



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 7 Bealtaine 2026

Thursday, 7 May 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Swimming Pools

1. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport given the significant deficiencies in Ireland's swimming pool infrastructure and the pressing need for urgent investment and strategic planning to ensure every Irish person has access to swimming facilities, to outline in detail the way in which he intends to action this; the timelines for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32735/26]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Considering the significant deficiencies in Ireland's swimming pool infrastructure and the need for urgent investment, can the Minister of State make a statement outlining how we intend to action this, and provide some indicative timelines for same?

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Ireland's first ever national swimming strategy was published in 2024 and sets out a vision to provide everyone in our country with an opportunity to swim. It includes an action plan containing over 50 actions across five thematic strands, focusing on providing improved facilities, increasing access for people with disabilities, improving the culture of inclusion, better coaching supports, increasing safety awareness and providing a pathway that allows for the nurturing and development of potential high performers.

Further to a specific action in the strategy, Swim Ireland carried out an in-depth analysis of swimming pool provision within Ireland, examining the condition and age of facilities, community accessibility, the availability of swimming lessons, energy and sustainability practices and the provincial and county-level distribution of pools. The resultant Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report was published in late 2025 and is available on Swim Ireland's website. The report is currently being examined by my Department and will be a key input to the future development of swimming pool facilities by enabling enhanced decision-making with regard to targeting investment more effectively.

The report was funded by the Department of sport. The report was carried out and commissioned by Swim Ireland on the back of the funding from the Government for that purpose.

At the moment, two capital funding programmes support investment in sports infrastructure, namely the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. LSSIF applications must be made by either a local authority or a national governing body of sport. The LSSIF is currently closed to applications, and no decisions have yet been made regarding the timing of the next round. Applications for the refurbishment of pools, for other swimming infrastructure works and for the purchase of non-personal swimming equipment can be made under the CSFF, the next round of which we intend to open in the near future over the summer. We will continue to fully assess the report in terms of how we can support the issues and gaps raised and clarified.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Ireland has only public pool per 81,000 people. That is a significant deficit compared with other nations like Scotland, which has one per 14,000 people. The Government, like previous Governments, has acknowledged the problem but there is no viable plan to resolve it. The Minister of State has accepted the Swim Ireland report, a pool within reach. That remains a distant reality amid critical swimming infrastructure gaps. There is just no movement in resolving the issues. This is not tomorrow's problem. There is not enough swimming infrastructure to sustain the current levels of participation, let alone plan for the future.

Currently, swimming infrastructure in Ireland is almost entirely in private pools. That means increased cost for clubs, participants and the parents of children who want to swim. It also means very early or late night swim times for clubs and competitors due to the sharing of facilities. All of this needs to be addressed. We need a research-based approach to building pools and we need to deliver them throughout the State. We need to support local authorities in an endeavour to deliver this as well. Action plans like the one the Minister of State mentioned provide everybody with an opportunity to swim. It is just not a reality. If it is, it is at an extensive cost to those who are participating this sport.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: From a Government point of view, this is something that we want to see addressed and the provision of swimming opportunities and facilities improved. That is why we paid for the Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report, which Swim Ireland commissioned. We are considering the full findings of that report. From a Government point of view, there has been investment through the LSSIF in swimming facilities. We have seen a total of €41 million allocated over the latest two rounds to support pools, namely, Askeaton pool in Limerick, Dundalk Leisure Centre, Galway Regional Aquatic and Fitness Centre, Portarlinton Leisure Centre swimming pool, the Samuel Beckett Civic Campus phase two, the Watershed Development, the Waterpoint Aqua Park, Wicklow swimming pool and Edenderry swimming pool, as well as a designated funding award to three swimming pools in Buncrana, Mullingar and Edenderry. Investment is being put in through the community sports facilities fund. There will be the opportunity to apply for funding this summer as well. We are further considering the gap analysis report and the response required to address the challenges raised by it.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: An adequate number of swimming pools for modern Ireland will not be delivered by the already oversubscribed large-scale sport infrastructure fund or the community sports facilities fund. The local authority swimming pool programme was to provide capital grant aid to local authorities for new, refurbished and upgraded swimming pools and never really did. Now the shift for future funding has moved to the LSSIF. If this remains the approach, then all of these supposedly ambitious public pools in Louth and Meath, in Drogheda, Dundalk, Trim and Navan, will have to continue to pay high rates to private commercial operators. I do not see this being delivered through this scheme. It is something that needs to be considered. This is an ever-growing sport. Participation levels are increasing day by day, but, unfortunately and sadly, so are costs for parents and clubs, as is the need for facilities for those who are competing at a competitive level. We are just not meeting the mark in that regard.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: It is something we want to do more on. Swimming is the second most participated sport in the country. It is wonderful in that it can be from a very young age throughout one's life. There are challenges. The gap analysis report has addressed those. Funding streams continue to be available and will be available this summer. In relation to how we consider the challenges to try to make sure that the opportunity is available to everyone to be able to participate in sport, we are considering the Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report. We have funding streams in place, and we will proceed with those and ensure those are available. We are also considering how else we may need to respond to address the challenges and the gaps across the country to make sure that swimming opportunities are available to people in all parts of the country and in every community.

Broadband Infrastructure

2. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport in light of the extensive availability of fibre broadband infrastructure across the State, if Ireland is now in a position to accelerate the switch off of the legacy copper network process; and if this will form a priority area for Ireland during negotiations on the EU Digital Networks Act as part of our forthcoming EU Presidency. [33834/26]

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank the Deputy. The Government's digital connectivity strategy, DCS, aims to have all Irish households and businesses covered by a gigabit network by 2028. A fibre network is faster, consumes less energy and is more reliable than a copper network, and the transition away from legacy copper infrastructure to modern fibre is consistent with that objective. In this regard, the Department supports the prioritisation of a managed transition from copper to fibre-based broadband.

The widespread deployment of fibre infrastructure across the State represents a significant step towards the transition from copper-based networks. However, the acceleration of the switch-off of the legacy copper network cannot be determined on the basis of infrastructure availability alone. Any decision in this area must take account of a range of additional factors, including the protection of end users, the continuity of essential services, affordability and the availability of appropriate wholesale access arrangements. It is also necessary to ensure that

competition in the market is maintained and that consumers, particularly vulnerable users, are not adversely affected. As indicated previously in response to Question No. 966 on 18 March 2026, the process by which Eir can retire this network is laid out in the Commission for Communications Regulation Decision D09/23, Framework for the Migration from Legacy Infrastructure to Modern Infrastructure.

The Government remains supportive of an orderly transition to fibre-based networks, while ensuring that any copper switch-off is carried out in a proportionate manner and in the best interests of consumers and the wider market. In January 2026, the European Commission published its proposed Digital Networks Act, DNA, which is a substantial file and contains several new policy proposals for regulating the electronic communications market. In relation to copper switch-off, the proposal sets out that member states must mandate copper switch-off in all areas where sustainability conditions have been met and it is commercially viable to do so by 31 December 2035. By 31 October 2029, each member state should prepare a national transition to fibre plan and notify it to the Commission.

The DNA proposal is currently being negotiated at official level in Brussels and copper switch-off is one of several significant issues including spectrum, resilience and satellite connectivity being discussed. While it is expected the negotiations will not be concluded during Ireland's Presidency, Ireland will aim to submit a progress report by December 2026.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister. I look forward to the progress report in 2026. That is good news. I agree that the move to fibre will improve Internet speeds, reduce connectivity problems and support modern services such as online learning, remote working, streaming and digital healthcare. I think that is what the Minister means by end users and vulnerable users. It is especially important for rural Ireland, where better broadband can create new opportunities. Copper networks are also old and expensive to maintain. Fibre is more durable, efficient and better prepared for the future demands of technology. As Ireland becomes more digital, we need infrastructure that can support future generations. The copper switch-off is not about taking something away; it is about replacing outdated technology with a stronger and more reliable system. Overall, this change will help modernise Ireland and improve connectivity around the country.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do not disagree with the Deputy at all. He gave a good synopsis there as to why the investment in rural broadband is so important. I do not know whether any political party bar my own at the time actually advocated for it, but it has been transformative. I see it in my own home where the broadband that I have now in a rural location with fibre connectivity is a lot faster than in my constituency office and is nearly faster than what we have here in Leinster House. That has been transformative. When I first came into the Dáil in 2011, every second question asked of the Taoiseach and the Minister for communications at the time related to broadband. This is the first broadband question that I have been asked since being appointed Minister, which shows the level of roll-out and the impact that it is having. I raise copper switch-off with regard to vulnerable users, specifically around isolation alarms and alarms for older people where they have the pendants on the wrists. We have to be very conscious that whatever we do, we do not leave them behind, particularly older people who have pendants and wristwatches where they press the button.

There is a bit of work to be done on this yet but I fully understand and empathise with what the Deputy is saying.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister. I will claim some for myself. I believe the project is coming in under budget. It goes back to maybe Pat Rabbite's days and that is over 10 years ago, so it is a long time coming.

While the copper switch-off is an important step forward, many people still do not understand what it means for them. This goes back to the vulnerable end users. That is why the Government should run a public awareness campaign once the time comes. Many households, especially older people and those in rural areas, still rely on traditional landlines and older systems connected through copper networks. Some might not realise they need to upgrade equipment or switch services before the change happens when it eventually comes. Without clear communication, people could become confused or worried about losing phone or broadband services. A Government campaign could explain what the copper switch-off means, when it will happen, how to prepare, and where people can get help and support should they need it. If the Government informs people early and clearly, the transition will be smoother, less stressful and more successful for everyone.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I agree with the Deputy. A lot of parallels can be drawn from this with regard to when the former Minister, Pat Rabbitte, initiated the Saorview switch-over. When Saorview was being switched over, a large amount of investment was put into public awareness and many vulnerable people, especially the elderly, received assistance to make sure they were not left behind. This is being discussed at EU Council level. We are far more progressed than a lot of our colleagues in the European Union thanks in no small way to National Broadband Ireland and the investment we have made in rural broadband.

However, in Dublin, for example, a lot of people are very reliant on copper. I do not in any way take from what the Deputy O'Donoghue said with regard to copper, which is slower than fibre. The reality is that for older people especially, where the conventional landline is their mode of communication and where the pendant and the wristband are their form of protection, we have to make sure through work we will do with the Minister in the Department of rural and community development, Deputy Calleary, that whatever we do is in an orderly fashion and we do not in any way cause distress to end users who are reliant on the copper network as it is at the moment.

Departmental Schemes

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his plans to improve accessibility for artists to apply for the 2026 basic income for the arts, BIA, scheme. [33423/26]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for raising this question and for his ongoing support for the basic income. In February, I announced that the Government had agreed to a successor scheme to the basic income for the arts pilot. Guidelines for the new scheme were published by my Department on 1 April. The applications portal opened on 15 April and will

remain open until 12 May, which is an important date given the fact we are still in the middle of that application process.

The BIA will provide 2,000 artists with a weekly payment of €325 for a period of three years. The focus of the successor scheme is to support professional artists whose creative practice is based in Ireland. This is a major milestone for the arts in Ireland and I am particularly pleased that the research my Department conducted provided Government with a clear evidence base upon which to make that decision. The research clearly demonstrated both how precarious and difficult it is to be an artist and the positive benefits for society as a whole if we invest in it. The Department has seen strong demand so far with over 3,000 applications submitted. Over 8,200 eligible applications were received under the original pilot scheme. We expect that number to grow substantially before the end date.

My officials are providing assistance with making applications in a number of ways, including an email mailbox, an online video providing information on filling out the form and a telephone helpline. There has been a high volume of email queries, which are being triaged depending on the urgency of the matter. Our officials are also providing over-the-phone assistance for those who have specific accessibility needs and for queries that cannot be dealt with via email. A voicemail service to book these sessions has been in operation since the scheme opened with priority given to those with accessibility needs or who are vulnerable. Assessment for eligibility and the selection of successful applicants for the scheme will begin once applications close on 12 May. I expect payments to begin before the end of the year.

This is a groundbreaking support for the arts in Ireland and recognising the importance of supporting artistic practice and makes Ireland a world leader in how we support our artists and culture and will help to sustain the careers of those who receive it and retain their talent into the future. I encourage artists from every background and every corner of the country to apply for the scheme as is currently laid out.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I also encourage professional artists and graduates because it is not just professional artists who can apply. There is a number of positions available in this scheme for those who have just graduated.

The issue I had raised initially relating to the website has been addressed. Originally people could not find where to click unless they read the whole front page. That issue is addressed. However, there are other issues. People who have been leaving voicemails or who have been looking for help were not getting the help as quickly as they felt they should. If somebody is an artist and is busy and is trying to access the website or a person to talk to, there is frustration. That has already led to some people thinking they might not apply. I encourage them to apply. The main thing here is to make it as easy as possible for those artists who should be applying to apply.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I agree with the Deputy. If anyone who has experienced any difficulties and has contacted the Deputy, I encourage him to pass any specifics on to me. We want to try to make it work. It is in our interest that we get the maximum number of eligible applicants because we are only around the corner from the next round of negotiations on public expenditure for the next budget. The success or otherwise of this scheme will be demonstrated not just in relation to the output of the artists but also through the number of eligible

applications we receive. The greater the number of eligible applicants we receive is a good thing as far as I am concerned. Whether I am able to give them a grant or not is kind of secondary. It will demonstrate very clearly to the Department of public expenditure and reform on my behalf that there is pent-up demand.

If there are IT problems the Deputy is aware of, I ask him to send them on to me. I also encourage anybody who has experienced difficulty to contact the Department directly or contact my office and we will endeavour to make sure that everybody gets a proper service. I am acutely aware there is a vulnerable cohort here as well who might not be as tech savvy as other people are who we do not want to be excluded.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The portal has been moved higher up on the page. Originally users had to scroll down several thousand words before they found the portal to click on. It is now in the first one or two paragraphs. When they click onto it the user is brought to a page that says "An Roinn Department Client Portal" and asks for an email and password to log in. It is only down at the end where it prompts if they do not have an account to create one account. The person will not have an account; that is the whole point. This is a one-off. For people who are not tech savvy, it can be scary. There are a lot of people who do not like filling out forms, whether they are on paper or online. When somebody gets to that page, it should state somewhere that this is the basic income portal and make the sign-up part larger, just for the next couple of weeks while we are waiting for applications.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is very helpful and I will certainly relay that back to the team in the Department to see if we can adjust the home page to address the points the Deputy has made. I am not sure whether that is possible or not but we will certainly try. If there are people who have nothing better to do at 9.05 a.m. than listen to the Deputy and I having a chat in the Dáil and who have specific problems accessing the service, I encourage them to contact the Department. We do not want to leave people behind. I do not want a situation where people say they could not apply because the system would not allow them. That is no good to me, no more than it is no good to the artist. If there are specific issues the Deputy or any other Deputy in the House has encountered regarding the application process, they should let us know and we will endeavour to make sure everybody gets a fair crack at this.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The appeal is for artists to apply. They have until 12 May. The appeal from here if, as the Minister said, anybody is listening, is for people to make the application between now and 12 May. They will then have to wait. When exactly will the scheme start? The Minister has allocated, I think, €18 million. That amount suggests six months for this year and it will cost €33 million per year based on 2,000 people. Can the Minister indicate when the scheme will start? The last time it started, there was a-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The screen indicates I have 11 seconds.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): That was for the Minister's previous reply.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I ask the Deputy to bear with me. Our bona fides in this have been well established and we have had a very good engagement with the Opposition.

Once 12 May has passed, and once I have a full read-out of the number of applicants, which I will publish, I will come back to the Deputy.

Broadcasting Sector

4. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport following recent reports regarding the raising of the Coimisiún na Meán levy on radio by nearly 70% from 2024, the way in which he plans to support local and independent radio broadcasters with these unexpected rises. [33369/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I would like to hear if the Minister has any response to the recent radio broadcast levy, which has gone up nearly 70% since 2024, and if he or his Department has any plans to support local radio with this very steep levy increase.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: A diverse, independent and trustworthy media sector, operating in line with appropriate media codes and rules, plays an important role in supporting our democracy, fostering our national identity, heritage and culture, and ensuring access to free and impartial news and current affairs. However, it is equally important that any supervision or regulation of the sector is also independent. As such, the independence of Coimisiún na Meán is provided for under section 10 of the Broadcasting Act 2009, as amended.

There is a long-standing principle that costs of regulation are met by regulated sectors, particularly commercial operators. Therefore, provision is made in section 21 of the Broadcasting Act for the imposition of levies to meet the costs of media regulation, supervision and licensing.

