind the statistics we read out in here are families. They are families exactly like that. It is for this exact reason the Government is allocating funding. According to the Department of housing, last year the Department funded a total of 68 second-hand acquisitions for Fingal County Council. Of those, 61 were for tenancy sustainment, allowing for these private tenancies to continue in preventing homelessness, and others were tenant in situ acquisitions. So far this year Fingal County

Council has only seven second-hand acquisitions in the pipeline. That is the information I have from the Department of housing. It has been given €30.7 million to fund acquisition of housing. This is a 54% increase on its allocation last year.

I will certainly bring the Deputy's feedback to the Minister for housing because, ultimately, what I am being told is that there is funding there and Fingal County Council has that funding, but only seven second-hand acquisitions are in its current pipeline. Perhaps that is because there was a pipeline from last year that it is still working its way through. I do not know the detail of that but the people who do are in the local authority, and they are who the Deputy needs to engage with on this. I know and respect that the Deputy has already done that but I think we need to do that further. There is funding there for this. With this funding we want to support families who are at risk of homelessness. The funding has been allocated to the council and the Deputy has given us an example today of the kind of family for whom we need to do that.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy George Lawlor: I wish to raise the issue of the appeals' process in the allocation of special needs assistants, SNAs, in the context of the treatment meted out to St. Aidan's primary school in Enniscorthy in Wexford. St. Aidan's is one of the largest DEIS band 1 vertical primary schools in Ireland. It is exceptional in scale for a primary school, with 861 pupils. It has seven special classes, 36 mainstream classes and 76 teachers and has been awarded 15.75 SNAs. The school currently has 54 pupils attending the seven special classes, all operating at level 3 support. The vast majority of the pupils here have care need plans and require regular access to an SNA. Of these pupils, 38 have a single diagnosis and 17 of the pupils have multiple different diagnoses, including general learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, ASD, speech and language disorder and severe intellectual disorder. Five pupils within the school are type 1 diabetics. There are also children who suffer from social and emotional behavioural difficulties, and children with anaphylaxis, epilepsy and physical disabilities. There are 36 pupils in mainstream classes with a diagnosis of ASD at different levels and as of yet the SNA allocation that covers both the special classes and the mainstream settings remains unchanged at 15.75 SNAs. Therein lies the difficulty.

The school appealed the outcome of the SNA review it requested. It was told that there would be no change to the SNA allocation and that the whole school SNA allocation for 2025-26 would continue at 15.75 SNAs. The letter the school received from a principal officer in the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, stated that this decision can be appealed. The details of the appeals process can be found online. In the letter, the NCSE advised the school to seek a rationale for the outcome prior to the submission of any appeal. Therein lies the problem.

Those in the school tried up and down and back and forward. They went to the local special educational needs organiser, SENO, and they went to the regional manager of the NCSE. They also went to the NCSE itself but nobody could give the school the rationale. They were encouraged to seek the rationale to add to their submission of their appeal. There is a ten-day period to appeal. The school went numerous times to the regional manager, the SENO and the NCSE. The NCSE came back with no clarity, no advice and no direction. No guidance could be provided by the staff there as to how they would access the rationale for the SNA review.

In the end the school had to submit its appeal to the NCSE without any access to the rationale that it was encouraged by the very same NCSE to acquire in order to submit the appeal.

This is a major school with massive support requirements. The teaching staff and the SNAs are put to the pin of their collar to provide a decent atmosphere and a decent schooling for the myriad children in the school who have additional needs. It simply is not good enough. I will acknowledge that I contacted the head of the NCSE and he came back to me after a couple of days to say it would be investigating the matter. To put the staff through the wringer on this and not supply the rationale that the school was requested to seek is simply not good enough in the context of the stress that already exists within these schools.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Lawlor for raising this important issue on behalf of St. Aidan's school community in Enniscorthy, and not just on behalf of the student or the students attending school in special classes, but indeed the entire school community, including teachers, parents, special education teachers and SNAs. I hear the Deputy's frustration. His frustration was mirrored earlier by one of the Deputy's constituency colleagues who also raised this with the Tánaiste today on the floor of the House. In case the Deputy missed that debate, I will just say that the Tánaiste committed to raising this with the Minister for education directly, asking her to arrange that either the Minister herself or the NCSE would make contact with that Deputy. I will certainly add Deputy Lawlor to that list to ensure he gets that same information and that same contact. I am very glad to hear that the Deputy has been in contact directly with the head of the NCSE and that he is working proactively to help to resolve this from a rationale perspective to give the information the school wants and should have gotten much easier than this. I appreciate that the issue here is not just for St. Aidan's and that the issue is with the process. I will absolutely provide that feedback to the Minister for education.

As the Deputy is aware, the National Council for Special Education has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision and care support for children and young people with special educational needs in our schools, including the allocation of SNA support to schools. In relation to the appeals process itself, on completion of an SNA review the NCSE communicates the outcome to a school. If the school is not satisfied, it may submit an appeal of the outcome to the NCSE. The school has ten days to do so. Information, including guidance on the appeals process, is available on the NCSE website. The NCSE is currently processing a number of appeals and the outcomes of these will be communicated to schools shortly.

The Department and the NCSE are committed to delivering an education system that is of the highest quality, where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. I will provide the Deputy's specific feedback on the rationale. I note this is what was advised in the information on the website to show this is how one should submit the appeal.

Deputy George Lawlor: The advice was in the letter.

Deputy Emer Higgins: To be told that this is the correct way to be able to gain the information and then to be frustrated through the process and not get it, I can understand that this is not efficient for either the school or the NCSE. It does not set the school up for success in terms of being able to put forward a coherent and comprehensive appeal. I appreciate what

the Deputy is saying in that this information should have been made available in a timely fashion to the school.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State for the response. Obviously it is not her core area so I understand the difficulty she finds herself in. I am holding the letter from a principal officer which was sent to say that there would be no change. Within the letter the school is advised to seek the rationale. I appreciate that the Minister of State said herself that this issue does not apply just to St. Aidan's school in Enniscorthy.

It is a huge primary school, particularly when one considers all the supports that are required. A letter was sent to the school informing it to seek a rationale for what was required while, at the same time, no one within that organisation, from the bottom to the top, could tell it where to get that rationale. From the conversations I had with the deputy principal and the head of special education teachers in the school when they visited me at my constituency office in Wexford, I know that they tried everything multiple times but no one within the organisation could provide them with the rationale, which seems to be a key component of the appeals process. What does this say about the entire appeals process from the start? Are all schools advised to seek the rationale? The fact that the school could not even be told where to get the rationale and the regional manager said he was seeking guidance indicates to me that there is a bit of chaos within the NCSE when it comes to processing the appeals system. It throws something of a blanket over the appeals process and suggests that it is a matter of just ticking a box to say "Computer says 'No'". It does not have any rationale available despite the fact that it tells schools to look for it. The notion that no one within the organisation knows where to go to find it is quite baffling. I am sure the Minister of State will agree with me in that regard.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and giving us this opportunity to discuss it on the floor of the House. The NCSE allocation and review processes are essential to ensure that SNA support is provided where it is most needed. An appropriate appeal mechanism is an important part of the review process, and this has always been the case. I fully appreciate that schools need to be given whatever information needed in order to put forward a thorough appeal. If schools are not satisfied with the outcome of a SNA review, they can then submit the appeal. As I said, details on how to do that are available online. The NCSE is available to support schools and discuss the deployment of SNA resources allocated to support their students.