The Act also vests authority and responsibility for the levy in Coimisiún na Meán. As such, as Minister, I have no role in either determining the cost of regulatory activities or setting the levy. I did, however, meet with two commissioners from Coimisiún na Meán last week in order to seek clarity from Coimisiún na Meán regarding its approach to implementing its statutory responsibilities with regard to the levy. It was also an opportunity for me to impress upon Coimisiún na Meán the need to take the opportunity to more clearly communicate such matters to its stakeholders and the wider public.

I am conscious of the very important role independent broadcasters and outlets play in the wider media sector, particularly at local and regional level. The importance of this role is recognised by ongoing support which is provided to the sector through a range of schemes, funded by both Exchequer and television licence revenues, which are designed to support the continued provision of a diverse range of public service content to audiences.

Between 2020 and 2025, the commercial radio sector was supported with over €13 million in funding through Sound and Vision. In addition, the number of support schemes has increased significantly over recent years. In 2026 to date, the commercial radio sector has been awarded €4.3 million under a range of media fund schemes. This represents a very significant

increase in funding for the sector and shows the Government's commitment to supporting independent media in Ireland.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am heartened to hear that the Minister has at least spoken to Coimisiún na Meán about this but I do not believe that explaining to it that it needs to communicate to its stakeholders is enough in this regard. I also do not believe that the argument of an independent regulator is reason enough for the Minister to wash his hands of this issue. As he has said, local radio is a crucial part of the fabric of Irish society. The services that local radio offers to community cohesion, democratic participation, entertainment and culture within this country are so valued by so many members of Irish society, yet this is an industry and a sector that are under great pressure and have been for many years now as we have seen change of ownership and the pressure of disruption from the tech sector. I do not believe it is enough to simply say that the regulator has the right to impose the levy and therefore it can. It is disproportionate compared with the others. Not only that but Deputy O'Donovan is the Minister for the media, and this goes beyond just asking the regulator about it. What is the Minister doing to support the radio sector in this complex situation?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I have already outlined what I have been doing. The Deputy cannot have her cake and eat it. It is not that long ago that her party and the party that sits beside it were very quick out of the traps, when I asked a question about Coimisiún na Meán, to remind me of my role under the Broadcasting Act and the independence of Coimisiún na Meán. The Deputy cannot have her cake and eat it. She cannot come in here one day and tell me to keep my nose out of Coimisiún na Meán and the second day come in here and tell me to tell Coimisiún na Meán its job. That is opposition politics for opposition's sake. The Deputy is good at it, fair play to her, but I remind her of what her party and the party that sits beside it said. This is a statutory organisation that is independent of the Government and that makes its decisions independent of the Minister and of any political interference. The Deputy wants it both ways but she cannot have it both ways.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: That interference, which is how I would describe it, or attempted interference, on the Minister's part was very different from this situation. His is a Government that has been in power for many terms now and it has built and established a statutory body to regulate this sector, so it is beyond me that he can say he has nothing to do with it. It is the Minister who is trying to have his cake and eat it by saying that this regulator can just be established and then let run. It is not interference to examine and engage with his agency on a disproportionate levy on radio of 2.8%, compared with TV at 1.2%, online services at 1.25% and streaming at 0.5%. This is an industry that, as I have said, is already under pressure. The Minister is the one who is trying to have his cake and eat it. He is trying to say he does not have anything to do with this when we know that independent local radio is being crushed. Meanwhile, the online sector, which is pumping out misinformation that local radio is trying to combat, which has taken all the ad revenue and which the Minister's Government is failing to regulate, is cleaning up.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Again, nice try. The Deputy fails to recognise one fact, and I think she was connected previously to the tech sector so she will know the role that Coimisiún na Meán has played with regard to the tech sector. Only this week Coimisiún na Meán has

announced further investigations into the tech sector. The Deputy is right: this Government has been in office for a long time. It has been in office thanks to the votes of the people of the country. We have won successive elections. We have put together programmes for Government, manifestos and mandates that the people have voted for. We have also put forward legislation through the House that the Deputy's party when it was a lot smaller and the party beside it when it was a lot bigger supported in relation to Coimisiún na Meán. If the Deputy is claiming people are washing their hands in here, she should stand in front of mirror. She is attempting to place me in a position where she knows I cannot be. Hers was the very party a couple of weeks ago when I asked a question - I just asked a question; I did not make an assertion - that jumped up and down, which of course it does very regularly. Nobody jumps up and down higher than the Social Democrats when it comes to indignation. I am simply saying what the legislation allows for. I have also said that I have had engagement with Coimisiún na Meán and I have relaid to Coimisiún na Meán the need for it to engage more clearly-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, you are well over time.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: -----with the relevant stakeholders.

Heritage Projects

5. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he is aware of the law adopted by the French National Assembly in April 2026 with regard to the repatriation of heritage objects taken as part of colonial plunder; if he plans to establish a similar framework for cultural heritage objects in this State; when the advisory committee on the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage last met; and the recommendations made. [33424/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question is about the law adopted by the French National Assembly on 30 April with regard to the repatriation of heritage objects taken as a result of colonial plunder. I ask if the Minister plans to establish a similar framework of cultural heritage objects in this State, when the advisory committee on the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage last met and the recommendations it has made.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for raising this important question. The issues of restitution and repatriation are complex and sensitive matters which have significant impacts on families and communities of origin, as well as more broadly on the cultural landscape. I am aware of the legislation recently passed by the French National Assembly which creates a legal framework for the return of cultural objects taken from former colonies, replacing the previous requirement for separate, case-by-case legislation for restitution.

In Ireland, the advisory committee on restitution and repatriation was established in 2023 to advise the Government on matters relating to restitution and repatriation of culturally sensitive objects held in collections in Ireland. The advisory committee has been expertly chaired by Sir Donnell Deeny, chairman of the UK Government's Spoliation Advisory Panel and member of the Court of Arbitration for Art in The Hague. The Heritage Council provides the secretariat,

and the committee's membership brought together diverse experiences, expertise and perspectives from potential claimant communities, the national cultural institutions and other collecting institutions, and the fields of law, ethics, academia, public policy and cultural heritage.

As part of its work, the advisory committee considered the associated legal, ethical, policy, procedural and institutional issues and reviewed the international best practice research available in this area. In 2024, the Heritage Council undertook a national survey to understand the scope and the scale of cultural heritage collections in Ireland. These findings have significantly informed the advisory committee's work and will also be of great interest and benefit to the cultural heritage sector.

Through its work, the advisory committee will provide guidance to support cultural institutions and other bodies that have responsibility for managing historic collections, on associated matters, including collections management and provenance research. I am very pleased with the progress that the committee has made in this regard to date. The committee as a whole met most recently in November 2025 with significant strands of work also being progressed between meetings.

I received the committee's interim report early last year and I am due to receive its final report shortly. I will bring this to Government at the earliest opportunity and I intend to then publish it without delay. I will give full consideration to the advisory committee's recommendations and I will then bring a plan to the Government to seek support for implementation.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The French National Assembly in some ways is setting out where we need to go with this but, given that it is a former imperialist and colonial power, it has a lot more work to do than we should have. That is not to say that there is not within our national institution collections elements of colonial plunder. We should look to ensure that the repatriation of those, where demanded or sought, takes place.

As to the real question, the Minister has mentioned the advisory committee on restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage, saying that it met in November. I believe he also said it was due to meet in February, which was its final meeting. When do we expect the committee's recommendations and final report?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: It is expected shortly. As I said in my reply, I will bring the report to the Government and then publish it. I do not disagree with anything the Deputy has said. Restitution cannot be a one-way street. We need to see if there is anything in Irish institutions that is connected to, funded by or associated with colonial plundering. I do not disagree with that term. I believe the Deputy is being very mild-mannered in using it. We cannot ask others to do as we say and not to do as we do. In a similar way, if other countries, particularly European Union and former European Union countries, have plunder from here, restitution needs to be examined. There are post-colonial museums scattered all over Europe like feathers out of a bag and these contain plunder from all over the place, including from Ireland. There is a compulsion on European Union countries that are funding museums they know to contain loot that was taken from people against their will to recover it and return it to those people's countries. That includes Ireland.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There are a number of issues here. We are not in disagreement. We must ensure our national cultural institutions and other museums are aware of this issue and will take a proper approach to it. However, funding is required to address that and perhaps to make 3D copies of the material on display so that we would still have a facsimile in the collection. As the Minister has said, it is not a one-way street. Over the years, we have seen countries, particularly England, holding material belonging to or relevant to Ireland that is hidden away in museums. This material is sometimes surplus to the museums' requirements. Such material has sometimes been given back by way of permanent loan rather than being returned outright. When he worked in a museum, my father managed to return some such items without anybody's permission. These items now sit in a museum.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: His methodologies may have been a bit different and might be a bit unorthodox for a Deputy of Dáil Éireann to be advocating. However, I do not disagree with the sentiment. If there are materials in other museums, particularly in countries that were formerly colonial powerhouses, including the one that occupied this State, in the modern world of 2026 there is a compulsion on them to look into their hearts and recognise that this stuff was taken against the will of the people from whom it was taken and that it really does not belong where it is. That is particularly the case where it is archived and shoved into presses or cupboards but it does also apply to stuff that is on permanent display that clearly does not belong to the country in question. There are some museums that contain nothing belonging to the state in which it is located but rather a mixum-gatherum of stuff that was literally stolen from all over the world. In 2026, any right-thinking democracy needs to take a long look at itself and say that now is the time to begin the process of repatriation as part of restitution and an overall recovery package for what was done during colonialism. I certainly support the Deputy's point. I look forward to the final report, which I will publish. Once I publish it, I expect our national cultural institutions and those institutions funded by my Department that are not NCIs to act appropriately.

Swimming Pools

6. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the way in which he plans to ensure that the implementation of the national swimming strategy addresses regional and demographic disparities in access to swimming facilities, particularly in areas experiencing rapid population growth and sustained unmet demand such as Fingal, where limited access to public swimming pools persists despite clear and growing community need; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33670/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: North County Dublin is one of the youngest and fastest growing areas in the country yet access to public swimming pools is extremely limited, particularly in north Fingal. Waiting lists for the limited swimming pools that are available are at 100%. Fingal County Council is planning to develop a swimming pool in Balbriggan. Will the Minister of State update us on whether any money will be made available from central government to fund that swimming pool?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Boland for her question. I know she is very committed to the development of a swimming pool in Balbriggan. Further to a specific action in the 2024 national swimming strategy and enabled with funding from my own Department, Swim Ireland was commissioned to carry out an in-depth analysis of swimming pool provision across the country. This examined the condition and age of facilities and the provincial and county-level distribution of pools. The resultant swimming pool gap analysis report was subsequently published at the end of last year and is available on Swim Ireland's website. That gap analysis report, which our Department paid for, is now being considered by Department officials. It will form a key input to the future development of swimming pool facilities, enabling enhanced decision-making with regard to targeting investment more effectively. That is the objective. We are now assessing the report and how to take steps forward, ensuring we are making the best investment that will have the biggest impact.

As things stand, the provision of swimming pools is ultimately a matter for the relevant local authorities. From what the Deputy has said before and today, I know there are plans to construct a new public swimming pool at Castlelands in Balbriggan. These plans are being progressed by Fingal County Council and the project has moved to preliminary design and planning stages. Fingal County Council made an application for grant funding in respect of the proposed new pool under the 2024 round of the Department's large-scale sports infrastructure fund. Unfortunately, due to the large volume of applications made under that round, it was not allocated funding. We continue to monitor capital availability under this round. Moving forward, we expect the large-scale sports infrastructure fund to reopen within the next couple of years. Applications to the fund must be made by a local authority or the national governing body of a sport. So far, we have seen €41 million invested in 12 swimming pool projects through the LSSIF.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome Swim Ireland's report. The Minister of State will have seen from it that waiting lists in Fingal are at 100%. The nearest pool to Balbriggan is in Swords. Balbriggan is the youngest large town in the country. We need access to a swimming pool for Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush, Lusk and the surrounding villages of Naul and Garristown. The demand is there and we have the population. Fingal County Council has put an awful lot of work into the planning. I urge the Minister of State to look favourably on any application from Fingal County Council. It is an essential necessity for the area, which is rapidly growing. We are building houses in Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush, Lusk and the villages. We need access to appropriate sporting facilities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I accept that. I know there is a particular challenge in the north Dublin area in relation to swimming pool availability. The gap analysis report certainly identifies that. We are considering that gap analysis report at the moment to get a sense of the scale of the challenge and to assess how those challenges can be matched by our current funding streams, including the community sports facilities fund and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. The Government is focusing on this issue and wants to see it addressed. The capital envelope will obviously be important in determining what we can do. However, we have now for the first time identified the challenges and where they are most acute. In line with our national swimming strategy, we want to achieve our objective of making sure that people have the opportunity to participate in swimming regardless of where they live. We are considering how best to do that, following on from the publication of the gap analysis report.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the Minister of State's positive comments. I think I will be back here asking him follow-up questions. I would appreciate it if he would work with me on this issue.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for her ongoing advocacy and for identifying the challenges and the need for swimming pool facilities, which mean that everyone can avail of sports and that we do not have long waiting lists. I look forward to continuing to work and engage with her on this with a view to identifying opportunities to invest to make sure that projects such as the one in Fingal can be moved forward.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Sports Events

7. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will call for a boycott of the upcoming Nations League matches between Ireland and Israel on the grounds that Israel is an apartheid state that has engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocide; his engagement with an organisation (details supplied) on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32981/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: Will the Government call for a boycott of the upcoming Nations League matches between Ireland and Israel on the grounds that Israel is an apartheid state that has engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocide? What engagement has the Minister of State had with the FAI on the matter? If he thinks it is okay to ban Russia from international sport, why can the same rule not apply to Israel? Will the Minister of State stop the game and refuse to play ball with genocide?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Ward for his question.

National governing bodies of sport, such as the Football Association of Ireland, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the organisation of sporting fixtures, whether in domestic or international competitions. The Government has no role in deciding who plays who in international sports. The FAI is within its rights to decide to fulfil these upcoming UEFA fixtures and I note its intention to fulfil both fixtures against Israel in September and October. I support the FAI's right to make this decision and the Government will not be calling for a boycott of these games.

The FAI has made this decision in accordance with its obligations as a member of UEFA, the governing body and confederation for football in Europe, and having consulted with An Garda Síochána and other key stakeholders. The FAI has also briefed myself and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on this matter, and I understand that it will be engaging with the Norwegian Football Association to learn from its hosting of a match against Israel last year. I understand that the FAI is also continuing to engage with An Garda Síochána to ensure appropriate preparation for, and policing of, the home leg of the fixture.

On a wider note, I want to reiterate that the Government remains committed to working with key partners to end the conflict in Gaza and to advancing a sustainable peace plan. We want all parties to adhere to their commitments in full, desist from any actions inconsistent with what has been agreed and continue to negotiate in good faith to ensure full implementation.

Deputy Mark Ward: Let us get real here. The Minister of State is ducking any responsibility. If the Government opposed Ireland playing Israel in an international soccer match, the FAI would follow suit. Yesterday a campaign was launched to stop the game between Ireland and Israel. An open letter was signed by many people in Irish soccer, including Brian Kerr, Joe Redmond, Pico Lopez, Louise Quinn and Roddy Collins as well as people outside soccer, including Christy Moore, Senator Frances Black, Kneecap and the Fontaines DC. I am a season ticket holder for the FAI. As a basic human being, I will not attend that match.

Last year, the FAI passed a motion to suspend Israel from UEFA competitions. The Government and the FAI must respect that mandate. The signatories are calling for the game to be stopped on the basis that Israeli teams are playing on occupied Palestinian land and that Israel has a brutal system of apartheid and has committed acts of genocide. The Government accepts that Israel is an apartheid state and is committing acts of genocide. It is inconceivable that the Irish Government is willing to stay silent on this matter while these crimes are going on in the name of football.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Deputy made the comparison with Russia in his contribution. To tease that out, the Russian exclusion from sporting events was a decision that was made by UEFA, the sporting body. It blocked and barred Russia from participating in competitions as did FIFA. The footballing body decided to do that as well. As we well know, in the European Union at political level, we have sanctions imposed on Russia. In regard to the participation of Israel, there is no such ban by UEFA or, indeed, FIFA. The FAI brought a motion or proposal to UEFA, which was not supported by other member countries. The FAI, as is its prerogative, is working within its footballing union. It is an independent body within this country. It has taken up the matter within UEFA and is fulfilling its responsibilities in that regard and the Government supports its right to do so.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Minister of State mentioned sanctions on Russia. The Government has still not enacted the occupied territories Bill. We are still waiting. That was a promise in the programme for Government. What the Government has responsibility for is who comes into our country. Can the Minister of State guarantee that those arriving to support Israel have not taken part in or supported genocide? What security measures will be in place to stop people who have taken part in or supported the slaughter of 75,000 Palestinian people from entering Ireland? How will the Government screen for those who have committed the most barbaric crimes from entering the country? Will they be arrested at the airport for crimes of collective punishment, mass displacement or genocide? Can the Minister of State even guarantee that the Israeli players themselves are not or were not members of the Israel Defense Forces? Are we going to stand by and allow supporters and perpetrators of genocide to enter our country? This part of it is the Minister of State's responsibility. I urge the Minister of State to stop the game: do not play ball with genocide and be on the right side of history.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: From a political point of view Ireland and the Irish Government has led out internationally in relation to the atrocities we have seen happen in Palestine as part of the conflict and in terms of providing leadership and trying to bring about a peaceful settlement to the conflict. We have set the agenda in many ways at European and international levels in relation to the approach and stance we took which subsequently many other countries rallied around as time went on. We continue to play our role internationally to try to ensure there is a sustainable peace settlement in Palestine. As a country, we have also led out on the development of and are assessing the legal challenges around implementing an occupied territories Bill.