With regard to the appeal, it might be helpful to outline some of what is taken into account in terms of the rationale. Special education needs organisers engage with schools, including school leaders, teachers and SNAs, and a national review panel reviews decisions to ensure consistency across the country. Among the factors taken into account are changes in student numbers, changes in individual care needs and students moving from primary to post-primary schools. Sometimes, those factors form part of the rationale. While I do not know the specific details in the case of St. Aidan's Parish School, the information should have been made available to it in a timely fashion.

School Enrolments

Deputy Joe Neville: I was due to speak on the need for an additional class between the three schools on Green Lane in Leixlip. Those three schools are Scoil Bhríde, Scoil Mhuire and Scoil Eoin Phóil. I attended Scoil Eoin Phóil. There is a requirement for an extra class, but I am delighted to say that this morning we finally received the good news that it has been delivered. Obviously, I had put in for this speaking slot and I still wish to speak to the matter.

I am thankful to the parents who raised this issue with me, as well as to the principals who worked with me in the past number of months. This was an issue for parents. It has caused major concern because there is a lack of school places in the Leixlip area. Parents want their children to attend school in their parish, but in excess of 20 parents had not been able to get places for their children. As I said, there was real concern for those children, especially given that some of their siblings already attend the local school. It was a serious, live issue. I thank the three school principals, Anita Clarke, Seán O’Boyle and Áine Crotty, who liaised with me continually over the past number of months. They indicated to me that they wanted to get behind this to provide the extra places. Obviously, we had to convince the Department of the need for the class. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, was amazing throughout the process. She and her team kept going back and forth. I needed to explain to them the importance of delivering this extra school class in our parish. In fairness, it worked and the classroom has been delivered. That group of children will be able to go to school along with their siblings and friends.

This speaks to the wider issue we have in north Kildare and in the Minister of State’s constituency of Dublin West, the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach’s constituency of Wicklow, Deputy Tóibín’s area of south Meath and Wexford town, where Deputy Lawlor is from. There are big population increases in these areas and there is a need for increased school provision. There is an increased demand for Gaelscoileanna, which is hugely important for all our towns and villages. We have demand in our secondary schools. We have a need for secondary school places. We also have a need for extra special education classes. I know this is not hard but they need to be dealt with. We must have a focus on this area.

Every few years, we carry out a census. Every year, we see new numbers coming into the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme. We need to be analysing those numbers clearly and in a qualitative way so we know where issues will arise in individual towns. Growing up in the expanding town of Leixlip in late eighties and the nineties, there was real growth in the area in which we went to school. As that boom declined, the numbers decreased but we are now seeing another housing boom coming back and those numbers are changing. We need to be alive to those changes. We must build for the future. All of these issues are real for the people who live in these communities.

The idea of a parent with one or two children in a certain school having to ultimately put another child in the car for an extra 15 to 20 minutes depending on traffic – we all know how bad traffic can be in north Kildare – is just not tolerable. That was a real concern. I am happy that I have been able to speak and receive text messages from a number of parents today who are so relieved and delighted. I thank them for their forbearance. I also thank the principals for their work. I thank the Department for seeing sense in this proposal and making the right decision. I thank the Minister for her decision as well.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta. I congratulate Deputy Neville and the school communities. I know that he attended one of the schools. I am sure this is a big day for both he Deputy and the school communities. I thank him for raising this issue and for his strong and consistent advocacy on behalf of families in Leixlip. I know he worked very closely with the school community on this issue. His engagement and that of the school community with the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, both on the ground locally and in the House, has been important. I compliment Deputy Neville on his hard work because he has been instrumental in bringing this matter to a positive outcome.

Providing school places for every child, including those with additional needs, is a top priority for the Government. While we are seeing a general decline in enrolments nationally, we know that growing communities like Leixlip are facing real and immediate pressures. Behind every statistic are families who simply want a place for their child in a local school. While the Department is aware of enrolment pressures and demand for additional school places in some areas, it is important to note that enrolment pressures can be driven by duplications of applications, applications from outside an area and school-of-choice factors.

In Leixlip, there has been particular pressure for junior infant places for September 2026. Department officials have been working closely with local schools, analysing the data and responding directly to the concerns raised by parents and the Deputy. Today, I am pleased to confirm a clear and practical step forward. Following direct engagement with Scoil Mhuire on Green Lane, the Department of education has, as the Deputy outlined, now approved the opening of a second junior infant class. This additional class will be in place for September 2026 to accommodate local children.

I am sure the Deputy will agree that this is a real and tangible outcome that will make a difference for families in the area. It will mean more local children will now have access to a place in their community. While places are available across the wider Leixlip area, we recognise that families want to stay local, wherever possible. That is why targeted, local actions like this matter.

The Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in the area. For planning purposes, the Department examines urban areas as a whole and does not recognise parish boundaries in the review. Parents have the right to choose which school to apply to and, where the school has places available, the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary. This selection and enrolment processes must be non-discriminatory and applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, this may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice.

In accordance with the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, schools are required to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admission policies. The criteria to be applied by schools and the order of priority are a matter for the schools. It is an important feature of the act that schools can only make a decision on an application for admission that is based on the school's admission policy.

I am pleased to be putting positive news on the record of the House today. I again thank the Deputy and the local school community in Leixlip who have engaged in a constructive and successful campaign.

Deputy Joe Neville: It is not often that I table a Topical Issue and get the win on the same day. This is a matter I have been raising for a number of months.

As already stated, this is a very positive situation. What has happened speaks to the work of Department in this case. The Minister of State stated that a specific issue can be targeted. I was conscious of the potential for the Department to look organically at this from a high level as opposed to looking at parish boundaries, different clubs and roads and what areas gravitate towards their own areas. Children want to go to school with the other kids who live on their roads.

We have a Gaelscoil and an Educate Together in our area. The Green Lane schools all have a Catholic ethos. Each one offers different things. Ultimately, people want their children to have the opportunity to go to school with other children on their roads and, most importantly, with the children in their homes, namely their older brothers or sisters who are already going to particular schools. In this instance, that would not have been possible until the decision made today. That is why I was quite passionate about this issue, why I liaised, as much as I could, with the schools and the parents involved in respect of it and, ultimately, why I raised it in the Dáil. I also spoke at meetings and raised the issue with the Department.

As I said, in this case, the issue has been resolved. There is a wider issue regarding north Kildare and other areas that have difficulties. I am sure parents in Celbridge, Naas and Kilcock have real concerns about waiting lists for primary and secondary schools. Ultimately, we have a group of families who are delighted. As I said, I am sure other families might be in a position where they are still awaiting decisions. As I said, this is a new good news story for the Green Lanes schools and I am glad to be in a position to have that news.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for outlining the steps he has taken and the positive and proactive engagement he has had with the Minister for Education and Youth and departmental officials and the collaborative way in which he has worked with the school community. That matters and doing that work matters. It is hard and tough work, but as the Deputy can see it gets results. It has got results in this instance.

The message here is very simple. The Government has listened, engaged and delivered. A new junior infant class has now been approved for Scoil Mhuire. Critically, that class will be ready for September of this year. The Deputy mentioned other schools in similar situations. The annual enrolment process for new junior infants at primary level and new first years at post-primary level is a large-scale operation. It is transacted with close to 4,000 schools across the country involving 140,000 pupils. In order to plan for school places and need, the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a geographical information system to anticipate school place demand. Information from a range of sources, including child benefit data, school enrolment data and data on residential development activities is used for this purpose. In addition, the Project Ireland 2040 population and housing targets inform the Department's projection of school place requirements.

The Deputy mentioned constituents in Celbridge and other areas. It is important that they are aware that the Department is looking at this from a holistic perspective and is making sure that the Department is able to provide classes, classrooms and schools where demand exists. Scoil Mhuire and the Green Lane schools very clearly demonstrated that the demand is there, and the Department responded accordingly.

National Monuments

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State for taking this matter, which relates to the Martello tower in Sandymount. The Minister of State will be familiar with Martello towers located across Dublin Bay. I understand that 28 were originally built. Every few of them are in as good nick as the one on Sandymount Strand.

As a local Deputy and a former councillor, I am aware that people have been raising this issue on a continuing basis. They would walk along the promenade past the Martello tower, which is such an iconic building. People have not had access to the inside for decades. Those who have lived in the community long enough remember a time when there was a café in the tower. In other parts of the city, such as Dún Laoghaire, there is a James Joyce museum in a Martello tower.

I could not tell the Minister of State the number of occasions on which I, as a councillor, was contacted by people asking whether anything could be done with the Martello tower. I do not know how often Dublin City Council wrote to the owner to see whether a collaborative approach could be taken to open the tower. We talk about dereliction and vacancy generally across the city. This is a landmark building. The owner is the only person who has access, which he is perfectly entitled to have. The first time anyone has had a glimpse of the inside of the building is right now because it has been put up for sale. Photographs have been published in order that people can see what the tower looks like inside. It has been decades since anyone has peered into the building.

The tower is recognised and registered as a national monument on the national monument registry. There is precedent for the State acquiring buildings that are recognised as national monuments. One of the challenges if the monument goes into private hands is its ability to serve the community and serve its intended purpose. To be fair to the current owner, perhaps 25 years ago or so, a planning application was submitted to put in place a café at the site. For whatever reason, that did not work out.

We should be able to do so much more to recognise and preserve our history. This is a unique opportunity. A tower was constructed over 200 years ago by our then colonial overlords to prevent or at least defend against the perceived risk of a French invasion. We now have an opportunity to preserve and highlight that history. It is not just on behalf of the community that I am making this representation. Sandymount Strand is visited by hundreds of people on a daily basis. It is an oasis on Dublin Bay and a UNESCO biosphere. It is something that the whole of Dublin is proud of, enjoys and frequents.

There would be an enormous opportunity to create a history tour linking all of the Martello towers. It could become an iconic destination. In terms of value for the State, the Government could work with the local authority and Dublin City Council. To be fair to the council, there has already been some preliminary engagement with the seller. The State and the local authority could work together to provide a café on site that would build up revenue. Whatever the capital cost might be right now, it would wash its face within a short period.

The cultural, historic and social dividend for everyone visiting the area would be ginormous. I have raised this matter in order to encourage the relevant agencies of the State to engage with

the sales process and investigate and determine whether it is plausible that the State could acquire this Martello tower.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which provides an opportunity to outline the position of the Office of Public Works, OPW, in regard to the potential acquisition of the Martello tower at Sandymount Strand, although I would suggest that there are other State bodies, Departments and local authorities that will have an interest in this matter.

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the significant historical and cultural value that this tower represents as part of Ireland's built heritage. These early 19th century defensive structures form an important element of our coastal landscape and are closely associated with our architectural, social and literary history, with approximately 50 located around the country. The OPW has responsibility for the care, management and presentation of a large portfolio of heritage sites across the State, as the Deputy will be aware. These include many of Ireland's most significant national monuments, currently numbering approximately 780 sites nationwide, which are under the ownership of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. In this context, it is important to note that the OPW does not have a general role in acquiring national monuments; rather, it is responsible for the conservation, maintenance and management of services of those sites where guiding services exist.

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is a relevant decision maker when the State is considering taking a property or monument into the care of the State. Ultimately, the OPW is responsible for conservation, maintenance and management of what is in the State's control. Acquisitions are considered on a case-by-case basis, having regard to a range of factors, including national significance, strategic fit within the existing portfolio, public access potential and the availability of resources to conserve and manage the site into the future.

As the Deputy said, the State already has a Martello tower in its care. It is managed by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown local authority and operates successfully as the James Joyce Tower and Museum. This demonstrates that, where appropriate, such structures can be preserved and repurposed through collaborative arrangements at local level.

In relation to the specific property referred to, I understand that the Martello tower at Sandymount Strand is in private ownership and has, over time, been used as a private dwelling and for commercial purposes. I commend the fact that the Deputy has engaged with the private owner from his time as a councillor and recognise that the situation will change if, as he stated, the property is up for sale. While the OPW recognises its heritage value, it is the case that the State must carefully consider its approach to acquiring historic properties. The assumption of ownership, as I am sure the Deputy understands, brings with it long-term obligations in terms of conservation, maintenance and public access. All of this must be carefully considered in the context of competing priorities across the heritage sector. In addition, local authorities are often best placed to bring forward proposals for the reuse and regeneration of heritage buildings where there is a clear community or civic function identified.

I was really pleased to hear the Deputy say that it is his understanding that preliminary engagement has already begun between the seller and Dublin City Council as that may be a really good avenue to continue to explore. Any future proposal for the Martello tower at

Sandymount Strand may be more appropriately considered at local authority level, in this instance Dublin City Council, and potentially in partnership with other stakeholders. I urge the Deputy to continue to engage with the city council on this matter. If the tower is up for sale, it is obviously now an opportunity for those discussions to happen in a serious context.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State. I am very encouraged by the reply. I may be too much of an optimist. However, to be fair to the OPW, particularly in the context of the reply the Minister of State read out its behalf, it has highlighted a very successful model that has worked when working with a local authority in the preservation of Martello tower in Dún Laoghaire, which is not very far away from the Martello tower in Sandymount, and how it successfully operates as a museum. It is my understanding, as already stated, that there has been some engagement on the part of the local authority regarding the sales process. I acknowledge that it identifies the parent Department as being the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which might have a role in directing the OPW in this matter.