Deputy Mark Ward: What about the security measures?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The FAI is an independent organisation working within the footballing and governance structures internationally. UEFA has not prevented Israel from taking part in competitions such as happened in the case of Russia. The FAI is engaging with An Garda Síochána in relation to the appropriate policing arrangements for the game.

Sports Funding

8. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the engagements he and his Department have had with local authorities and national sporting bodies to ensure local sports clubs are supported in applying for available grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32806/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Minister of State outline the engagements he and his Department have had with local authorities and national sporting bodies in advance of the forthcoming round of sports capital grants?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for the question. I know the sports facilities fund is something he is very committed to in relation to supporting clubs in his local area. In line with the previous rounds of the community sport facilities fund, a review of the current funding round has been undertaken and will be finalised shortly. It is anticipated that the objective of the next round will particularly target areas and sports that have been under-invested in over the years. We are working to be in a position to be ready for opening a new round next month.

The Department is currently collating feedback from sporting clubs and organisations which will provide valuable input to our ongoing preparations for that next round. I and my officials engage regularly with local authorities and national governing bodies and this engagement is helping to shape the criteria for the new round. New guidelines will be published in advance of the opening of the next round to ensure clubs have clarity in relation to the application round. We will also undertake a comprehensive communication round to help clubs make their applications.

My aim is to have as many eligible sporting bodies as possible applying, by simplifying the application process and guide, and carrying out a wide-reaching communications campaign, including with local authorities and national governing bodies. Many clubs are relying on

volunteers, and with a revised and simplified application and assessment process which my Department is implementing, it will be easier and quicker for clubs to navigate the system at all stages and allow for quicker turnaround times while also streamlining the workload for my Department.

As I travel to many different parts of the country, I provide the opportunity for sports clubs to engage with me. I get their feedback on the challenges they face and how best we can make sure this next round of community sport facilities fund meets their needs as well as to give them as much information and answer as many questions as they have on how the programme and fund has worked and how they can best prepare for the next round. Once we finalise that review and publish the new round, we will communicate that clearly through the national governing bodies and through our sporting organisations.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome that engagement. I want to highlight an issue particularly in cities. Often within cities land is the key issue. There might be land owned by one party and then there is a club or sporting body. That needs a degree of co-ordination. Of specific concern to me is that co-ordination and bringing parties together is not being done on a structured level. I have done it in my own communities where I have tried to bring different parties together. Dublin City Council's parks have so much potential across the city. I am not certain that at a senior level in the city council the opportunity of the sport facilities grant is being taken serious in regard to all-weather pitches. There are parks right across my area that have the potential. There is already the example in Finglas west, the Kildonan model, where two soccer clubs have joint access to a new all-weather facility. I want to see that in parks right across Dublin City Council. That involves Dublin City Council leading the charge.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Particularly in large urban areas such as Dublin city land can be a real challenge. That is why with the last round but particularly this upcoming round we are looking to encourage educational institutions as well as local authorities to work with clubs to make joint applications.

For example, where we can get a school that has some land available, where facilities can be improved and the children can use that during the school day and a club or community can use it in the evening, we get a lot more participation return for the investment that we are making. I have tasked my officials with engaging in more detail with the Department of environment and the local authority structure about how we can better structure the collaboration in relation to identifying land and making sure that it is part of our wider policy analysis and sweep, to make sure that the provision of sporting infrastructure and amenity infrastructure is considered with regard to how we develop communities, particularly new communities.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome what the Minister of State is saying. When the sports capital grant opens, it is almost too late to start to bring together parties in that way. That is why the city council has such an opportunity to lead on this. I am looking at a park like Albert College, for example. Many soccer clubs but also GAA clubs really need somebody to bring them together and to put that package together on city council land in a park. I am thinking of clubs like Glasnevin FC, which really wants an all-weather facility in Albert College. There are other parks like Johnstown Park or Poppintree Park in my area that could do with all-weather facilities. We know these pitches are used widely at the moment but the wet weather

that we have often reduces the amount of usage that they get. Our public parks are for everybody and we do not want to see public parks losing space, but a well co-ordinated plan and better co-ordination with the Department of heritage about brent geese needs to happen. I ask the Minister of State to reach out to Dublin City Council and ask it what its intention is this year, because I am fearful that it will not be substantial or ambitious enough.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I have engaged on this and will meet local authorities across Dublin in advance of the round opening, with the objective of making sure that they are being as proactive as possible. I know from visiting a number of clubs and working with the Deputy in his own area that he and other representatives working with him are trying to ensure that the local authority is prioritising this as well. There are challenges, particularly in urban areas, but those are challenges that we want to try to do our best to address. It requires everyone working together. Regarding the next upcoming round, we want to see that happen as much as possible. Also, with regard to long-term planning, there should be a joined-up policy and regulatory approach to make sure that land availability is considered in the context of supporting and growing a community.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Facilities

10. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he plans to introduce a scheme to support sports clubs with the cost of purchasing land for playing pitches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31768/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister of State if he plans to introduce a scheme to support sports clubs with the cost of purchasing land for playing pitches. I could include buildings. My question is about providing clubs with a permanent home, whether playing pitches, boxing clubs and so on. It is a big issue for clubs across the State, particularly in urban centres and, in my case, in the commuter belt area, where the State does not own land.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The programme for Government commits to supporting local authorities in the acquisition of new lands for parks and playing pitches to help to build liveable communities. While neither of my Department's sports capital funding programmes, the community sport facilities fund, CSFF, or the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, provide for the acquisition of land, I would be supportive of local authority acquisition of lands for sport and recreation purposes. I have asked my officials to engage further with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage's officials in this regard and will liaise further with the Minister to assess steps that we can take to make real progress on this and on working with local authorities to identify and secure land.

Once lands are acquired for sporting purposes, applications for capital investment, including equipment, on those lands can be supported by both the CSFF and the LSSIF. In line with previous rounds of the CSFF, a review of the current funding round is being undertaken and will be finalised shortly, in advance of it opening. My Department is aiming to announce the opening of applications over the course of this summer. Regarding the LSSIF, our current focus

is on ensuring project delivery under the first two rounds and this process will inform any decisions regarding the timing of a future round.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Both the Minister and Minister of State have to be aware that this is a major issue. We are here for oral questions every six weeks or so. Every time we are here, this question comes up, particularly in the urban areas, Dublin and the wider commuter belt. The issue is that there are public parks and they are oversubscribed and, certainly in my area, that the State does not own land. The first question I asked when I was a county councillor elected to Meath County Council in 2014 was to show me the land that the council or the State owns in the area I was elected for. It is minuscule. Clubs are entirely dependent on negotiation or some sort of deal under the county development plan. They are renting and are sent from pillar to post. It is a major issue and there needs to be a solution for it. Whether it is the Minister's Department or the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, we need a solution for this.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We need to do more on this. Certainly, with the next round of the community sport facilities fund opening over the course of this summer, we want to try to do as much as we can in that short timeframe to encourage collaboration between schools, local authorities and clubs. We also have to look at how we can do more to identify land and communal grounds where municipal-type facilities can be developed. The programme for Government commits to that. My officials and I are engaging with the Department of housing to establish that. One recent example I saw was a GAA club where the local authority had required that an area the size of a football pitch be made available to the club free of charge as part of a zoning permission for a new housing estate beside that pitch. That is the type of joined-up thinking we need to see more of and that is the objective.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I could name any number of soccer clubs, including Stamullen FC, Killegland AFC and Kells Celtic FC, and boxing clubs which are in precarious situations. For example, they may be renting a corner of a gym. Many important sporting clubs and organisations have been without a permanent home for a long time and a solution needs to be provided. I have heard the Minister of State mention this developer-led approach where there can be negotiations and conditions on planning applications. I have also heard and have experience of working with educational facilities. It is very slow. An Teachta Seán Crowe was here before to address a specific roadblock. I have experience of people going for a sports capital grant on school facilities who did not get the okay and had to pull out of it. It is not a permanent solution but where it works, it works. In an awful lot of cases, it does not work. We need the State to step in and say it will build communities and support people doing it.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The key thing is that we have to make the biggest impact we can with what is available, and also look to grow what is available too. There are opportunities in many communities where there could be land available through schools and local authorities to collaborate with clubs. That is a message that we are getting out as strongly as we can with regard to this new round to encourage that collaboration, but there are also challenges regarding availability of land and it not being available. We are engaging across Departments about that to see how we can do more. Tools are available to local authorities, like I described, to be able to identify lands and to help to make them available, but we certainly

need to make that more of a priority and for it to become more standard practice in how we step out and plan for new communities and make sure that their sporting and recreational needs are fully catered for.

Post Office Network

11. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the funding agreed by Government for the post office network in January 2026; if the funding has been made available to An Post; the projects and services the funding will be allocated to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33216/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Ba mhian liom ceist a chur ar an Aire Stáit uasdátú a thabhairt ar mhaoiniú a d'fhógair an Rialtas do líonra Oifig an Phoist i mí Eanáir. I ask the Minister of State for an update on the €15 million agreed by Government for the post office network in January, if the funding has been made available to An Post, and what projects and services the funding will be allocated to.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for his question and his ongoing advocacy on behalf of the post office network and its importance for local communities.

The post office network is a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout the country. On the back of that, the programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. In that regard, on 13 January 2026, the Government approved renewed funding for the post office network for the next five years, running from 2026 to 2030, at an enhanced amount of €15 million per annum from my Department. That has increased from €10 million per annum.

In line with the programme for Government, the funding will support the stability and sustainability of the nationwide network of post offices, protecting and nurturing a commercially focused post office network. It will also support access for citizens to the key social benefits of the post office network and help citizens access services effectively and equitably.

The Government also agreed the principles on which the funding model will operate, which include maintaining access to the network across urban and rural Ireland, aligning individual funding with criteria, including the degree of isolation and the sustainability of each post office, ensuring a minimum revenue threshold for post offices, and recognising offices of cultural or geographic significance, such as those on inhabited islands or in Gaeltacht areas.

My Department is progressing the necessary legislation to place this funding on an appropriate statutory footing. I will shortly prepare a memo to bring to Government to publish the legislation which has been drafted in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General. As matters stand, that funding is being provided from the start of this year by An Post to the post offices. Once the legislation is passed by this House, we will reimburse An Post and provide that funding for this year.

Decisions relating to the network, including decisions relating to specific post offices, are always operational matters for the board of An Post and the management of the company.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Minister of State and I agree the post office network and post offices, particularly in rural Ireland, are vital community infrastructure. I pay tribute to the Irish Postmasters Union for the work it is doing on behalf of the postmasters throughout the country and our party colleague, Councillor Tom O'Callaghan, for his advocacy as well. I appreciate the €15 million that has been allocated. However, the question that still remains for a lot of the postmasters is when the funding will reach the network so that they actually see it. I appreciate that the Minister of State said it has already been allocated but a lot of the postmasters have not seen any of it yet.

Furthermore, what specific improvements or protections will the funding support? Part of that is looking at extending the post office network into other areas, such as click and collect, and making the business more commercially viable, operating in the heart of a community and delivering services that would not be available if it were not for An Post.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: My understanding is that, since the start of the year, the funding is being paid from An Post to postmasters. If there are any particular instances where that is not the case, I will be happy to have them followed up. That is my understanding of the situation based on the briefing I have received on it. An Post is due to get €15 million, which is an increase from €10 million last year. This requires short legislation going through the Houses. Our objective is to have that completed by the summer. Once that legislation has been facilitated, we can make the €15 million payment for this year to An Post. This will cover the funding the company has already given post offices since the start of the year and the funding that is required to carry post offices through to the end of the year and, going forward, to 2030.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It would also be beneficial to have annual reporting on that €15 million to ensure there is transparency as regards where and how it is being spent. That would be extremely helpful in order to get a better understanding and ensuring value for money for the additional funding the Government is providing to the post office network.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There was very strong engagement between the Irish Postmasters Union and An Post in relation to agreeing the criteria for how the funding will be distributed. An agreement on its distribution, including the criteria around that for each of the five years, has been finalised and is now in place for postmasters. That Government commitment, under which we have increased our funding to the post office network by 50% since last year and increased certainty around the future of that funding by putting in place a five-year agreement as opposed to the three-year agreement it is replacing, has been very much welcomed by postmasters throughout the country and the Irish Postmasters Union. It reflects the commitment of everyone in the House, including the Deputy and I and, in particular, the Government, to supporting the post office network. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and for his ongoing advocacy on behalf of the post office network and of its importance to local communities.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann

12. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport an bhfuil sé ar an eolas faoi gheo-bhlocáil a chuireann isteach ar chláracha Gaeilge ó chraoltóirí seirbhíse poiblí a bheith ar fáil don lucht féachana sna Sé Chontae, ar sheirbhís bheo agus ar sheinnteoirí ar líne araon, agus an bhfuil sé i gceist aige aon ghníomh a chur i gcrích chun a chinntiú go bhfuil fáil ag an lucht féachana fud fad na hÉireann ar ábhar sa teanga náisiúnta. [33400/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Baineann an cheist seo leis an geo-bhlocáil atá á dhéanamh ar chláracha Gaeilge ó chraoltóirí seirbhíse poiblí nach bhfuil ar fáil don lucht féachana sna Sé Chontae de bharr an geo-bhlocáil atá á dhéanamh ar sheirbhísí beo agus ar sheinnteoirí ar líne araon. An bhfuil sé i gceist ag an Aire aon ghníomh a dhéanamh chun deireadh a chur leis an geo-bhlocáil sin ionas gur féidir le lucht féachana ar fud na hÉireann ábhair atá á chraoladh sa teanga náisiúnta a fháil?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I measc na n-aidhmeanna atá ag RTÉ agus ag TG4 is ea go gcuirfeadh an dá chraoltóir seirbhíse poiblí a gcuid seirbhísí ar fáil, a mhéid agus is féidir é, don phobal uile ar oileán uile na hÉireann. Tá RTÉ agus TG4 araon ar fáil i dTuaisceart Éireann ar an ardán Freeview, chomh maith le hardáin síntiúis eile, ach is féidir bac a chur ar ábhair áirithe ar bhonn cearta. De réir mar a thuigim, nuair a cheannaíonn an dá stáisiún cearta ar ábhar craoltóireacht, ar nós imeachtaí spóirt, déanann siad iarracht cearta a cheannach ar bhonn oileán uile nuair is féidir. Ní bhíonn sé seo éasca i gcónaí. Is é an gnáthnós sa saol craoltóireachta ná cearta a dhíol ar bhonn críche. Mar sin is minic nach dtairgtear ábhar do RTÉ agus TG4, nó ní bhíonn siad in ann ábhar a fháil gur féidir a chraoladh i dTuaisceart Éireann nó áit eile taobh amuigh den Stát as Béarla nó as Gaeilge. Is minic a bhíonn cearta críche ar chlár, nó ar ábhair faoi leith, faighte cheana féin ag craoltóir sa Ríocht Aontaithe don dlínse sin ar fad. Cuireann sé seo cosc ar RTÉ agus TG4 iarracht a dhéanamh an t-ábhar sin a cheannach don oileán uile. I gcásanna áirithe, cé go bhféadfadh cearta uile-oileáin a bheith ag RTÉ nó TG4 maidir le craoladh líneach, tá cosc orthu ábhar a chraoladh ar sheirbhísí sruthú, mar a bhíonn acu ar na seinnteoirí, lasmuigh den Stát.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Baineann an cheist seo le halt a bhí ar Journal.ie le déanaí. Is ceist í atá ardaithe agam agus ag daoine eile i dTithe an Oireachtais. Baineann sí le clár do leanaí ar nós "Bluey" nó "Dora". Bíonn an clár "Dora" ar TG4 agus bíonn "Bluey" ar RTÉ. Tá geo-bhlocáil á dhéanamh. San alt céanna, dúirt Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh ó Chonradh na Gaeilge:

Tá sé scannalach, beagnach 30 bliain ar aghaidh ó Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta, go bhfuil RTÉ iad féin ag déanamh socrúithe clár teilifíse a cheannach agus a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge, agus ansin bac a chur...[orthu siúd] do phobal na Gaeilge atá lonnaithe sna sé chontae.