This is clearly an area in which the State has comfort. What everybody wants to see is a community dividend from this unique opportunity. I would be concerned that the relevant stakeholders on the State side will not grasp the nettle. This is a live sale process. Theoretically, the tower could be acquired by any person who wishes to acquire it right now. It is for sale on the open market. I will certainly be engaging with Dublin City Council on foot of the reply that has been given. Equally, I will engage with the Ministers responsible in the Department of heritage, particularly as this Martello tower is registered as a national monument. I will highlight, as the OPW has done, a ready-made existing policy, not something to be feared by the State, that has proven successful, viable and that it has the experience to deal with the maintenance of such an important building.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy. I agree. The fact that this is a registered national monument that is located in a UNESCO biosphere on, as the Deputy put it, the oasis that is Dublin Bay, this does represent a unique opportunity now that it is for sale. To reiterate, the OPW does not have plans to acquire the tower, but it is standing ready to engage constructively with relevant stakeholders, where appropriate, and remains committed to the conservation and the promotion of Ireland's built heritage and its natural heritage more broadly.

What the Deputy said regarding continuing engagement with Dublin City Council is very positive and is something I would actively encourage him to do. In my constituency, we had a similar situation whereby Lucan House, which is the former residence of the Italian ambassador to Ireland, was going to be put up for sale on the open market. We have really benefited from the fact that South Dublin County Council, our local authority, was in a position to purchase the estate. While it is still not fully open to the public, it was open on Saturday and it was great to have so many people there enjoying the atmosphere and the stunning grounds. The house itself will soon be open to the public. There is precedent for local authorities taking the lead on this, obviously supported by national Government.

There is the precedent for local authorities to take the lead in circumstances where the OPW does not necessarily see that something is a fit for it. In this instance, the OPW has clearly stated that it is not a fit for it in the here and now, but having Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council operate a successful museum in a very similar tower not far away does offer a roadmap for success. Ultimately, I know the Deputy's goal is to preserve this historic amenity and to

bring to life its history and that would be a wonderful thing if he was able to partner with Dublin City Council to achieve.

Message from the Standing Business Committee of Dáil Éireann

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): The Standing Business Committee of Dáil Éireann has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by Deputy John Brady to waive the requirement for scrutiny of the Flood Insurance Bill 2021 by the relevant committee under Standing Order 103 and has agreed thereto.

An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (Cearta Vótála i dToghcháin Uachtaráin) 2025: An Dara Céim [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tairgim: “Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois.”

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

I am delighted to be able to introduce this Bill in the House today. It is a good-news story. The Bill simply seeks to extend the democratic franchise, the right to vote, to all Irish citizens across the country in presidential elections. This is no small thing at all. Enfranchising 1 million Irish citizens is massively important. It is historic in many ways. This Bill would have significant consequences. To put it in context, the last time we saw a Bill affecting the franchise on this island at this level was in 1918. The last time that any legislation was passed to give the right to vote to a section of Irish citizens across the country was over 100 years ago. Indeed, the last time Irish citizens in the North of Ireland got a chance to vote in an all-Ireland election was in 1918. That is an incredible fact.

This Bill should not be underestimated. I ask the Minister of State to imagine circumstances in which she, as a passport holder and an Irish citizen, did not have or was denied the right to vote in a presidential election. Imagine if it was not just her but also her family and entire constituency that was refused the right to vote in a presidential election. I imagine she would be furious. She would see that as a massive attack on and affront to her democratic rights. Yet, that is exactly what is happening in the North of Ireland at present. Hundreds of thousands of citizens who were born in Ireland, who live in Ireland, who play Gaelic games and who hold Irish passports are refused the right to vote. In many ways, this is an affront to the Good Friday Agreement, which states that citizens in the North of Ireland have the right to Irish citizenship.

The Good Friday Agreement has been in place since 1998 but we still have not implemented the spirit of it in the intervening period. I ask the Minister of State to imagine the sheer joy of Irish citizens in the North of Ireland if they were able to cast a vote in an all-Ireland election for the first time since 1918 and the sheer joy she would afford them if they were allowed to do so. Shockingly, a person from the North of Ireland can campaign in a presidential election. They can put their name forward for election as President. They can win a presidential election.

They can actually be the President of this country, but they cannot vote in presidential elections. Mary McAleese is the perfect example in this regard. Would the Minister of State deny Mary McAleese's Irishness? Would she say that she is less Irish than she or I because of where she was born and raised? I am sure the Minister of State would not do so.

5 o'clock

Yet, in a legal and democratic sense, we do exactly that to well over 700,000 passport holders in the North of Ireland. Irish citizens from the North of Ireland can join the Irish Army. They can fight and die for Ireland but they do not have the right to vote in a democratic election on the island of Ireland. That is an affront. It is wrong and it needs to be changed.

The legislation that we in Aontú have put forward is not a zero-sum Bill. Often, we talk about the constitutional situation in the North of Ireland as, when nationalists gain something, it in some way takes a right from our unionist brothers and sisters. This Bill does not do that in any sense. It does not remove anything from our unionist brothers and sisters. It simply adds to the rights of Irish people. On most of the constitutional questions that we discuss, debate or converse on in the Dáil, we talk about not having the ability to do it. However, the crazy thing is that the power for this change lies not in Westminster or Stormont, but here in Leinster House. It is we who can make the change in law to create the constitutional right for people to have a referendum on this issue. This is in our gift. If there is a wrong in relation to people not being given the right to vote in the North of Ireland, that wrong lies on the shoulders of the people here.

It is over 100 years since the Irish Boundary Commission. If the Minister of State knows her history, she will know that the Boundary Commission was just one in a long list of bitter blows against Northern nationalists in terms of participating in Ireland. It shut the door to Northern nationalists playing a democratic role here. Surely, it is now time, 100 years later, for us to open that door to these citizens to be able to vote in this country.

From what I know, Fine Gael supports a united Ireland. It is my understanding that every party in this Dáil currently supports a united Ireland. For some people, Irish unity is for some time in the future. For Aontú, we support it now. The majority of Irish citizens, when polled, say over and over again that they support a united Ireland. This Bill does not even go that far. It is an incremental step along the way, but it does not go that far.

My understanding is that the Government is not going to oppose the Bill on Second Stage. I welcome that. It is wonderful that the Government is not going to oppose it. I urge the Government to join in a cross-party effort to speedily get this legislation through the Oireachtas in the next year. Sometimes, it is the practice of the Government not to oppose something that is popular. We often see that the best way for a Government to say "No" is to say "Yes" and then do nothing about it. My worry is that this Bill will get through Second Stage but then languish just before it gets into committee. In other words, the Government majority on a committee will simply not facilitate the Bill moving to Committee Stage to allow it to proceed. If that happens, it will be absolutely shocking.

One of the barriers to this Bill - it is the same as the barrier to a united Ireland - is that some political parties see these steps as a threat to their own party interests. Some political parties put their party interests ahead of the national interest on these issues. Before partition was introduced, Liam Mellows stated that if partition was introduced, two establishments would

grow on either side of the Border that would depend on the Border for their power and the removal of the Border would threaten their ability to govern, and so it has come to pass in many ways.