Bhí leanaí Phádraig ag baint sult as "Bluey" trí Ghaeilge agus iad ar saoire i dTír Chonaill. Nuair a d'fhill siad abhaile, áfach, bhí "Bluey" imithe don seinnteoir. Tá muid anois tamall maith de bhlianta ó Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta inar glacadh leis go ndéanfaí cinntí le déanamh cinnte de nach mbeadh cosc nó baic maidir le cothú agus forbairt na teanga.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an clár "Bluey", an leaid gorm sin as an Astráil, don lucht féachana Béarla agus Gaeilge araon. Tá an clár tábhachtach do na gasúir óga agus iad sa bhaile. Ní hamháin go bhfuil sé tábhachtach do na gasúir, ach tá

sé tábhachtach do na tuismitheoirí freisin. Is ceist thábhachtach í. Ní hamháin go mbaineann an cheist seo leis an gclár "Bluey" agus na cláir eile a chraoltar do na gasúir óga, ach baineann sí le stádas na teanga i dTuaisceart Éireann. Leagadh amach i gComhaontú Aoine an Chéasta a thábhachtaí is atá an Ghaeilge. Mar is eol don Teachta, bhí mé i m'Aire Stáit a raibh freagrachtaí na Gaeltachta air.

10 o'clock

Bhí an-chuid fadhbanna ag an Rialtas anseo ag déileáil leis an bhFeidhmeannas i dTuaisceart Éireann maidir le stádas na Gaeilge i dTuaisceart Éireann. Ar an gcead dul síos, is ceist í seo don Fheidhmeannas agus do Rialtas na Ríochta Aontaithe, ach tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an cheist seo, ní hamháin don chlár "Bluey" ach do stádas na teanga i dTuaisceart Éireann freisin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tuigim go dtuigeann an tAire an cheist. Ní bhím ag féachaint ar "Bluey" mórán ach nuair atá na garpháistí linn, bíonn siad á lorg i mBéarla, i nGaeilge nó i pé teanga ina gcráoltar é. Is breá leo "Bluey". Nuair a bhí m'iníon óg, is ar an chlár "Dora" a bhíodh sí ag féachaint. Nuair atá RTÉ agus TG4 ag ceannach cláir mar seo agus ag déanamh aistriúcháin orthu, má dhéanann siad iad féin é, tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil na ceadúnais acu chun na cláir a chraoladh fud fad na hÉireann ina iomláine. D'fhoilsigh mé an Bille Craolacháin (Seirbhís Uile-Éireann) (Leasú), 2025 chun díriú isteach ar an gceist seo. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh an Rialtas ag díriú isteach air seo ionas gur féidir linn teacht timpeall ar an bhfadhb seo.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: B'fhéidir gur ceist í seo don Roinn gnóthaí eachtracha nó Roinn an Taoisigh mar tá sí an-tábhachtach. Mar atá leagtha amach i gComhaontú Aoine an Chéasta, comhaontaíodh go mbeadh TG4 ar fáil chomh forleathan agus ab fhéidir ar fud Thuaisceart Éireann. Tá stádas TG4 agus stádas tábhachtach na Gaeilge leagtha amach cheana féin. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta na deacrachtaí a bhí agam maidir le Foras na Gaeilge nuair a bhí mé i m'Aire Stáit le freagrachtaí don Ghaeilge agus do na Gaeltachtaí. Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé seo, ní hamháin do na gasúir ach freisin do stádas na Gaeilge. Le críoch a chur leis an ábhar seo, tá an Teachta ar nós "Bluey" ar maidin agus é ag caitheamh léine goirme, chomh maith le seaicéad gorm. Tá sé go hálainn an léine gorm a fheiceáil ar maidin.

Online Safety

13. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the actions being taken to protect young people online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32803/26]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I ask the Minister to outline the actions being taken by his Department to protect young people online.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an ábhair tábhachtaigh seo a chur os comhair na Dála ar maidin. Ireland's online safety framework includes the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, the EU Digital Services Act and the online safety code. That code requires that designated platforms restrict access to certain

categories of content that could cause harm, including to children. Those include cyberbullying and promoting eating disorders, dangerous challenges, self-harm and suicide. The code came into full effect in July 2025 and applies EU-wide in respect of platforms established in the State, including many of the larger platforms. Failure to comply can lead to significant financial sanctions of up to €20 million or 10% of turnover.

The Digital Services Act includes obligations to protect minors. Failure by a platform to comply can also lead to significant sanctions. However, the developing nature of digital services requires continuing vigilance. The protection of children and young people in the online world remains of the utmost importance to the Government. It is a key theme in our most recent national digital and AI strategy.

Under the online safety code, designated platforms must use robust age assurance measures to prevent minors from accessing pornography or gratuitous violence. I am determined to make sure that this requirement can be implemented. Officials in my Department are working with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer on an age verification tool within Ireland's digital wallet. This will meet high standards of privacy, confirming to platforms only whether a person is over 18.

I am exploring options for introducing restrictions on social media use for young people under 16. It is Government policy and my firm belief that there should be a restriction at EU level, and I have been engaging with EU counterparts in that regard. If a common approach is not achieved at EU level, I will seek Government approval to take action at a national level.

Online safety for children is a priority for Ireland's Presidency of the European Union. The evaluation of the audiovisual media services directive, which will be published during our Presidency, may also yield proposals for other new measures to protect children online. I will be hosting a high-level Presidency conference in Dublin dedicated to this, which will review progress and discuss options for further measures.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister for that overview. As a parent, I am supremely worried about online technology harms. To a person on the street, it seems we have a wait-and-see approach. I feel child welfare is quite often dismissed due to our dependence on technology companies in the Irish economy, not by the Government but that is what it is seen as quite regularly. We see younger and younger children accessing mental health supports. We have to acknowledge the correlation between social media and online harms and our children's mental health. I see this as a public health issue, on which we must act fast.

I am glad to hear the Minister is making this a priority during the European Presidency because we have to make it a priority. He mentioned that the code of conduct came into effect in 2025. Does it work? What are the results? Have we seen any sanctions so far? Does Coimisiún na Meán have the resources and personnel it needs?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: To go back to a previous question, Coimisiún na Meán is self-financed in terms of the regulation. Regulation costs money and that is why levies are imposed. People do not like that, and the previous Deputy said she did not like it. That is a separate issue, however. I am a parent as well and I am not happy with what is happening, particularly at EU level. This issue was raised at the EU Council meeting last week, and there was a shift

in attitude on it. At the previous EU Council meeting, there was a view that the Digital Services Act was enough. It was very clear last week, maybe with the exception of one or two countries, that everyone now wants action taken on this. I had a bilateral meeting with the Commissioner at which I made my Department's priorities clear. We have one sole priority, and I laid that out clearly. Everything else the Commission wants us to do as a Government in the areas of communications, postal and everything else will be predicated on its commitment to working with us on this. If it does not work with us on this, we will not work with it on those other areas. That is the way I am going to play ball. There is no issue facing the European Union at the moment that is more pressing than the protection of our children. If people do not get that message the easy way, we will do it the hard way.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I appreciate the strong line the Minister is taking on this. It is positive that this will be the single line of importance for his Department during the European Union Presidency. It is important we take a zero-tolerance approach to this and that we look after our children. As I said, it is a public health issue. The damage it has caused to our children will stay with them. I also extend that to online social media in general for all of us in the country. People would not dare say the things they say online to people as they walk down the street. If they cannot say it to someone's face, they should not say it online. Everyone in this House has been a victim of nonsense being said about them online. When we meet those people in person, however, they are as quiet as mice. We have to stand tall and ensure we put pressure on the digital media companies to stamp it out. They have responsibility.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I agree entirely with the Deputy. For anyone who did not hear it, I restate that if a common approach is not possible at EU level, I will seek Government approval to take action at a national level. That is not *mañana*. If I feel, having taken over the Chair of the Presidency, that this is something the Commission or a significant blocking minority is resisting, we will go it alone like France, Spain, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg and a number of other countries have done.

The sad reality is that the Commission and the European institutions have left it to individual member states to act unilaterally in this regard. That is not how Europe should work. This question should not be about anything other than the protection of the European child. At the moment, that is not the case. If I feel, having taken the chair of the Council of Ministers, that this is something being pushed back on by the Commission or there is a reluctance to move it forward, I will bring forward proposals for Ireland to deal with it unilaterally in our jurisdiction by implementing a digital age of majority, as other countries have done.

Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Funding

15. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the next round of sports capital grants will be opened for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33161/26]

16. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he hopes to open up the community sport facilities fund and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund for applications. [33164/26]

18. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the next round of the sports capital grant will open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32999/26]

19. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the capital funding programmes for sport, such as the community sport facilities fund will open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33292/26]

27. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if there will be increased levels of grant aid in the next community sports facilities fund scheme, taking into account the substantial increase in construction costs since the last round of grants were approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33411/26]

33. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the review into the current funding round community sport facilities fund will be finalised; the budget allocation for the forthcoming CSFF; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32811/26]

39. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he expects to open the sports capital and equipment grant programme for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32459/26]

40. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport in light of his Department aiming to open the new round of the CSFF in the first half of 2026, when the new guidelines will be published in advance to include updated eligibility and likely assessment criteria in this next round; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32741/26]

56. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when details of the next community sport facilities fund will be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33410/26]

Deputy Séamus McGrath: When does the Minister hope to open the community sports facilities fund and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund for applications?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I propose to take Questions Nos. 15, 16, 18, 19, 27, 33, 39, 40 and 56 together.

I thank Deputies McGrath and Cleere for their questions. The programme for Government commits to continuing to support the funding of sports capital projects and assessing the distribution of funding in order to maximise participation in all sports at community and national level. My Department's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028 commits to continuing to

invest in sports infrastructure through the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, and also the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. Deputies will be aware that these funds are critical to advancing the development of sporting facilities in different counties and parts of the country. This infrastructure is key to sporting participation and success and we will continue to invest in it.

One of the benefits of the investment we have seen as a result of the community sports facilities fund over the last years has been a growing level of participation. Sport Ireland's sport monitor shows that just under 50% of the adult male population now participate in sport at least once a week and among women, just 3% less than that, at 47%, participate in sport at least once a week. Significantly, in recent years we have seen the closing of the gender gap between the participation levels of men and women. This success is putting significant additional pressure on our sporting clubs and organisations in relation to the need for facilities and the quality and standard of facilities. This is all a result of that success.

The Government's objective, through grants from the community sports facilities fund, is to work with clubs to help them develop their facilities. We have seen the significant impact these grants have had since 1998 when the community sports facilities fund, previously the sports capital fund, was established. A total of €1.4 billion has been invested in grants to clubs, with 19,000 different projects supported. There has been a significant and generational change in the quality of facilities across the country as a result. The most recent round saw the largest ever investment in the community sports facilities fund, at just under €270 million, with over 3,000 projects supported and 40 different sports types benefiting.

We are now in the process of preparing for the next round. Significant work on a review of the previous round has been undertaken. We are working towards being ready to open for applications next month. We also have to finalise our engagement with the Department of public expenditure in advance of that. A lot of work has been carried out. We are also in the position of finalising a new communications or IT platform on which applications will be received. Everyone involved with clubs across the country will be very familiar with the OSCAR platform, which has been in place for over 20 years. Work is being finalised on a new platform which will be ready to accept applications on this occasion. It will be more user-friendly for clubs and for those making applications.

We are also finalising the finer detail in relation to the terms and conditions and how the scheme will operate. These will be made clear to clubs when we open it up. This applies to the standard club applications, which, under the previous round, were for a maximum grant of €200,000, and the regional applications, which were for a maximum grant of €500,000 under the previous round. The stream within the community sports facilities fund for equipment grants will be available again this time around. That was capped at €70,000 last time around. Clubs can apply for that. We had discussions earlier about the challenges of getting access to premises. Through this round, we want to bring about more collaboration around how people provide facilities where clubs do not have premises. Basketball and boxing clubs, for example, which may not have a premises and instead rent premises, are eligible to apply for equipment grants. Clubs must have a lease or ownership of a premises if they are applying for a capital development grant, but not so for equipment grants. This is certainly an option that clubs will be able to avail of as well.

I am meeting many clubs to gain feedback and provide information opportunities to clubs in different counties. We are also engaging on their experience of previous rounds of funding. The information gathered as part of that will help inform the review of this round to make sure it is as workable and practical as possible for clubs and to address the particular challenges we see as regards areas that have growing demand and sports that may have been underfunded in the past. We are working towards being able to open up the fund, all things going well, next month, pending Government approvals, and to have an application round over the next months.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I very much welcome the Minister of State's commitment in relation to these sports schemes. They are critically important. We are a proud sporting nation, as the Minister of State outlined. It is critical that we continue to invest in sporting facilities. There are many sporting clubs, community groups and national governing bodies waiting for the sports funds to open for applications. I see the importance of sporting clubs in my community. They are the thread that holds the community together. They provide a very positive outlet for people of all ages, particularly young people. It is essential in the world we are living in that we provide this positive outlet. Sport provides immeasurable benefits from a health point of view, both physical and mental health. It is critical, therefore, that we continue to invest in sporting facilities. I welcome the commitment the Minister of State gave and the fact that the community sports facilities fund is likely to open for applications in June.

I also asked about the large-scale sports infrastructure fund. If the Minister of State or the Minister could give us some clarification in relation to that, it would be welcome.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I thank the Minister of State and acknowledge his role in the sports capital grant. To see the fund increase under previous governments from €70 million to €170 million and then to €270 million in the previous round has been absolutely fantastic. This Government needs to continue to support and invest in sporting organisations right across the country.

The caps on the regional, local and equipment grants were €500,000, €200,000 and €70,000, respectively, in the previous round. It is my strong view that grants need to be brought in line with increased costs. I implore the Minister of State to try, to the best of his ability, to get all three of those caps increased to give clubs a fighting chance.

Sports capital grants are a shot in the arm for clubs that are the lifeblood of communities. They are at the heart and soul of communities right across the country. They make a phenomenal difference and the Government has to continue to support them. I look forward to the funds opening up in June for the thousands of clubs across the country that can benefit from this significant funding.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have all seen the benefits of sports capital grants. There was a lot of conversation about the sports capital grant for the pitch and lights in Oriel Park. It has been a great benefit and absolutely necessary. We need that to continue. I add my voice to the call to increase the caps of €200,000 and €500,000 given the higher costs, especially with serious capital builds.

When will the large-scale sports infrastructure fund open? This is of major interest, not only to Dundalk Football Club and Oriel Park, but particularly to Louth GAA. We have seen the

work on the stadium going on, and rightly so. If this was a couple of weeks ago, I would be talking about how great the Louth team is doing but it has been a rough week. I commend the under-20 team on a good game against Kildare. The best of luck to them. Hopefully we do better at senior level against Dublin next time.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputies McGrath, Cleere and Ó Murchú. With regard to Deputy McGrath's question on the large-scale infrastructure fund, we have had two rounds of that fund so far, in 2019 and 2024. The national development plan provides for one round to be conducted and opened during this Government term. We expect it will be a couple of years from now, towards the latter end of the Government, because the current focus is on drawing down funding and making sure the projects funded in the most recent round are followed through on. We will be monitoring that closely. We are not talking about the next year or 18 months, but a time beyond that, perhaps in a couple of years. We will monitor it as it goes.

We will monitor that closely. We are not talking about the next year or 18 months. We are talking a couple of years beyond that. We will monitor it as it goes. There will be one round of the LSSIF over the Government's terms.

We are considering the caps as part of the review. The Minister and I will engage with the Department of public expenditure and across government as well to make sure that the funding envelope can be as strong as possible. That will inform where we are at with the caps as well in terms of the level of funding that can be made available and our general guidance on that. Going around the country, I met Deputies McGrath and Cleere in their own areas. I know they have many projects they want to see going forward. There is real demand. It is exceptionally rare that I visit a club or an organisation that is not under pressure for capacity and space. That is a reflection of the really strong work that the volunteer input that drives our clubs and makes support possible in communities is achieving. From a Government point of view, we have to work to try to support clubs with their key priorities in how they are developing their club best to meet the needs of their members and the participation demands that are on them as well.