If we are honest, there are those in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil who see this Bill, if it were in place, as preventing them from having the opportunity to win a presidential election. Maybe 700,000 voters from the North of Ireland would plump for a Sinn Féin candidate and, therefore, make it more difficult for Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael to win a presidential election. It has always been Aontú's view that the reason Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are reticent about Irish unity is that they are regional political parties. They are not national political parties. They do not represent Irish people in the North of Ireland. Therefore, in a general election, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's representation in an all-Ireland Dáil would shrink and they would be less likely to be able to form a Government. If that is the case, it is wrong. It is wrong for an individual political party to put party political interests ahead of the national interest. I urge the Government to make sure that is not the case. If that is the Government's fear, the democratic right to vote should not be dependent upon the outcome of an election. The right to vote, the franchise, should be independent of that outcome, whatever it should be. As a democrat, I think the Minister of State would agree with that premise.

Right now, Sinn Féin in the North of Ireland is not doing so well politically. According to the opinion polls, its support is at its lowest in five years. Northern nationalists now have much more opportunity to vote for other political parties, such as Aontú, than they did before. It is not a given that 700,000 voters in the North of Ireland would plump for one political party.

This Bill has the potential to create a dynamic in all-Ireland politics that we do not even understand. Through legislation like this, some people from a Protestant, unionist and loyalist background would be attracted to also vote in a presidential election. People from a unionist background might vote for Fine Gael. They might feel that Fine Gael is the logical party to vote for in such a situation. There is no guarantee that only nationalists would vote in a presidential election. There is a growing number of people from a Protestant, unionist and loyalist background in the North of Ireland who, because of Brexit, have become frustrated with the so-called United Kingdom and are now more interested in the opportunities that a united Ireland could provide, or at least an all-Ireland democracy could provide. That situation could very easily develop if this Bill were enacted.

If a small political party like Aontú can function in the North of Ireland, form cumainn and compete in elections, and if the Green Party and People Before Profit can do likewise, why can the Government parties not do it? Why can Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil not represent people in the North of Ireland? Fianna Fáil was very close to doing so once when it opened a cumann in Queen's University. It planned to open further cumainn in the North. Mark Daly and Éamon Ó Cuív were suspended from Fianna Fáil for landing in Omagh to officially declare a candidate in an election as a Fianna Fáil candidate in the North of Ireland. Unfortunately, under Micheál Martin, that move towards united Ireland politics has reversed significantly. Hopefully when Micheál Martin retires, Fianna Fáil too will open cumainn in the North and contest elections. That is the solution to this. Without any change in the law, all political parties could create an all-Ireland dynamic by simply standing for elections in the North. We have a moral responsibility to represent all Irish people in Ireland and not just a segment of people in the North. This is important for the Government's future development. A united Ireland is coming.

There is a growing demographic change in the North of Ireland. There is a growing section of the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community in the North who have an interest in Irish unity. Due to Brexit, there are significant changes happening.

In Stormont, Westminster and local elections, the number of nationalist votes is increasing year by year. It is in the long-term interest of the Government parties to contest future elections in the North of Ireland. This Bill is an historic opportunity. It is an opportunity to build a democratic country, North and South, and realise the objectives of many of the founding fathers of the Minister of State's political party. There are many debates around this issue. The key debate, however, is how it is just or moral that an Irish citizen one mile south of the Border can vote in a presidential election while an Irish citizen one mile north of the Border cannot vote in that same presidential election. This is a very simple Bill that does not remove any rights from any section or community in the North of Ireland. It is a Bill that adds. It is an additional human rights Bill. It is an additional democratic Bill for people in the North of Ireland.

When we talk about the North and presidential elections, many people say there are more important things at the moment, in terms of the cost-of-living crisis, housing and healthcare.

I would say "No", actually. There are urgent things in life and there are important things in life. There is an urgency to the cost-of-living crisis, to housing and to healthcare, but over the 100 years development of this country, it is in our national interest to be able to organise on an island basis. It is in our national interest in terms of developing a bigger economy and a more efficient public service. The Border is like a wall with 1,000 blocks. Each of those blocks is impeding development North and South, whether it is spatial development, healthcare development, such as an all-Ireland ambulance service, or educational development. Universities are working in some cases with their backs to each other. Incredibly, we are still spatially developing this country with our backs to each other and at a cost to each other.

People say there is an economic cost to all this. I say the people in Dundalk are just as hard-working as the people in Newry, the people in Dungannon are just as enterprising as the people in Monaghan and the people in Derry are just as hard-working as the people in Letterkenny. The key ingredient that is missing is self-determination: the ability of the Irish people to make decisions for ourselves for the betterment of this country.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I can confirm the Government will not oppose the motion and will continue to keep the matter of extending the right to vote in presidential elections to citizens overseas outside the State under review.

The story of emigration from our island is long and layered. For many years, the prevailing narrative rightly focused on the fact that economic challenges and social exclusion meant that, for many, emigration was seen as the only viable option. For others, particularly more recently, emigration was a choice made under more positive circumstances. In our work, we are fortunate to witness the role the diaspora plays in carrying Ireland's voice and values around the world.

From talking to colleagues across the Oireachtas, two things stand out. First, there is hardly a town, village or community across Ireland that has not been impacted by emigration. Like many in the Chamber, I have direct experience of family and friends moving abroad and the

strange gap that exists when someone who was always around is now in another country. Second, we all share a desire to deepen the ties between Ireland and the Irish abroad.

Earlier today, in line with the commitment made in the programme for Government, my colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for international development and diaspora, Deputy Richmond, launched the Government's new diaspora strategy. The launch was one of the highlights of the fourth Global Irish Civic Forum, which takes place in Croke Park today and tomorrow. The forum is an integral element of the Government's engagement with Irish communities abroad. It has brought together 250 people from 21 countries for two days of networking and discussions on the challenges and opportunities facing the Irish abroad.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not about "abroad". There is nothing in the Bill about being abroad or emigration or diaspora. It is purely the North of Ireland.

Deputy Emer Higgins: When I was abroad, I had the opportunity to meet very active Irish communities in Sweden and Denmark. I am pleased Irish politicians get the opportunity to engage with so many Irish living across the world. Throughout 2025, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, led the most intensive consultation ever undertaken with the Irish abroad. The centrepiece of the process was a series of formal consultations led by Ministers in 27 cities across 17 countries, including Ireland. Just under 500 individuals attended these discussions, with over 250 organisations represented. In addition to the formal public consultations, the strategy was informed by engagements with a range of stakeholders from the Oireachtas, civil society, NGOs, community and cultural movements and groups, business networks and academic institutions at home and abroad.