We look forward to working closely with the Deputies to finalise the detail of this review, and then to having a round open over the next number of months and to make sure that it is as practical and as accessible as possible for clubs to be able to participate in it. We will all work collectively as a Government then to try to support the great work happening in our communities, driven by clubs and underpinned entirely by a voluntary commitment and effort. It makes such a difference and is such a gift from those people to their local communities in terms of the time they give up throughout their week for a wonderful dividend with sport being part of more and more people's lives on a regular basis.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I welcome the Minister of State's acknowledgement of the volunteers who help to run these sporting clubs across our country. They are critically important. People give up their time to provide a positive outlet for people of all ages in our communities. I want to add one point on the need to continue to invest in our sports facilities. Housing is our number one priority as a Government and we are rezoning additional land across the country. We will see additional houses built in our towns and villages. It is critically important that we invest in our social infrastructure, such as sporting facilities, to provide outlets and amenities for people. As I mentioned to the Minister of State previously, in my

hometown of Carrigaline I have a project in the pipeline for the LSSIF. This is why I am interested in that fund. This is a combined application made up of a number of local sporting groups and we have a very ambitious project in the pipeline, so I will follow up on that with him in due course. I welcome the fact that there is a commitment to open up that fund during the Government's term.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: As the Minister of State knows, I have a number of projects and I am sure we will discuss them at length in due course. I want to pay tribute to his colleagues in Killarney as well. Ken and the lads have been fantastic in any dealings I have had with them on existing schemes to new ones going forward. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to the LSSIF to open in late 2027 or early 2028 as provided for in the programme for Government. We have some key infrastructure projects in my constituency that I look forward to discussing with the Minister of State as well.

Last night in Kilkenny I attended an amazing event for an incredible young man called Peter Lynch. He is the fastest marathon runner in the Republic of Ireland. He ran 2:06:08 to finish ninth in the London marathon and was the first European past the post. Peter is a product of Kilkenny City Harriers. In March, he ran the first sub one hour half marathon in New York, which was an incredible achievement. The community of Kilkenny City Harriers and Kilkenny County Council came out last night to support and congratulate this young man on his incredible achievements. It is important in this House that we acknowledge that Peter was an ordinary young lad growing up, worked his way through and showed incredible and resourcefulness. To come away and be a pure champion is absolutely fantastic. I pay tribute to Peter Lynch and Kilkenny City Harriers for their fantastic work.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree. We all know the necessity of sport as being a real positive in a world of many negatives. It is about making sure that the money does come on stream and that the Government would look at the caps. Whether it is Louth GAA, Dundalk FC or Drogheda United, they would be somewhat worried about what looks like a delay in the LSSIF. It is necessary, particularly for League of Ireland clubs. I said it about Louth previously and now I will say it about Dundalk FC. Hopefully we will do better against Bohemians at the weekend than we have done in the last while. We also need to make sure that we support the likes of Peter Lynch, Kate O'Connor and those who are coming behind them. We know some good work has been done but there is a lot more that needs to be done. We are starting from behind in some cases.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legislative Measures

65. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence if she will outline her proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; when she intends to bring forward a Bill in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33425/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The volatile nature of the world underlines all the more the reason that Ireland needs to maintain an independent foreign policy. Central to that policy,

as was articulated by members of the Government while in opposition is the triple lock. This is a crucial protection for our neutrality. I would like an update as to where this legislation stands and what consideration the Minister has given to the pre-legislative scrutiny report from the committee.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Helen McEntee): I fully agree with the Deputy. We can all see that we are living in a very changed world and a more complex world, particularly when it comes to our overall security environment. That being said, I want to make it absolutely clear that the Government has no desire to change our position and our policy of military neutrality. This is something that is long-standing and something that the vast majority of people in this country support. However, it is my intention and the intention of Government to change the terms of how our Defence Forces can be deployed overseas. I, and I think many colleagues in this House, believe that it is untenable to continue with the current policy. Essentially, we have a situation whereby other countries, many of which are at war or in conflict at the moment, are able to make a decision that impacts on our sovereign decision-making process when it comes to where and how we deploy our troops. That position is untenable.

Any considerations on international peacekeeping engagements should be within Ireland's exclusive sovereign control. It should be our own decision-making process and it should be purely within the remit of Government here so that we can have these debates in the Oireachtas with people who have been democratically elected by the people of this country. This is a very strong belief and firm view that I have. I thank the committee for the excellent work it did on the pre-legislative scrutiny. This legislation has gone through a number of stages at this point. I have considered carefully a number of recommendations from the report and brought this to Cabinet recently. Drafting work is under way to progress some of the recommendations, specifically around the international obligations but also in terms of annual reporting. I accept that where one element is removed from what has been a long-standing process, we have to make sure that any mechanism we have in the Oireachtas and across the committees has a level of oversight and scrutiny. What was stressed by the committee is that in any changes that are made, it is very clear that any peacekeeping mission that will be approved will be in line with and grounded firmly by the principles of the UN Charter and international law.

That is something the committee has stated very clearly.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister thanked the committee and I acknowledge that. It was under a different Minister, and I would say it is not an unheard-of occurrence, but it is remarkable that Government TDs and Senators on the committee were whipped to prevent extra hearings because there was such a rush in terms of this legislation, and now it is many months since that process was concluded. I find that hard to understand. We had a desire within the committee to ensure that it would see full scrutiny. Members of the committee were clearly whipped to prevent the extension of it. That was a tremendous shame.

I would make the point to the Minister that the triple lock is a protection for future Governments as well. More importantly, I would make the point that it is our decision. The Defence (Amendment) Act is Irish legislation. It is legislation constructed and passed by these two Houses on the basis that our troops should serve on peacekeeping missions that are mandated by the UN. If we are going to be serving on peacekeeping missions that are not

mandated by the UN, under which auspices are we undertaking those peacekeeping missions or other missions generally?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy said this is about protecting future Governments that might decide to deploy our troops to missions that are not based on the UN Charter and are not upholding and protecting fundamental principles of international law. What I am saying very clearly is that the legislation would have this enshrined in it. It would be very clear as to how and when our troops could be deployed. There would be a level of oversight within the Oireachtas. It would have to be voted through by a democratically elected Government. There would also be a level of oversight within the committee, depending on when or how many troops are being deployed. That would also be included in the legislation.

We have a situation emerging at the moment. We now have some of the final members from the 128th Infantry Battalion who are going out to UNIFIL. That mission has not been continued because we know it would have been vetoed. If it had been vetoed and if a vote had gone through last year, our troops would have had to have left immediately. Decades-long service of Lebanon peacekeeping troops would have ended immediately. We would have had no ability to send our troops back unless we had a new mission put in place, be it a common security and defence policy, CSDP, mission, which is something at which we are looking at the moment. Moreover, and on top of that, we now have another mission, Operation Irini, that we are looking at very carefully but which very soon, in the coming weeks, could come to an end because it looks as though that mandate is not going to be renewed. What we want that mandate for is to be able to monitor the shadow fleet in our waters that is causing huge challenges and that is funding the war in Ukraine. There is also a potential environmental disaster looming with any of these ships. How do we know it is going to be blocked? We know the Russian person who is perpetrating these crimes is on the committee and is able to do it. The idea that Russia would be able to stop us from keeping our troops on a mission in the Mediterranean that would monitor what are illegal ships is absolutely crazy. It is crazy that we are in a situation that, as a country, we cannot deploy our troops because a country like Russia is going to be able to stop us.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister spoke about the SCDP and potential deployment. Could she elaborate on that? Is she saying there would potentially be a CSDP deployment to Lebanon in place of UNIFIL? Could she please clarify that?

The issue in relation to the protection of future Governments is crucially important. That is my view, and I think it is the view of the people. Our troops have served under the UN flag with incredible distinction. I think it is profoundly dangerous that UNIFIL is coming to an end. I really regret that decision. It is important that we continue to push for UN reform. I would like to hear the Minister say some more about that. Ultimately, if we are not deploying troops under a UN flag, they are going to be deployed in another context. It is not difficult at all to see circumstances where if we remove the triple lock, pressure comes on a future Irish Government to deploy troops to a scenario or theatre that would clearly endanger our neutrality. The Minister has said that the Irish people support neutrality. This potentially brings future Irish Governments into a position where they are pressurised into deploying troops in situations that would undermine our neutrality.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The first thing to say is that any change to our triple lock does not change our position of neutrality. Our position of neutrality is about joining military alliances. If we are to deploy troops under this new legislation, it would have to align with, adhered to and be firmly grounded in the principles of the UN Charter and international law. That would be our law, so to do anything other than that would be to breach our law. This would be overseen by committees and by the Chamber. We fully support the UN. I make this point every single time I engage with it at an international level and it knows that. However, we know that the structure is not working at the moment. The fact is Russia would be able to stop a mission that is currently under way in the Mediterranean in which our troops participate. They do a really important job in terms of arms. We want to now use that mission to be able to monitor the Russian shadow fleets - an illegal fleet that is funding an illegal war and a maritime disaster ready to happen. The fact that Russia would be able to block that does not make any sense. It is taking away our sovereign ability to make a decision as to where we send our troops but it is also stopping us from doing what we should be doing and that is monitoring its illegal activity and making sure we do everything in our power to stop it from being able to wage the war it is waging and possibly more beyond that.

In terms of making it clear around the overall missions, again, it would not be within our power to send our troops to anything other than peacekeeping missions or, as we have seen in recent times because of the conflicts happening around the world, where we need to get people out safely. That is something we really need to be able to do.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We can do that.

Defence Forces

66. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the timeline for the increase of cadet pay in the Defence Forces; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33427/26]

Deputy Duncan Smith: The world is changing, and national defence is becoming more important by the day. The Government is slow-walking change, though, to the pay and conditions of our Defence Forces, particularly for our cadets. It is simply unacceptable. The question I want to ask the Minister today is about the timeline for the increase of cadet pay in the Defence Forces.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree. The world is changing. We need to expand our Defence Forces. We need to enhance our capabilities. However, we need to make sure we have the men and women in our Defence Forces to be able to operate and be able to grow in the way we need to. That means looking to retain those we have but also encouraging more and supporting our cadets as well.

As the Deputy will be aware, there has been significant progress made more broadly in terms of pay and conditions for the Defence Forces personnel, particularly over the past six years. There has been a renewed focus, and rightly so, in making sure we increase pay and that the pay is reflective of the work and training that is happening. I met with representatives of RACO on 22 January 2026 and they, of course, raised the issue of cadet pay with me. It is an issue that is currently on the conciliation and arbitration agenda. I have agreed on top of that to give

further consideration to the issue and the process that is ongoing. I outlined at that meeting, however, that any cost-increasing claims must be addressed within the parameters of public pay policy. I think we all know that but we want to make sure that structure is progressing and that claim is progressing as well.

The Deputy will be aware as well that different pay scales apply during training, obviously, for different periods for cadets and recruits. The current pay scale applicable to cadets ranges from €26,248 to €39,026, depending on their qualification. In addition, cadets are provided with accommodation and meals free of charge for the duration of their training as part of their overall package. What is important here as well is that we are investing in where they are staying and where they are eating their meals. In the past two weeks alone, I opened quite a large new canteen facility, essentially, in the barracks in Dundalk. In the past two weeks, I also opened accommodation in Haulbowline for a significant number of new recruits. We want to make sure we are investing significantly in where they are staying, where they are being fed and where they are training and in their gym where they need to do their training. This year alone about €70 million is being spent specifically for accommodation. That is an investment in the men and women of our Defence Forces.

At the same time, I appreciate that when it comes to overall pay and cadet pay, in particular, we need to make quicker progress through the conciliation and arbitration agenda. This is something on which I have committed to working with them.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Those improvements in accommodation and other physical places, such as barracks, etc., are welcome. I and Deputy Ó Laoghaire have just come from the Joint Committee on Defence and National Security, and that came up and was complimented. It simply is not enough to talk about action when it comes to pay. I accept the Minister's bona fides in terms of wanting to improve this but it is worth putting on record that cadet pay remains the lowest in the Defence Forces at just €503 per week compared to €550 for a recruit. It rises to €627 after 12 weeks. Cadets remain on this pay for the entirety of their first year while recruits can move to a weekly salary of €814 after six months. They are paid significantly less than enlisted recruits despite being in full-time training for commission leadership and bearing far greater responsibility. In fact, in their first year, cadets earn 47% less than their enlisted counterparts. This can have knock-on impacts for their pension entitlements. I know there is a process under way but we need a timeline. I accept the Minister's bona fides but we need to see real progress on this for the cadets.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree. I would like to see things move on. I would like to see a resolution as quickly as possible. It is obviously going through the process. Again, the current public service pay agreement to which the members of the Permanent Defence Forces are party provides for that local bargaining process. It provides for that 3% of basic pay, with the 1% to be paid from the current agreement and the balance to be addressed in any successor pay agreement.

There is an opportunity beyond the current engagement to examine pay and conditions, including cadet pay, through that process. There is a number of different ways in which we can look at this.

It is encouraging, not only for cadets. However, if you look at the number of applications for cadets in 2022, it was 1,297. If you fast-forward to this year, it is 2,878. We are seeing a significant increase in the number of applications, more broadly, across the Defence Forces. There were 16,500 applications last year and up to the end of March of this year alone, there have been 7,000.

There is a significant increase in interest and I think it is because we are investing more. We are clear that we want to expand the Defence Forces. We want to invest in the men and women who are there but we want to invest in greater capabilities. There are more opportunities, be it in the Naval Service, the Air Corps or the Army, for people and that is reflected in the overall figures.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Certainly, we are trending away from the recruitment and retention crisis that we have seen in the Defence Forces. We are not quite there yet and still have a bit to go.

In terms of cadet pay, the long-term impacts of it and why it needs to be resolved, it can become financially illogical to become a cadet. Under the single pension scheme, earnings are averaged across an entire career meaning that paying cadets the existing poverty-level wage does lasting damage to their pension entitlements. It is not as enticing an offer to young people as it could be if we get through this process as quickly, as expeditiously and as beneficially as possible for the cadets. These young cadets will have dependants in the future and an increasing amount of responsibilities, like most people, as they go through life.

There is an increase in recruitment but we will have a problem with retention unless this pay and pensions issue is resolved for cadets. I urge the Minister to put every pressure on to get this resolved as soon as possible.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I stress that the claim was received by the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers. The claim is being dealt with under the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Forces. The Deputy will appreciate the discussions under the conciliation and arbitration scheme are confidential but I look forward to, and hope we can have, that constructive engagement and that conclusion reached as soon as possible.

The Deputy is correct. There is quite a variation from €26,248 to €39,026. I would stress, however, that if you are a cadet coming in, your accommodation is paid for and your food is paid for. Obviously, for a lot of people, that would account for a significant portion of any wage that they would get on a weekly or a monthly basis.

More broadly, we need to make sure we are doing everything that we can to focus on increased recruitment and retention. We have a defence sector working group, which was established to examine the representative associations' proposals. We are working with RACO and PDFORRA proposals under local bargaining. What that is doing is identifying measures to increase recruitment and retention, with a particular emphasis on the Naval Service because with the new national maritime security strategy and with the need for us to do more when it comes to maritime security, our focus on the Naval Service is important and the cadets within that. We are seeing an increase in numbers also.

Air Corps

67. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence further to recent Dáil Éireann debates, her views on past health and safety measures in the Air Corps; the actions she intends to take to support former aircraft maintenance and ancillary personnel; whether she intends to ensure their medical needs are met; and the other supports that can be offered to the category affected as a whole. [33426/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Since our last engagement on this issue, we have had the "RTÉ Investigates" documentary, considerable reporting by Neil Michael from the *Irish Examiner*, and many disturbing and worrying disclosures and descriptions of what was going on. It is clear that Air Corps personnel were exposed to unsafe working conditions and to dangerous chemicals and there seems to be a strong correlation to very serious illness and bad health outcomes. These are people who served the State. They should get support. What does the Minister intend to do about it and how does she intend to ensure that they are looked after?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I acknowledge the Deputy's engagement around the issue. I welcome the opportunity to set out the position as it stands. As there are multiple ongoing cases before the courts, as I have stated previously, I am limited in terms of what I can say so that I do not prejudice any of the ongoing litigation. The Deputy has said previously that it is possible to discuss both but I always want to be careful in that regard.

The advice available to me is that any view I have here needs to be carefully expressed so that we do not undermine the current process. Each claim has to receive the necessary case-specific analysis and consideration because what is clear is that each individual case is different to a certain extent.

I had a number of briefs from my officials on this. I then requested further detailed analysis from them. I have received that and carefully considered it. I convened a meeting with the Attorney General, representatives from the State Claims Agency and officials from my Department to discuss the matter further, having sought various different advices.