The in-person consultations were supplemented by the Global Irish Survey, our first ever online survey of the Irish abroad. That consultation launched on 7 July 2025 and ran for seven weeks throughout the summer of 2025. Over 10,000 responses were received. The overall response to this open and expansive approach in person and online was very positive. In a changing and complex world, building an enduring relationship with the diaspora remains as significant as ever to our national identity. Our new strategy reflects the commitment of the Government to work with the diaspora on a new and unprecedented chapter in diaspora relations. There are 23 commitments and they focus directly on the challenges and opportunities identified by the Irish abroad during the consultation process. Given my portfolio, I welcome the commitment to open doors for those from under-represented groups to engage with Ireland.

I will deal with the substance of the Deputy's Bill, which is votes for citizens outside our jurisdiction. As I understand it, the Bill seeks to extend the presidential franchise to citizens resident in Northern Ireland. The issue of voting rights in Irish presidential elections was debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly last year. We have also been supportive of the work undertaken by the Convention on the Constitution. This matter is not without challenges. At an operational level, a number of implementation issues will have to be addressed, including the establishment of an online-based voter registration and the extension of postal voting.

Before that, we are all aware that extending the franchise will require constitutional change. It is important, as we have this discussion, that we do not underestimate the challenge constitutional change brings. In the course of the last Government we held two referendums

and both were defeated. I believe in expanding the presidential franchise to all Irish citizens, regardless of where they live on this island or around the world, but to get to that point we have to win that debate. When you hold a referendum, you need to be, as we found out, in a position to win, and preferably to win strongly. If you do not, then the chance to extend the franchise will be lost for a generation.

When this debate arises, the Government is often accused of not supporting an extension because we would not like the result. Like all here this evening, I am a democrat, I was democratically elected and I would not support approaching the matter in an undemocratic way, but we have to be clear as to what is possible. Holding a referendum is a political decision that needs to be taken by the government of the day. I assure the Dáil that this Government is reflecting on this issue for that exact reason.

I have a number of speaking points in relation to deepening ties with the global Irish but I appreciate the Deputy's comments that he would like the debate to focus on the specifics of the Bill, which concern citizens resident on the island of Ireland. While those comments have been circulated, I will take the Deputy's feedback on board and leave it at that.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Tacaím leis an mBille seo. Tá sé ag dul sa treo ceart. This Bill is going in the right direction and we will support it. Sinn Féin firmly believes in the core republican principle of equal citizenship and supports the right of all citizens of voting age to vote for the Irish President, regardless of their place of residence. The Good Friday Agreement states the Government recognises the right of all people born in the North to identify as Irish citizens if they wish. We should not treat them as second-class Irish citizens but as full Irish citizens with full voting rights. It is a dreadful exclusion that our citizens in the North are treated with such disdain that they cannot vote for the President of Ireland.

In September 2013, 73% of the members of the constitutional convention voted in favour of giving Irish citizens resident in the North a presidential vote. This was not the answer the sitting Fine Gael-Labour Government wanted and that Government missed deadlines in issuing responses to recommendations of the convention, refused to hold referendums on many of its recommendations and held an unsuccessful referendum on the future of the Seanad, without the support of the convention. The Government should have faced up to the democratic demands of that convention to end this disenfranchisement. Instead, it pretended it never happened, as governments always do when citizens' assemblies do not produce the result they want. We are still waiting for meaningful action on the report from the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use.

It fell to the Opposition to try to make real the change that the Assembly demanded. Gerry Adams and I introduced a Bill very similar to the one we are debating now in March 2014. It would have been the thirty-fourth amendment to the Constitution. Many referendums have come and gone, and still our Northern citizens are excluded. Our Bill would have granted the franchise to every citizen of Ireland without disqualification on the basis of place of residency. In this regard, I refer to many of the issues the Minister of State dealt with.

I would like to think that the President represents us all and that every citizen would have a say in the selection of their representative. While this Bill is narrower in scope than mine, it would be an important first step and a realisation that the Good Friday Agreement promised

that all citizens would be equal. My Bill is still on the Order Paper and ready to go if the Government lends its support to it.

There is always talk of the legal and logistical challenges that come with change like this. However, are we really saying we cannot organise polling stations or a postal vote across the North? People queuing up outside embassies in Dublin in order that they can vote in elections back home is a regular sight, and not just in the case of presidential elections. Some countries, including South Africa, allow a special vote for all citizens abroad in their national elections. We act as if it would be the biggest logistical feat since the Berlin airlift. Ireland is, in fact, among a small minority of countries that do not allow non-resident citizens any sort of voting rights. One hundred and forty countries currently allow voting in at least some elections.

There is a broader discussion to be had in this State about the obstacles to voting. The difficulty in obtaining a postal vote is on that list, along with the poor quality of the electoral register. Let me quote the 2020 general election manifesto of Fine Gael:

We support extending the franchise at presidential elections to Irish citizens resident outside the State. This referendum will take place within the first year of Fine Gael being returned to Government. If passed, this will allow Irish citizens in Northern Ireland and around the world to vote in the next presidential election, in 2025.

These are the words of the Fine Gael Party. That was the commitment it made to the people, supposedly in exchange for their support. Fine Gael was returned to office, but there was no referendum.

The presidential election has come and gone. It is not as if Fine Gael did not have plenty of opportunity. Former Minister for foreign affairs Simon Coveney introduced a Bill in this area in 2019, with the referendum question already worded. The previous Government could have picked up where he left off, and no one in this House, bar, perhaps, the current Taoiseach, would have objected.

We cannot go on ignoring the right of all our citizens to have a say. We are reducing their citizenship to little more than a passport. Let us start with giving our Northern countrymen and countrywomen a vote for a President who represents all on our island.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Is Bille maith é seo agus táimid ag tacadh leis.

It is fair to say that this State has abjectly failed those in the North for many years. The issue we are dealing with is therefore the continuous failure over many years. It is also fair to say that primary responsibility for partition lies with Britain. Partition entailed the idea of Britain maintaining a foothold in Ireland, not so much facilitating Ulster unionists as using them – not for the first time and not for the last. We cannot forget the threat from David Lloyd George of “immediate and terrible war”. Obviously, that led to a really sad history. It broke many families, created a huge split in what had been the independence movement and eventually led to the creation of Cumann na nGaedheal, which later became Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. I agree with what Deputy Tóibín said about the necessity for any parties here to organise in the North, but ours would have been a very different history had those parties organised in the North. This would have changed their mindset in relation to many events. Maybe we could have avoided much of what happened, down to the fact that the North became, for all the failings of this State, a sectarian state, a sectarian Orange state that maintained the

supremacy of unionism over nationalism and treated Catholic nationalists, it is fair to say, like dirt. Unfortunately, the British Government and Governments down here did nothing to address this for 50 years, and that is what led to what was a community insurrection and, unfortunately, huge pain on all sides. We are a lot happier that we are in our current position. However, the only point of that is actually delivering on our citizens' rights across this island.

We are talking about voting for Uachtarán na hÉireann. That is fairly straightforward. I refer to the idea that the Irish President would represent the Irish people. You would think that would include those in the Six Counties. The Minister of State's former leader, Leo Varadkar, accepted that Northern nationalists had been failed for many years, so I would like to think a move could be made to address this issue.

Deputy Crowe spoke about the 2013 constitutional convention, and that should have been the impetus to take action. The Deputy spoke of the fact that he and Gerry Adams produced legislation in 2014. Unfortunately, none of these opportunities have been taken up. We failed to deliver for the last presidential election.

I accept some of what the Minister of State emphasised regarding the diaspora. Given our history of emigration and families torn asunder, we should do everything to ensure we engage those who have found themselves on far-flung shores. Unfortunately, some of our young people have had to leave because of issues with housing, childcare and all the other cost-of-living issues that unfortunately existed here long before the present cost-of-fuel crisis.

Deputy Crowe stated it quite clearly: we have all seen in news reports and elsewhere people queuing up outside embassies to vote in far-flung places, whether in parts of eastern Europe or elsewhere all over the world. In eastern Europe, people had a long history of not being able to vote. It cannot be impossible for us to facilitate voting, no more than it cannot be impossible to find a means by which we could facilitate those in the North to vote in a presidential election.

A much bigger body of work has to be done. The failure does not start and stop with presidential elections. In this Chamber, it should be possible to provide speaking time for those who represent citizens in the North, those who are elected in the North. It is vital that we bring their voice to this Chamber. The fact is that demographics are changing. There is a conversation happening across Ireland and there are significant sections, even within the Protestant unionist community, who now see Irish unity as a sensible option, including for reasons such as being part of the EU. Many were not very taken by the madness that took Britain and the North out of the EU, particularly when the majority in the North voted to stay in it. They have seen the chaos that has existed in Westminster for far too long.

We will rail about this Government and what it has failed to do, but I believe more and more people on this island realise that the best way to make decisions for the people of Ireland, North and South, is to make them here on the island. Too many times, we have seen how there are insufficient powers in the Executive and the Assembly when it comes to taxation and other very particular issues where powers are still maintained by Westminster. These are all issues that need to be addressed.

We need this Government to take the right steps. We are talking about Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government. Fianna Fáil would profess to be the republican party and the Minister of State's party professes to be the united Ireland party. I would like to see some action in that direction. The Taoiseach has set his mind against any moves on Irish unity. We all accept very

much that good work has been done by the shared island unit and I think we all want to eventually see the necessary work done on the A5. All of us see Narrow Water Bridge as an example of a spectacular project connecting my constituency with County Down. We know that there will be huge benefits not only from the point of view of transport and connectivity, but also from a tourism point of view. However, we also have to make sure that we follow through on the conversations that are happening about constitutional change.

From my point of view, it is about removing the British presence from Ireland, but it will probably be a very different united Ireland than I would have thought when I was 17. We are talking about an agreed Ireland. It is an Ireland where we have to make space for unionism and for those who see themselves as British. There is an argument that there is an onus on all of us in a referendum to be able to sell the idea that life would be better for them and their children and that we can deal with the inadequacies across both states relating to health, education and ensuring the sustainability of the economy. It is as simple as that - that we can literally put together a roadmap to Irish unity that can provide for better lives so that we can cherish all the children of the nation equally. That is something that we should all espouse.

The problem is that the Taoiseach and the Government have stated that we have to wait on this perfect moment of utopia involving what the Taoiseach terms complete and utter reconciliation. Fine Gael's former leader Leo Varadkar said that if this had been the idea, the Good Friday Agreement would not have been agreed upon. It is nearly 30 years since the Good Friday Agreement and we are in a much better place.

When we are talking about giving citizens in the North the right to be able to vote in a presidential election, we are talking about the bare minimum. We need to see the preparatory work this State has the capacity to do actually being done. Even if people do not want to call it a citizens' assembly, we need some sort of forum where people can have a conversation about what Irish unity would look like and where they could deal with those particular issues and the worries that some people have. I do not see a British Government agreeing to a referendum date on Irish unity when you have an Irish Government that will not even ask the question. Rather than supporting this today and then letting it wither on the vine, we need to see movement. Regardless of whether it is Deputy Tóibín's legislation, Gerry Adams and Deputy Seán Crowe's legislation or the Government's, we need to see delivery. I have no problem with making sure that as many members of our diaspora as possible can vote but we must ensure that citizens from the North who live on this island can vote in a presidential election and then see real movement toward building the republic that many have died for over many generations. That is what we need to see. Go raigh maith go léir agus an phoblacht abú.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I listened to the Minister of State's speech and looked at the hard copy of it here. The vast bulk of this speech - up to 75% to 80% of it - is about a topic that is not included in the Bill at all. There are a couple of reasons there is a significant problem with this. In the speech, the Minister of State mentioned emigration, overseas, the Irish abroad and the diaspora. This Bill has nothing to do with any of those people at all. They are a completely separate issue. I am not sure if this is a mistake or if it is purposeful and I will tell the House why. If someone goes to the Fine Gael website and clicks on the North of Ireland or if someone from the North of Ireland wants to join Fine Gael, it actually terms it "overseas members", so someone from Newry who wants to join Fine Gael must join as an overseas member. I mean no disrespect but I am not sure if the Minister of State wrote this. It would be better for her if

she did not write this, to be honest, because this is not about the topic at hand, and if it is about the topic at hand, it is deeply disrespectful to Northern nationalists. Imagine someone from the North of Ireland listening to this - as many people are likely to be doing because this is a big issue in the Six Counties - and a Minister of State of the Government talking about overseas Irish, global Irish, diaspora Irish, emigrants, etc.,-----

Deputy Emer Higgins: Deputy, I also spoke about votes for citizens in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: But I have the hard copy-----

Deputy Emer Higgins: We had a back and forth about this. On a point of order-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In fairness, if I stood up in the Minister of State's place, I would be ruled out of order very quickly.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I would just like to raise a point of order. Am I entitled-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: An Teachta Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have the hard copy here and 75% of the speech is either an insult to Northern nationalists or is a mistake, and that is very problematic. The context of me saying this is the fact that the people of the North of Ireland have gone through very difficult times in the past 100 years - heart-breaking, devastating challenges over the past 100 years - but at the heart of the annoyance felt by Northern nationalists is the strong feeling that they have long been betrayed by the political establishment in the South of Ireland. There is a very strong belief running through people in the North of Ireland that in their time of need, there has never been or has seldom been solidarity from the South. There have seldom been efforts to really stand up for their interests and rights. That feeling of betrayal will be magnified in many ways by the words of the Minister of State on this.

The Minister of State stated that she and her Government were reflecting on this issue. Reflection is good. I am a fan of reflection but reflection has to have some time limit for when it is complete. The programme for Government in 2020 stated that this Government would introduce a Bill that would give voting rights to the people of the North of Ireland. We are six years later. The Government had already given the commitment and has not fulfilled that particular commitment. The citizens' assembly also voted by a majority that voting rights should be given to the people of the North of Ireland. On foot of the Aontú Bill tabled initially, Sinn Féin tabled a non-binding Bill in Stormont that was supported by the majority of MLAs. Opinion polls have shown that there is support for this. Maybe there is reflection but maybe there is reflection in an effort to be in a position of paralysis and not actually do anything about this.