There are accusations that the State is prolonging legal proceedings as a deliberate tactic but that is not the case. It is important to stress that at every step of the way, the engagement that we have had, be it through the State Claims Agency working with individuals, has been to try to find a resolution and to work constructively with them.

The State Claims Agency has confirmed to me that it has made representations to the legal representatives of the litigants to explore the possibility of mediation to find a resolution to this issue. This is the way we want to move forward - that we can mediate and find a way forward - but those approaches have been rejected pending the cases having been set down for hearing.

I would encourage all those involved. We want to find a way forward. We do not want this to have to go to a court setting. There is an offer there from the State Claims Agency to work with it and with its legal representatives. We all want to find a mutually agreeable resolution, taking into consider what people have gone through and the current individual situation for

those involved in this overall. I would encourage them to take up that offer and to engage more broadly with us.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: To be honest, that is a frustrating response because the Minister is well aware that I have outlined the point in the past. I would say there are issues in relation to the handling of the State Claims Agency of these cases. It is not appropriate for us to get into individual cases. I have never asked the Minister to do so. I have never tried to discuss individual cases in this Chamber, with the Minister or her predecessor. The issue here is in relation to a category of people who were acting in the service of the State. They were supporting the Defence Forces in terms of maintenance of aircraft. As the Air Corps Chemical Abuse Survivors group outlined, there have been 130 potential premature deaths. Clearly, we need to get to the bottom of that.

I am not asking for an update on the legal side, although I think there are issues in relation to the State Claims Agency's approach. What I am asking for is what the Minister proposes to do, and which we discussed previously, in terms of the whole category, a potential package of health supports and health safeguarding, including forms of screening, and an accountability mechanism. There has to be an accountability mechanism as well.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There are 22 active cases before the courts, which we are trying to engage with. Like the Deputy, I want to understand whether this is something that is happening on a wider scale but at the same time, we have to identify whether or not there is a consistent pattern here. Work has been done within the Department to see whether this is something that has been happening on a broader scale and whether there is a consistent pattern beyond the 22 people the Deputy is talking about here, and even within those cases where there is not a consistent pattern in terms of health implications or issues that have come to the fore. I am not for a second disputing the fact that the people who we are engaging with have health concerns and have had health concerns. There has never been a dispute that there needed to be better measures in place in terms of health and safety, whether it was gloves or handling. Whether the exposure had the overall effect, as has been set out by the individuals in the 22 active cases, is what is being discussed and engaged with at present. I would encourage all those to engage further in a mediation process that we have been actively trying to pursue because I think this the best route to be able to come to a conclusion for all of the individuals concerned.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: If there is a pattern, we are not going to find that out in the High Court. That will be found out through a process the Department seems to be considering. A memo was due to be brought to the Minister in the first quarter but we are past the first quarter now. That is what I recall the Minister saying. Has the Minister considered this memo in relation to a whole-category approach?

I ask the Minister to not go back into the legal cases. The clear example is in relation to Australia where the Australian air force saw that there was an issue, it engaged with the group and the people retained their right to take cases as they saw fit but there was health screening, an accountability mechanism and health supports. There is nothing preventing the Minister from doing that. When will she make a decision as to whether the Government will put in place a process such as there was in Australia - a study of health outcomes, identifying whether

there is causation and ensuring support for people who are very sick? Among these people, there have been heart conditions, colorectal cancer and suicides.

Clearly there is a need for things like routine cardiac screening. These are all things that can be done without any reference to the court cases. When will the Minister make a decision on a solution for the whole category?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy referenced Australia. The case in Australia involved de-seal and reseal programmes. The maintenance workers were quite literally required to physically climb into fuel tanks of F111 fighter jets. They worked in extremely cramped conditions for extended periods with chronic confined exposure to concentrated hazardous substances. Nobody has suggested at any point that this is in any way aligned with the conditions in the Air Corps.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: No, but it still goes on.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have said very clearly that there need to be better health and safety standards. That is something that has been made very clear and those changes have been made. As the Deputy has outlined, we have a significant number of different conditions that have come to the fore with the litigants who have been mentioned. However, it has not yet been identified whether this was specific to the exposure.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We should find out.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I told the Deputy that there was a body of work being done initially to see if there is a connection. Is there an increased level of particular types of health complications? Was there an increased level within the Air Corps during that time because of that exposure?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: When will we find out?

Deputy Helen McEntee: That body of work is still under way at the moment. I do not think we can say this is the same as Australia.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I hear the Minister saying that but when will we find out?

Deputy Helen McEntee: That work is under way and I will bring that to the Dáil and to the Deputy's attention when I can. If people have been harmed here, I want to make sure we know about it. I also want to make sure that those involved in the process can engage with us and come to a conclusion on that process.

Military Neutrality

68. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Defence if she plans to introduce the defence (amendment) Bill to provide for the abolition of the triple lock; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33645/26]

Deputy Seamus Healy: Is it the Government's intention to proceed with the proposed defence (amendment) Bill to provide for the abolition of the triple lock, which is against the expressed wish of the Irish people as expressed in two referendums on the Nice and Lisbon treaties?

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Thomas Byrne): As set out by the Minister earlier in this session, the purpose of the defence (amendment) Bill is to consolidate the existing provisions of the Defence Acts concerning the despatch of members of the Defence Forces for service outside the State. In effect, the requirement for a UN mandate will be removed. It will modify the existing requirement regarding the so-called triple lock mechanism in relation to the despatch of the Defence Forces for service outside the State as part of an international United Nations force.

It is important to note that the Bill will also seek to amend the Defence Act to provide for the suspension of members of the Defence Forces, thereby giving effect to recommendations in the 2024 Ward report on the management of members of the Defence Forces charged with, or convicted of, serious criminal offences.

There has been extensive engagement between the Department and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on the drafting of the Bill, and the Minister intends to bring the Bill to the Government for approval shortly.

As previously outlined to the House, the continued reliance on a UN Security Council mandate can have direct practical consequences for Ireland's peacekeeping engagements. A very recent and tangible example is in relation to UNIFIL. We saw one power exercising its veto at the UN Security Council. Had the mandate for UNIFIL not been renewed - as was the case for a short period of time - Ireland would have been legally obliged to plan for the immediate withdrawal of Defence Forces personnel from that mission. Similar issues arise in respect of other operations, with concerns arising in relation to the upcoming renewal of the UN mandate of Operation Irini in the Mediterranean in early June. The outcome is currently unclear and if this mandate is not renewed, it would necessitate the immediate withdrawal of Irish troops under the current legislative provisions. The mission would continue nonetheless in its humanitarian work and its work to prevent illegal weapons coming into Europe because it is an EU mission.

The Bill also provides for reinforced safeguards governing any future overseas deployments. While the UN Security Council mandate requirement is being removed, the legislation expressly requires that all such deployments be consistent with the principles of the UN Charter and with international law.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Neutrality and a triple lock have served his country well. The current Taoiseach is on record as saying that the triple lock is the core of Irish neutrality. Of course, that neutrality goes back over 100 years to when James Connolly erected a banner on Liberty Hall declaring that, "We serve neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland". It also goes back

to hugely successful protests against conscription in Ireland during the First World War. It goes back to Article 29 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, Éamon de Valera's Constitution, which speaks of "adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes by international arbitration or judicial determination." It goes back to Éamon de Valera's declaration of neutrality in 1939.

The triple lock itself has been endorsed by the sovereign Irish people in two referendums, the second referendum on the Nice treaty and the second referendum on the Lisbon treaty. Solemn national declarations have been added to those treaties. Successive polls have shown support for the retention of neutrality, the core of which is the triple lock. I believe it is now time to abandon this proposal. Of course peace missions can be authorised by the UN General Assembly as well as the Security Council.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy is correct that under Article 29 of the Constitution, Ireland's international relations are founded upon international justice and morality. Our Constitution affirms our "devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations". That is not changing. That is in our Constitution. That is the entire basis on which the Government exercises its foreign policy. The removal of the triple lock in current circumstances has no impact whatsoever on Ireland's policy of military neutrality. All it means is that we are not giving the authority to any of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to determine what our foreign policy is in terms of our peacekeeping missions. It is a fact that the UNIFIL mission was stopped, effectively, by one member of the UN Security Council. It is also a fact that if a mission were to continue, for example under EU auspices, in Lebanon, it is entirely unclear as to whether Ireland could take part in that without a UN Security Council mandate. Operation Irini would continue as a very effective peacekeeping mission but Ireland would not be able to be part of it without a UN Security Council mandate.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Irish peacekeepers who have served throughout the world for decades know the value of the triple lock. Neutrality has been an invaluable component of Ireland's foreign policy. This country's involvement in and reputation for peacekeeping gives moral legitimacy to our voice for the international rule of law and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Former Defence Force members with first-hand experience of peacekeeping and conflict have spoken in defence of the triple lock. These people include Senator Tom Clonan who stated that it gives international status as an impartial voice for peace and de-escalation of armed conflict. Gerry Rooney, a former secretary general of the PDFORRA, which represents about 7,000 members of the Defence Forces, is also on record as saying that maintaining the triple lock and strengthening the engagement of the United Nations would be a more effective path for sustaining Ireland's peacekeeping role and neutrality. I believe that abolition of the triple lock undermines our peacekeeping role in the world.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: All deployments of Irish troops abroad under this legislation have to be consistent with the principles of the UN Charter and international law. I have already said that I agree with the Deputy in relation to the Constitution. However, I suggest that nobody in this House agrees with the decision of the UN Security Council to end peacekeeping duties in Lebanon.

Deputy Seamus Healy: What about the General Assembly?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The General Assembly has not put forward any proposal in relation to that and it is not practical for us to-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: The General Assembly is entitled to call for peacekeeping missions.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There have been no proposals in the General Assembly to continue a mission in Lebanon. At the end of the day the Security Council is the authoritative body on international security. That is just the reality of the situation. We have an incredibly proud track record of peacekeeping under our Constitution and consistent with UN principles. We would like that to continue. In the current environment it literally cannot continue in Lebanon because of the decision of the UN Security Council. That mandate is coming to an end because of a decision effectively of one country. If another peacekeeping mission were agreed, for example at EU level, we could not take part in it under the current legislation. All we are trying to do is to make our own sovereign decisions and continue the peacekeeping work that we have done over many generations.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 69 and 70 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Properties

71. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Defence if her Department or the Defence Forces have plans to renovate and bring back into use more than 80 vacant homes at the Curragh Camp; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33195/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: My question relates to the future use of the accommodation at the Curragh Camp. There are many vacant homes there at the moment.

11 o'clock

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. There has been significant investment in the Defence Forces built infrastructure in recent years. The capital expenditure for building works in military installations and barracks across the country for the past five years was approximately €170 million, and for this year alone is close to €70 million. In particular, the development of accommodation for new recruits has been a priority for the Department.

In terms of the existing Defence Forces residential housing stock in the Curragh Camp, of 104 residential units, 63 residential properties are uninhabitable. None of these properties can be brought up to a habitable standard without significant work, and many were built prior to the introduction of building regulations. Consultants were commissioned to assess the condition of the Defence Forces vacant housing stock and its suitability for conversion or

refurbishment to provide for additional single living-in accommodation for Defence Forces personnel. That consultancy reported its recommendations on refurbishment projects last year.

My officials have since engaged with the Defence Forces to have those projects included in the existing infrastructure development programme. I am advised that work is actively under way to prepare the necessary tender documentation, with a view to commencing a procurement process this year.

There is currently an extensive programme of investment in accommodation for serving Defence Forces personnel across all military installations. Since the launch of the infrastructure development plan in January 2020, numerous accommodation projects, at a combined cost of approximately €49 million, have been completed and have provided 775 beds. The Deputy may also wish to know that a steady pipeline of accommodation projects is being progressed. These are expected to significantly increase accommodation capacity in the coming years.

As I said in an earlier reply, only last week, I was at Haulbowline, the naval base in Cork, where we opened state-of-the-art accommodation with over 70 beds. That was in some of the older infrastructure, thereby making sure we protect our heritage and protect our older buildings, where possible, but also making sure that our new recruits are living and operating in new, modern facilities.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I take it from the response that there has been some progress. The Minister referred to 63 but my information is that up to 80 properties are in a derelict state. Soldiers are travelling distances to work, and many travel from County Laois. There are also retired soldiers, some of whom, unfortunately, end up in difficult housing situations. It is important these properties are put back into use. We cannot have vacant homes of any kind lying empty, given the housing crisis. Has there been liaison with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the issue?

I would make one point about the consultants and the report. The Minister and I know that things can go around the houses over a long period of time. It is important that there is action. They are empty and derelict houses. It is important that we move on and try to get them back into use.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree that we need action. We need to make sure that the money we have allocated, all €1.7 billion of it, in particular the money that is specific to accommodation, is spent and that projects are ready to go.

Deputy Brian Stanley: How much will be spent on accommodation?

Deputy Helen McEntee: In this year alone, we are up to €70 million, and that includes accommodation, but also dining facilities, a new gym and overall critical infrastructure. It will be over €400 million in the coming years. We need to make sure that we have projects ready to go and lined up. As I said, 63 residential properties have been identified as uninhabitable.

The projects that are being progressed include refurbishment of block one in Collins Barracks, modular accommodation in Haulbowline, the conversion of houses Nos. 2 and 5 in

Casement Aerodrome, the refurbishment of cadet accommodation in Haulbowline, the refurbishment of the cadets' mess accommodation in Haulbowline, the refurbishment of blocks A, B, C, D, E and F in Stephens Barracks, and there is also Cathal Brugha Barracks, the Curragh, Gormanston and Casement Aerodrome. These are all projects that are under way. On top of that, the projects that have been completed to date include Pearse Barracks, the Defence Forces Training Centre in the Curragh, Cathal Brugha Barracks, Casement Aerodrome, McKee Barracks and Haulbowline. A huge amount of work has been done in recent years. As I said, a huge number of projects are currently under way.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister outlined the many different locations, barracks and naval bases. I welcome that. However, the issue at the Curragh is of particular concern. This has gone on for a long time and in the past three or four decades, these houses have gradually fallen into disuse. I know some of them might be a challenge as they were built at a different time, some during the period of British rule. Whether it was 100, 120 or 130 years ago, housing standards were not what they are now. There has been a lot of talk in this House about upgrading houses and bringing old houses back into use. There is a lot more technology now. The Minister outlined a wide range of works across the State but I would like to see a particular focus on the Curragh. The Curragh was the main Army camp over the years. There was a big concentration in Kildare, and many people from County Laois served there. I would like to see that as a particular target.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have been in the Curragh a number of times. It is synonymous with the Defence Forces and is long-standing in terms of what it has provided and supported for Defence Forces members for many years, including accommodation and training on the grounds. I want to do everything possible to invest in new infrastructure but also to bring what is derelict back into use and ensure we are making the best use of the infrastructure that we have there. That is why we are seeing a significant amount of investment, not just in accommodation, but more broadly in infrastructure across the Curragh and all of the various different barracks and areas that I have mentioned.

It is important to stress that we have a Defence Forces infrastructure development plan. It has set out the delivery of these projects from 2023 to 2027, many of which have already been delivered. With the new capital plan, the intention is to make sure that we have a new stream of works and more projects that are ready to go, including projects like the one at the Curragh. As more funding comes on stream, or as additional funding is added to our capital plan mid-term, I hope that we will have more projects ready to go and that we will be able to continue that steady stream of investment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Fearghaíl indicated that he wished to ask a supplementary question.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I commend Deputy Stanley on putting down a question on this important matter. I welcome the response from the Minister. I grew up in Kildare at a time when, like many generations before me, the Curragh was a vibrant, living community. Unfortunately, in recent decades, the Department of Defence took as its policy the depopulation of the Curragh camp. Worse still, in recent years, we have seen the demolition of many houses

in the area, which is completely wrong. I thank the current Taoiseach and former Minister for putting a stop to the demolition of houses. I welcome the Minister, Deputy McEntee's reply today. The commitment to refurbish those houses is very positive.

I ask her to also look at the Orchard Park 100-house development, where a few houses remain in Army ownership. The intention is to transfer them to the local authority, which is in agreement, but there are still some tenants in those houses who would want to avail of an option to purchase. I ask the Minister to look at that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We need to look at all of the stock in the Defence Forces. We need to make sure that where we can refurbish, we are doing that, and where we need to build new, we are doing that, but also that we are looking at other options, whether with the local authorities or other associations. I am happy to look at any proposals or suggestions that the Deputy has raised.

More broadly, the Deputy spoke about it as a community. I work very closely with somebody who went to school in the Curragh, so I understand that we are not just talking about people who are training but their families living onsite and going to school there. It is a community. We want to make sure that it maintains that sense of community, given its importance for the Defence Forces overall. My priority is to make sure we continue to invest in it, and that where there is dereliction, we address that, but also that we highlight it and support the community that is thriving there. That is an integral part of our Defence Forces because the support the families provide to our Defence Forces is essential. Again, this comes back to the fact that if we want to grow and expand our Defence Forces, have greater capabilities and encourage more people to come into the Defence Forces, we need to make sure there is appropriate accommodation and services for them. That is a key part of our overall plan and objectives in the years ahead.

Defence Forces

72. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence her views on the release of figures that show that Ireland continues to languish at the bottom of the EU table for defence expenditure; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33417/26]

Deputy Duncan Smith: I ask the Minister to comment on the fact that Ireland remains stubbornly at the bottom of the EU table for defence and security expenditure, and what plans she has to ensure that Ireland does not remain at the bottom and continues to improve its investment in this area.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am very conscious, as we all are, of the narrative that Ireland has not been spending enough and that we have not invested in the Defence Forces. I think we all agree that we need to do more and spend more. That is why, in the past six months, we have seen an increase in our overall capital plan for the Defence Forces of 55%. We have a new defence sectoral national development plan from 2026 to 2030.

This is a comprehensive plan for the record €1.7 billion capital investment in over the next five years - an increase of €600 million, or 55%, on the previous baseline. This investment

provides for the modernisation of the Defence Forces capability across all domains. In addition, the defence Vote group has been provided with the highest ever level of overall funding - an allocation of €1.49 billion - for 2026. That is, over time, an increase in spending on capital by 55%. Our increase in current is going in the right direction. In the upcoming budget, I will be hoping to increase that further.

When we look at the investment itself, we see that each new investment is delivering additional capabilities as part of our commitment to delivering on a major programme of capability improvement in the Defence Forces. For example, I opened a number of different blocks and accommodation and supports for the Naval Service base, but also for our Defence Forces across the country. This is part of a range of ongoing projects including the development of the cadet school - we spoke of cadets earlier. By investing in the school, we are encouraging more. It also includes a new medical facility at Casement Aerodrome. We also have a new contract for the construction of an Army Ranger wing headquarters at the Defence Forces training centre. A record €83 million has been allocated this year.

What comes through when I speak to colleagues at an international level is what we are doing when it comes to our new capabilities, particularly the military radar programme. This is the first thing that I have brought forward in our capital plan to make sure that we have the appropriate capabilities that we need in terms of long-range, land and air radar, given that the type of challenges that we are facing is changing and we need to be able to respond.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Successive Governments, for decades, have underinvested in our Defence Forces. Beyond that, wider politics needs to take some responsibility. We have used our commitment to military neutrality as a reason not to invest in our Defence Forces and our national security. We do need, at this time, a greater degree of sophistication in terms of how we discuss this. I hold our military neutrality very dear. I do not ever want to see Ireland join NATO, a common defence union through the EU or any other composition that would tie our hands in terms of military deployment. I also want to see us invest in our national security and ensure that we are sovereign in that. The triple lock is a part of that discussion, but it is not the full discussion. Again, there needs to be an approach on all sides of the House in relation to that. It is a part of it, but it is not the full story. We have neglected them. There has been some change and some increased investment, but I believe we need more. We need a lot more.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are in a good place in terms of the increased investment that we have agreed to. I think we need to do more. I fully agree with the Deputy. My intention is that if SAFE, a fund that is applicable to all member states, opens up again, which I believe it will, Ireland should be applying for funding through SAFE. We should be using our own money that we are investing in Europe to be able to invest in our security and our defence. I fully agree. I think there is a belief by some that our military neutrality - the militarily neutral position that we have taken - somehow does not fit with us needing to defend ourselves by making sure we have the appropriate security mechanisms in place to defend our people and to work with other colleagues, partners, allies and friends across the EU and at an international level. When I speak to colleagues about the fact that we now have a new national maritime security strategy, it is something that is very welcome. Our maritime domain is seven times the size of our land domain. Many of the risks we are seeing now are not land wars, albeit that is happening now in Europe for the first time since the Second World War, and we are very

clear that we are not neutral on that war. We now have a situation where we know there is a shadow fleet and other ways of bringing about the cutting of significant cables, hybrid attacks or other types of security warfare that is impacting us as well.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Defence and security experts are clear that we are not at a major risk of a kinetic attack but that our infrastructure is under constant threat. It is important to ensure that the debate is taking place in that space. Last week, Dr. Paul Davis from the DCU Business School appeared before the defence committee on the topic of defence procurement and raised how defence procurement needs to be looked at differently. There is already a degree of exceptionalism to it, but we must look at it from outside the general procurement system in the context not of what delivers value for money today, but of what keeps us safe into the future in scenarios that we hope never arise. That is a difficult thing politically because success is measured on things that do not happen and that we do not see, rather than being able to point to something like a children's hospital. As controversial as it has been, at the end of it, we will have a hospital. It is different in defence and therefore requires a degree of political leadership. There is a real possibility that, come the end of this decade, Ireland could find itself sandwiched between Europe and a US that is becoming increasingly hostile to Europe. Who knows where the UK could be in terms of its politics? These threats are real. They are unseen, but they are something we need a sophisticated approach to.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree. There are two things we need to do. First, we need to spend more and we need to spend wisely. The investment in our military radar programme and our counter-drone technology is absolutely essential. We are also investing in sonar equipment in order that we can scan our seabed and make sure we know what is happening underwater as well as above the sea. I also mention the sonar buoys that are going to be deployed from our helicopters and our Air Corps. We also have investment that is happening in new technologies. We are supporting the private sector to make sure we have the best equipment and the best technology, whether it is on Haulbowline or in the monitoring of our seas and what is happening. It is also about investing in cybersecurity, where An Garda Síochána has a lead, but also the Defence Forces now have their own unit within it to make sure their equipment is safe and cannot be interfered with by other outside forces. The second thing does not cost money. It is about engaging with other countries. We do a huge amount already. We are involved in PESCO programmes, European Defence Agency programmes and UN programmes. We are looking to see whether we can do more in joining more co-operative agencies, task forces and groups that are set up within the EU and beyond. Where we are sharing information and intelligence and doing it on a more regular and structured basis, we have a better picture of what the challenges are and we are better able to respond. I am determined that we will do both.

Defence Forces

73. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on the personnel number of the Defence Forces for 2026, 2025 and 2024; the steps she is taking to increase numbers and strengthen the Defence Forces; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31761/26]

84. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Defence the establishment figure of the Defence Forces; the figure required under level of ambition 2 of the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces; and the total number in 2019 and currently. [33261/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister to update the House on the Defence Forces personnel numbers for 2026, 2025 and 2024. What steps are being taken to increase those numbers and to strengthen the Defence Forces?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 73 and 84 together.

I am fully committed to supporting the Defence Forces to increase numbers and, overall, to strengthening our Defence Forces. It was positive to see the growth in numbers last year, with 790 inductions. I have set a target of 850 inductions for 2026. Indeed, overall application numbers for careers in the Defence Forces continue to grow, with a total of 16,510 applications received in 2025 and more than 7,000 received to end of March 2026. On top of that, the number of people who left last year was at an all-time low over the last ten years. Not only are we seeing more people applying, but we are getting our numbers up in terms of the overall inductions. The number of people who are leaving, because our retention figures are much better, is at a low over the past ten years.

I recently visited the joint induction training centre in Gormanston barracks, an impressive facility in our own county, which is under expansion and will eventually facilitate the induction of up to 900 recruits per annum. Following investment of over €8.8 million, I officially opened the accommodation base in Haulbowline, as I have mentioned, which will accommodate an additional 74 personnel. The military authorities have provided the requested establishment and strength figures over the last seven years, which are set out in the table that is included with this reply. What we are seeing over the last number of years is an increase in that overall strength. Coupled with the increase in applications over the last three years, this shows that the enabling measures we are putting in place to support and drive Defence Forces recruitment retention numbers are yielding results.

2019	9,500	8,659
2020	9,500	8,568
2021	9,500	8,456
2022	9,500	7,966
2023	9,589	7,550
2024	9,600	7,557
2025	9,739	7,756
2026	9,739	7,778 (as at end March 2026)

I will outline some of the measures. We have increased the maximum ages of recruitment and retirement respectively. This was aligned with the increased age for An Garda Síochána as well. It also includes the extension of private secondary healthcare to all personnel and the application of the provisions of the working time directive, which is something the unions quite

rightly fought for and engaged with for some time. The patrol duty allowance payable to Naval Service personnel at sea has been doubled after ten days at sea in a calendar year, while the Naval Service tax credit has been extended up to 2029. There continues to be significant progress on pay with all personnel benefiting from a pay award in February with a further increase due in June. We now have a situation where our Defence Forces personnel are represented by unions at those pay talks, which is really important as well.

Underpinning these and other measures, my colleague ensured that budget 2026 provided a record allocation of €1.49 billion, an increase of €145 million on 2025. These funds include provision for the recruitment of a net 400 additional members per annum. Opportunities for careers in the Defence Forces remain open via a diverse range of ongoing competitions including general service recruitment, re-entry schemes and multiple direct entry competitions for specialist roles. While recruitment and retention remains a challenge, and that is the case across a lot of our public sector, significant strides continue to be made on a number of fronts.

We have record levels of expenditure and investment. We are seeing the numbers of people who apply and, importantly, the number of people who stay increase on a year-on-year basis. I want and need to ensure, as we all do, that we continue on that trajectory. If we are to meet our level of ambition 2 and go beyond that, we need to make sure we have a steady plan and are on the right trajectory, which we currently are.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I do not agree. I will be interested to see the figures, which I understand the Minister will provide. According to the latest information we have, which is from the end of 2025, the target for the Naval Service, for example, was 1,094 personnel and the target for level of ambition 2 for 2028 was 1,794 personnel, whereas the number *in situ* in late 2025 was roughly 784. That means we needed more than 1,000 additional members to be recruited by 2028. Is that going to happen? What are the latest figures the Minister has for the Naval Service? My concern is that we are a long way off that level of ambition 2 figure.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have set targets for 2028 and meeting them is going to be a challenge. I will not say otherwise. However, I believe that the higher the targets we set ourselves, the quicker we will reach them and the more we do to encourage and support more people to apply and also to retain our overall numbers, the quicker we will reach those establishment figures.

In terms of the Naval Service, this year the figure has gone up again. It is now at 833. With an establishment figure of 1,094, however, there is obviously still work to be done. The overall figures show that of the 7,000 people who applied in the first three months of this year, 23% applied to the Naval Service. If 23% of 7,000 applicants in the first three months were applying to the navy, we are clearly starting to see the numbers increase, which is really positive.

That is down to the fact that now, for the first time ever, we have a national maritime security strategy and are very clearly focused on how we can invest in the navy, its ships, fleet and personnel. We are now developing new equipment the Naval Service will use on our fleet. As part of the advancement of the new military radar programme, we will see new radar capability on our ships this year. In addition, the Naval Service will also deploy sonar equipment.

We are focused on our Naval Service. We are going to invest in it and we are talking about how good it is. It does a huge amount of work. On a 24-7 basis, seven days a week, 100% of our exclusive economic zones, EEZs, are monitored. Of the eight vessels we have, four are out on rotation at any given time, as are two helicopters. Due to that and the support we have from the Air Corps, our EEZs are monitored all of the time.

To Deputy Smith's comment, it is when things do not happen that we tend to talk about them but the fact is we have had successful monitoring, we are able to respond to challenges and we are working closely with other countries. We need to highlight that more. My ambition is obviously to be as ambitious as we can be but also to highlight what the Naval Service is doing and how important it is to us, and to encourage more people to join the navy because we want to grow it and we have more work to do.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister has acknowledged that recruitment is a challenge and will be a challenge until 2028. I hope she will acknowledge that retention is also an issue. Defence Force members in County Meath, the Minister's constituency and mine, raise with me the issues of breaches of the working time directive and recognition, respect and fair pay for our Defence Forces and for the overtime they do. Does the Minister recognise that is a contributing factor in terms of the recruitment and the retention of Defence Force members? How will she address that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We always need to do more in terms of retention. However, the fact that the numbers leaving was at a ten-year low is a positive sign. Notwithstanding that, as regards any measures brought to me by the unions, all of which I met in the first part of this year, I have given a commitment to actively work with the unions and overcome any challenges, particularly when it comes to overtime or working on bank holidays. That was raised recently and I also discussed it during oral questions recently. We are working through that.

More broadly, if we want to get our numbers to where they need to be, we need to make sure we look not only at recruitment to the Defence Forces but also at civilianisation more broadly. That is the path we have taken with An Garda Síochána where it has obviously improved numbers. Everyone brings something different and significant to the roles as well. A new workforce plan is being developed by the Defence Forces, working with my Department, and I hope to be able to present that in the coming weeks and months. That will set out the overall figures and also what we need within those figures, how we get to those figures and, importantly, how we increase the number of civilians we have working within the Defence Forces as well. There is a greater need and role for civilians if we are to achieve the overall numbers.

It comes down to making sure that we have a continued focus on investment in the critical infrastructure and resources that our Defence Forces use and need. It is about making sure, through public sector pay agreements, local bargaining and other negotiating options, that our Defence Forces benefit in the same way everybody else does. I stress again that it is very welcome our members are now, through the unions, around the table and part of the discussions. Any public sector pay agreement is about making sure that as issues emerge, we respond to them and that, more broadly, we highlight the positive work our Defence Forces do and the contribution they make, not just home but abroad.

We discussed the triple lock earlier. The first thing that comes to everybody's mind is the work we have done in Lebanon and the unbelievable contribution our Defence Forces have made in that regard. We need to highlight that work and make sure it is seen as a worthwhile career. The Defence Forces are doing extremely meaningful work in very challenging and difficult circumstances.

Naval Service

74. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Defence if she will outline the importance of the National Maritime Security Strategy, particularly in relation to protecting critical infrastructure; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33263/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question largely focuses on objective 2 of the national maritime security strategy and how we can improve the security and resilience of Ireland's critical maritime infrastructure. Will the Minister outline the importance of the national maritime security strategy, particularly as it relates to protecting critical infrastructure?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising this question. Earlier this year, I launched Ireland's first national maritime security strategy. This is the first strategy of its kind in Ireland. It focuses on risks and threats to Ireland's national security and defence as a consequence of the assessed threat level, our geographic position and the fact we have a maritime domain seven times the size of our land domain. There is a responsibility and need for us to protect that domain and the critical infrastructure around it, and also to work closely with our colleagues in the UK, in Denmark, in the Nordic and Baltic countries, France and beyond, in identifying where those potential risks emerge and how we respond to them.

Through the new strategy, I am paying particular attention to the security of critical infrastructure in our maritime domain. This is because, as we all know, many major undersea cables land on our shores, come across the Atlantic and transit through our EEZ. They carry significant amounts of global Internet traffic and financial data. From an energy perspective, they are absolutely critical for us. In addition, our energy sector is heavily supported by subsea gas pipelines and electricity interconnectors. The infrastructure is vulnerable to hybrid threats. The same applies to any other country. I stress that with any type of underwater infrastructure, we are all open to the new and evolving types of threats. Vessels from the Russian shadow fleet also present a significant challenge from an environmental perspective. This is something that has been called out significantly.

I will outline some of the key actions in the strategy to respond to and be able to combat some of the concerns. First, we will develop the concept of a national maritime security centre, which will deliver a new whole-of-government approach to protect the security of our maritime domain. We will explore the opportunity for Ireland to host or participate in a regional maritime monitoring hub for the protection of critical undersea infrastructure in the North Atlantic. We want to strengthen regional partnerships, particularly with our near neighbours. Most recently, I signed a memorandum of understanding with the UK. We have a new memorandum of understanding with France and we are also looking at what other types of European initiatives we could join. We are working more closely with the private sector, which is absolutely crucial

when so much of the equipment for underwater cables is from the private sector. We are also developing a comprehensive new legal approach.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the national maritime security strategy. It is a very positive step forward. With the EU Presidency just around the corner, this defence issue has rarely been more topical. We face potential threats now that we would not have thought of ten, 15 or 20 years ago. The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines, for example, puts into perspective how vulnerable we would be if that were to happen to us.

The two interconnector gas connections going from Scotland to Ireland will carry 86% of our gas for this winter. The new Celtic interconnector on the seabed between Cork and France when it comes live will have 700 MW of power, powering potentially 450,000 homes. These are all vulnerable. Until we transition to renewable energy sources, they will be vulnerable. Will the Minister elaborate further what is being done to safeguard those particular assets from man-made threats to them?