Voting rights for the diaspora is a completely different project to voting rights in the North of Ireland. I am in favour of voting rights but with regard to saying that a person in Johannesburg should have the same right to vote as a person in Forkhill, that a person in Buenos Aires should have the same right to vote as a person in Belcoo or that a person in Shanghai

should have the same right to vote as a person in Strabane, they are two completely different proposals and should not be lumped in together or even understood together.

To understand them together completely changes what it is to be an Irish citizen. The Constitution and the Good Friday Agreement state that a person, as in the Good Friday Agreement, has a right to be an Irish citizen. All I am saying is that because of that inherent right, it should be fulfilled in their rights to have a democratic franchise. That is what we are looking for with this.

I accept and agree with the Minister of State on a point and I do not want to be totally negative on this. I agree there is a challenge in the functionality of whatever election is held in the future in terms of making sure we register people in the North of Ireland properly and that we have a facility whereby people are able to cast their votes properly. However, that is a challenge that is surmounted by 140 countries around the world in facilitating voting in an election outside of the specific jurisdiction. It is nothing new and has been happening for well over 100 years in many different places and there is an opportunity there.

The Government also mentioned that reconciliation should happen before these decisions are taken and this is the mad thing. If I can have her attention for just a second, this is important. Reconciliation has happened pretty much 100% since partition in the South of Ireland. Most people who come from families who were unionists or loyalists in the South of Ireland are fully reconciled with the southern State. I do not know of anybody in the South who is from that original community and is not reconciled with their brothers and sisters, their neighbours or the State. In the North, it is the opposite. The Northern state has fossilised and petrified conflict. The Northern state, because it has been so wrong and unfair in how nationalists have been treated, has actually maintained the issues at the heart of the conflict and reconciliation is far more difficult in the North of Ireland. If you want to turbo-boost reconciliation, the way to do that is on an all-island basis. If you want to stop reconciliation happening, maintain the *status quo*. When Micheál Martin states reconciliation must happen before we enter upon this journey, his policy is to maintain the seeds of conflict in place and all the negativity that comes from that.

In another aspect to this issue, back in 2018 I was the rapporteur for the enterprise committee and I was given the task of carrying out the first report in Leinster House on the all-Ireland economy since partition. I interviewed about 100 people from all different backgrounds in the North of Ireland from different communities including Catholics, Protestants, trade unionists, business people, farmers, people in the public sector, etc., and one common thing in all those discussions was that if we plan together, fund together and deliver services together, they simply will be better services and will be more efficient and cheaper to deliver.

There is so much opportunity at the heart of the proposals we have for this particular Bill and for Irish unity. I am thinking of many of the Aontú representatives in the North of Ireland such as Gemma Brolly, a representative for us in East Derry, Liam Reichenberg in south Armagh, Roisin Mulgrew in Newry and all the people who represent Aontú in the North of Ireland. I am thinking of all the hard work they do on a daily basis to build positive relationships with their communities but also to further the objective of having a society that allows for equality among Irish citizens. The *status quo* makes one Irish citizen more equal than the others.

I urge the Government to see this as a legacy issue. The Minister of State could go through governance for the next few years and in 100 years' time, what does she think the people will think about her Government? In 100 years' time, if Government passes a Bill such as this, that will be the issue it will be remembered for. This is a legacy-type Bill. This is a Bill that transforms a country's ability to include everybody on the island of Ireland. This is a Bill of significance, up there with the extension of the franchise to women and the extension of the franchise to people in 1918. This is a Bill of significant magnitude and I urge the Government to take it from us and run with it. Please do not let it get blocked by intransigence on Committee Stage and allow citizens in the North to use the next election in six and a half years' time to be the first election since 1918 where they can participate in their democratic franchise as equal Irish citizens.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): The Government recognises that conversations on issues like this lead to more specific discussion and engagement, North and South, about constitutional change more broadly, as provided for under the Good Friday Agreement. That is why we are not opposing this Bill and why we want to have this debate in this Chamber. However, I do not appreciate some of the comments the Deputy has made in his remarks. These are extremely important issues and they naturally require very careful and serious consideration.

We have taken careful note of the reports published by the last Oireachtas on these issues. The full implementation and effective operation of the Good Friday Agreement is an absolute priority for this Government. In addition to the rights regarding identity, the principle of consent and the possibility of change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland are fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement endorsed by the people of this island, the island of Ireland, both North and South. The approach of any Irish Government regarding Irish unity is guided by Article 3 of the Constitution, as amended by the people in 1998, as the Deputy will be aware.

The Government firmly respects and affirms everyone's right on the island to make the case for the constitutional future they wish to see, whether they are nationalist, unionist or neither. The Good Friday Agreement and the two sovereign Governments explicitly recognise and validate the legitimacy of views on these constitutional positions. Our focus through the shared island initiative is in working towards a shared future underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. That approach is necessary, regardless of whatever shape, future or constitutional change may take on this island or between these groups.

I am talking about constitutional change because, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Bill would require constitutional change. The Deputy's Bill would require a referendum. The issue of voting rights in the Irish presidential elections, as I said earlier, was debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly last year and we have been supportive of the work undertaken by the Convention on the Constitution. This is not without its challenges and Deputies Crowe, Ó Murchú and Tóibín had specific queries and comments regarding those challenges I mentioned.

Ultimately, the issue of expanding the right to vote in presidential elections for Irish citizens resident outside of the State and those in Northern Ireland is a sensitive topic and requires thorough and respectful dialogue across this House. I commend Members this evening on their contributions and note that until recently, it was mature and constructive debate, which is a

debate I want to engage in. On the specifics of this Bill, namely, expanding the franchise to Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement makes clear the people of Northern Ireland can, as we all appreciate and respect, identify as British, Irish or both. Article 2 of the Constitution, as amended, forms a key part of the agreement and ensures the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation.

This Government and all governments since 1998 have advocated for and defended that right, and we must do so as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and will continue to do so. However, the issue of extending the franchise for voting in presidential elections is not straightforward. The work undertaken by the Convention on the Constitution and voting rights and other matters was important, and the detailed 2017 options paper on the matter prepared by the Department of housing, planning, community and local government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, considered a range of policy, legal and logistical matters that need consideration. As I said earlier, these include the register of electors and postal voting, for example. I am not saying it cannot be done; I am saying it requires careful thought and preparation, as well as securing a positive result in a referendum.

The Government is focused on what is attainable - the art of the possible. We want to hold a referendum that we can win. We believe that if you hold a referendum, you need to be in a position to win it. That is why it is imperative that we continue to maintain cross-party dialogue on this topic and that we continue to be respectful of people when it comes to it.

I wish to reassure the Dáil that the Government takes this matter seriously. We are not opposing this Bill for that reason. We are, as I said earlier, reflecting on it and on how best to work on it going forward.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.51 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 6 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.51 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 May 2026.