Deputy Helen McEntee: When I meet colleagues, be it when I was in Poland last week or when we have colleagues visiting here, security is one of the key things we speak of, making sure that, from an economic security perspective, we are focused on it but also when it comes to the potential threats. The Deputy touched on it and mentioned the Russian shadow fleet, not least the fact that that shadow fleet is funding the illegal war in Ukraine. There is also the potential for an economic disaster. With our Presidency coming up, there will be a renewed focus on Ireland and the fact that we have a large number of visits taking place. Then there is also the critical infrastructure, be it our energy infrastructure or the huge amounts of data that are essential for much of our economies here but also that carry data right across the globe. We need to make sure that we have all the infrastructure in place to be able to identify where risks emerge and how we respond to them. The military radar programme coupled with the sonar programme we are developing, the sonobuoys, make sure that we have a full and complete picture of what is happening under our water and above our seas. The close engagement we are having with the UK, France and many other countries and the networks we are feeding into at a European level mean that we have a complete picture of what is happening. We are also making sure we are able to respond to threats as they emerge. I hope to enact before the summer new legislation which will give our Defence Forces even greater clarity in terms of boarding, inspecting and directing ships if they are where they should not be.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I really welcome the co-operation with the UK on this matter. Let us be honest: it has technological capabilities and experience in this area that we can really learn from. That partnership is therefore really welcome. I am Chair of the climate, environment and energy committee, and we had a briefing recently from officials from the French embassy and they really highlighted the issues around the Russian shadow fleet and its proximity in terms of its operations close to our waters or, in fact, sometimes in our waters and the threats they carry. I would welcome, in the context of the Presidency, Ireland really pushing that issue with France to try to prioritise resolving those issues. There are environmental risks associated with the shadow fleet. They are probably the least of the risks but they are there as well because those vessels are so dated. As Chair of the climate committee, I have seen first hand how vital certainty and stability are for energy. The roll-out of the new EU-wide resilience

measures that the Minister mentioned and the co-operation with our partners are really important. I would appreciate if we could keep that on the clár for the EU Presidency.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have a huge amount of talent and a lot of innovation happening here. I think other countries are looking to Ireland and some of the work we are doing. On the same day I launched the maritime security strategy, I awarded a grant of €1 million through our Department to a private company that has been working with a university here. It is developing technology that can scan the seabed, look at gas pipelines and other types of critical infrastructure and identify where risks are emerging and how we respond to them but also maintenance and upkeep where that is needed. There is a lot of innovation happening here in Ireland, and we need to do more. The Deputy will know that our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, is bringing forward legislation to allow companies where there are dual-use opportunities around security and defence to access funding in a way they have not done before. That is really important. What is also critical in the new national maritime security strategy is the development of a forum that will bring together the private sector, Government, State agencies and Defence Forces to look at the overall infrastructure and how we develop, protect, monitor and manage it. That will be a really important way to ensure that everybody involved here in protecting what is critical infrastructure and the security of our State is working together and that we have full sight of what we need to do. Work is under way at the moment, and I look forward to providing further updates.

Naval Service

75. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Defence the number of navy vessels the Naval Service can now staff and put to sea; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33199/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask for the number of naval vessels that are in service and that we can staff and safely put to sea. As the Minister knows, in recent years that has been down to one or two at times. I am just looking for the current level of ability or capacity there.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Naval Service currently has a fleet of eight commissioned vessels. These eight vessels consist of two P50 class large patrol vessels, four P60 class offshore patrol vessels and two P70 inshore patrol vessels. I am advised by the military authorities that there are four vessels available for operations on a rotation basis. This rotation takes account of maintenance, crew training and rest periods.

The strength of the Naval Service, as of 31 March 2026, was 833 personnel out of an establishment of 1,094 personnel. The military authorities have advised that the total number of personnel currently required to crew all vessels is 294. It should be noted that this figure is currently under review in the context of the overall force design process currently in progress, with a view to enhanced capabilities under level of ambition 2.

Challenges with ships to sea have been well documented in recent years. In 2025 we saw the benefit of a number of initiatives which have been introduced in recent years, such as the doubling of patrol duty allowance payable. As a result of these initiatives, we have seen the

number of patrol days completed by the Naval Service in 2025 increase by over 35% on the outputs from the previous year, so quite a significant increase.

I reassure the Deputy that the regeneration of the Naval Service is one of my priorities as Minister for Defence. It is also, of course, a priority for the Defence Forces. This reflects the commitment in the programme for Government. It is reinforced in the actions required under the strategic framework to 2026, which was published in February of this year.

To that end, I have had detailed discussions with the Chief of Staff on the need to have a regeneration report submitted on the Naval Service, and work is under way on that. The Defence Forces, in conjunction with senior officials in my Department, are working to have the report, and an action plan against which progress will be able to be measured, delivered to me as soon as possible.

The joint actions of the Defence Forces provide a vital foundation for the new strategy. I am determined to strengthen our Defence Forces through investing in their personnel and capabilities in order that they can continue to protect and monitor our maritime domain against new and evolving threats.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for her reply. Of course, the maritime area that has to be protected and that comes within our jurisdiction is massive. From her reply, I take it that there are four vessels that are seaworthy and available, as she said, at any one time. In relation to the rotation, are there some ships within that fleet of eight that are not seaworthy at all? The Minister might clarify that when she comes back. If I heard her right, I think she said that there are 833 staff. What are the numbers that were recruited in 2025, what were the numbers that retired and what is the target? They are the three key figures: the target, the numbers that have been recruited and the numbers that have retired or that have left the Naval Service. I know there has been recruitment to improve the capacity, and I welcome that. It is important we have it to protect our cables. The fact that we are a neutral country, which the Minister admitted in answer to a previous question, does not impede us in any way from increasing the capacity of our navy and having sensible levels of co-operation with neighbouring countries and other European countries.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Our overall strength, as of 31 March, was 833 personnel. We have an establishment or a target figure of 1,094. Obviously, we want to reach that, and we want to go beyond it if we are looking at level of ambition 2 and beyond. While I do not have the exact figures to hand for last year, as of 31 March this year a total of 39 personnel have been inducted, but that is just within the first three months. As I mentioned, of the 7,000 who have applied this year, about 23%, I believe, are applications to the Naval Service, so quite a large number are still applying. Thirty-nine have been inducted up until 31 March this year.

In terms of the overall vessels and how they operate, it is not physically or logistically possible for all our Naval Service vessels to be at sea simultaneously. That is because they operate on a rotation basis. Furthermore, I refer to maintaining safe manning levels and preventing personnel burnout. That is why we want to increase our numbers, in order that we can increase our overall capacity. Again, I stress, through the ships we have out, and with the support of the Air Corps, we are able to cover and to monitor with technology and equipment our EEZ 24-7. Obviously, we want greater capabilities on top of that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: In relation to the eight vessels, there are four at sea at any one time. I understand there is rotation and that they cannot all be at sea at any one time. Is it the case that there are one or two of those ships that are not seaworthy and that are permanently docked at any time? I ask the Minister to clarify that. That is the question I am asking. Of course, we have to protect our undersea cables.

As a result of the agreement signed with France, the Celtic interconnector will now be coming on stream. The import of drugs also continues to present a challenge. The navy and other arms of the State have had some notable successes in that regard. I welcome the target of 1,094 personnel but only 39 were inducted in the first three months of the year. That is a very low number considering the huge number of applications. Huge numbers of people are applying but the Minister said that 39 have been inducted, which is a very small number. Will the Minister clarify that point regarding the ships?

Deputy Helen McEntee: In relation to our ships, at any given time, something might arise resulting in a ship requiring unscheduled maintenance but, the vast majority of the time, it is a case of scheduled maintenance. Ships come to a certain point in their lifetime and go in for scheduled maintenance. It obviously takes some time to go through that process. That is why the ships operate on a rotation. The *LÉ Aoibhinn* is a new ship that we hope to be ready and commissioned in the third quarter of this year. Again, it is about making sure that scheduled maintenance happens as it is supposed to. Where issues arise and ships need to be taken in for maintenance as the result of unforeseen circumstances, we obviously need to respond as quickly as possible. I again stress that the physical presence of our navy ships is complemented by intelligence-gathering carried out by naval operations 24-7, 365 days a year, at the command centre in Haulbowline. That involves remote monitoring. In addition, Air Corps aircraft are equipped with state-of-the-art communications and surveillance equipment. To the Deputy's point, these work very closely with An Garda Síochána, Revenue and customs. We recently saw a massive drugs haul involving the *MV Matthew*. That was the result of all of our agencies working together with all of the resources we have.

Defence Forces

76. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Defence her plans to increase cadet pay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33119/26]

85. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence her views on the matter of entry-level cadet pay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33405/26]

93. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on her actions to date to ensure cadet pay is increased to bring cadets in line with other entrants into the Defence Forces; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33214/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: This question is a logical follow-on from the one posed by Deputy Stanley. It asks the Minister about action on cadet pay. I ask it against the background

of the continuing crisis in recruitment and retention. It is not just a question, but a call for urgent action.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 76, 85 and 93 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. He would probably agree that significant progress has been made on pay and conditions for Defence Forces personnel, particularly over the last six years. I have met with the various associations. I met with RACO on 22 January and its representatives raised the issue of cadet pay with me. As the Deputy will know, the matter is currently on the conciliation and arbitration agenda. At that time, I said that I would see whether we could give further consideration to the issue beyond what is being done through that system. I have asked my Department to look at that. During those discussions with RACO, I also outlined that any cost-increasing claims have to be addressed within the parameters of public pay policy. When dealing with our public servants, including members of the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána, we have to work within that public pay policy.

As the Deputy will be aware, different pay scales apply during the training period for both cadets and recruits. The current pay scale applicable to cadets ranges from €26,248 to €39,026, depending on various qualifications. In addition, cadets are provided with accommodation and meals free of charge for the duration of their training. This is part of the overall package. For many young people starting off, rent and food make up a large chunk of the bills they have to pay so the fact that these are included is very welcome and certainly helps with the overall costs facing cadets. Cadets are required to complete a training period that is approximately 11 months longer than the training programme provided to recruits. They have to complete this programme before they are commissioned and operational. When they are commissioned, their starting pay ranges from €46,359 to €51,748, depending on whether they came in as school leavers or as graduates.

In the conversation surrounding the pay and conditions of members of the Defence Forces, it is important to point out that, in addition to basic pay, certain positions in the Defence Forces attract specialist and technical pay. There is additional pay to attract those with specialist qualifications. There is also scope for further income from duty allowances for specific duties carried out on an ongoing basis as well as the possibility of earning a tax-free duty allowance, which starts at €15,000, for a six-month overseas deployment. Many of those in the 128th Battalion, which is heading to Lebanon in the time ahead, will receive that allowance.

Members of the Permanent Defence Force are a party to the current public service pay agreement. This provides for local bargaining. Parties can bring forward proposals up to a maximum value equivalent to 3% of basic pay, with 1% to be paid from the current agreement and the balance to be paid under any successor pay agreement. There is an opportunity to examine pay and conditions, including cadet pay, through that particular process.

To the Deputy's question, negotiations are ongoing. The matter is on the conciliation and arbitration agenda. I would like to see that process concluded as quickly as possible. I have also asked my Department to look at other ways to support them on top of that. I can come back to that in my next response. It is about making sure we are investing in the physical environment and in our Defence Forces and that we are making it an attractive career, whether you come through as a cadet or through any other route.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I acknowledge the Minister's positive disposition to this matter in many aspects of her response but the general secretary of RACO, Conor King, recently set out in the *Irish Examiner* the fact that cadets are paid far less than the enlisted soldiers they work beside in their first five years. This anomaly would be indefensible in any other profession. Cadetship is a gruelling high-intensity apprenticeship like no other. As well as undergoing long hours of education and training, cadets may be deployed as an aid to civil power operations and are routinely used as the go-to unit for State ceremonial events, representing Ireland at moments of national and international significance. They demonstrated their usefulness during the course of the Covid crisis. We have a problem with recruitment and retention. Much has been done in that area but low cadet pay is a serious blockage in recruitment and needs to be addressed urgently.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister has given indications in the past and she has talked about addressing this issue but it has been six months since she took office and ultimately nothing has changed. Cadets are still paid well below the minimum wage. That is damaging to recruitment and retention. Their pay is the lowest in the Defence Forces at €503 per week. That compares with €550 for a recruit. Considering that is weekly pay, there is a considerable distance between the two. Recruit pay rises to €627, which is considerably above that €503. They remain on this pay for the entirety of their first year, earning 40.7% less than enlisted counterparts. This has a knock-on impact on pension contributions so it has a whole-career impact. This is undermining recruitment and retention. These are the future leaders of the Defence Forces. It is crucially important they are supported. I understand RACO has said it has been left with little alternative but to recommend that cadets enlist as a recruit in the Defence Forces before entering a cadetship, which unnecessarily lengthens the progress of their career.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In these six months, I have been clear that I want to see us do more for cadets. There are quite a range of entry points, starting at €26,248 and going up to €39,026. A person's entry point depends on whether they enter on the higher scale as a graduate or otherwise. I cannot step into another role. The Representative Association of Commissioned Officers has sent in a claim. This is being dealt with through the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. Those discussions are confidential. While I would like to resolve the matter myself, I cannot do so. However, I would like to see it resolved as quickly as possible. We may have an opportunity to increase pay for our cadets and other members, including recruits, through local bargaining or otherwise through the public sector pay agreement.

It is essential that we look in the round at how to attract more people to the Defence Forces. Of course, an important part of that is pay and conditions. I accept that. We all know that. That is why, in recent years, we have made significant advancements on overall pay through the public sector pay agreements, on the health supports that are provided, on specific supports for those in the navy with particular programmes they are engaged in, on direct entry, and on allowances for specialised areas. More recently, issues around holiday pay, bank holidays and double time have been resolved. We need to make sure that, where issues and challenges arise, we respond to them quickly but in the context of the overall public sector pay agreement. As the Deputies will appreciate, this is not relevant only to the Defence Forces but we must make

sure that our Defence Forces are represented and that, where there are increases, members at every level, including cadets, feel the benefits.

I will finish where the Deputy has alluded to very clearly. Cadets are valued members of Defence Forces as is the work they do. I know many people who have gone in through the cadet programme and are doing really well. They are people we are extremely proud of in the roles they are in. We need to make sure we provide every opportunity for people to enter and progress within the Defence Forces and to continue the really important work they do on the ground at home and overseas. That is my commitment in the time ahead as Minister.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I have to proudly state that those who emerge from cadet schools are people of an extraordinary calibre that we are all enormously proud of. Low pay might be tolerable if the cadetships were short or if the financial impact disappeared once training ended but under the single pension scheme, earnings are averaged across an entire career and, therefore, at the end of a career, the cadet is still being penalised by virtue of the reduced pension they will receive. That is not a tolerable situation. The recruitment age for cadets has been increased to 39 years. If people are 30-plus and have a family and a mortgage there is no way, unless they have very substantial savings, that they could afford to become a cadet and take the vastly reduced pay available at that level. The good step of increasing the age profile is being hampered and impeded by the low rate of cadet pay. It really needs to be resolved.

On a completely different but related matter, the cadet school has ended its relationship with Malta. For many years, the Irish cadet school trained members of the Maltese military in a really beneficial and impressive manner. I regret this has ended. Can something be done to restore that programme?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I would love to hear about local bargaining. Local bargaining seems to be the solution to cadet pay, the service commitment scheme and to specialist staff. However many per cent it is, the scope clearly does not exist to expect it to be like the miracle of loaves and fishes and solve all the problems. There is scope to do a bit with local bargaining but ultimately the Department needs to recognise that these are strategic considerations in the development capability and the personnel numbers of the Defence Forces. This is intolerable. Deputy Ó Feargháil is entirely correct. If people are coming from a different sector to become cadets, it will not be sustainable for them to keep up mortgage payments on that kind of pay.

I will give a brief mention to something else in another training sphere, namely Air Corps apprentices. One category of them, not the most recent, is actually on lower pay than the class coming just behind them because of the recategorisation. It is a small category. Some sort of *ex gratia* scheme or approach should be made to support them because it is not fair to have one class on a lower scale even though it is a year advanced than the next category.

Deputy Helen McEntee: An investment in the men and women in our Defence Forces is an investment in our security and the security of our State. We all fully agree and we are all aligned in that. We all fully agree we need to expand and grow our Defence Forces and expand our capabilities. That means more money but it also means making sure that pay and conditions are as strong as they can be. We have made significant progress in the past number of years.

Conditions not just for our cadets, but across the Defence Forces, have improved. Through public sector pay agreements, overall pay has increased. There has also been investment in specialities and particular roles as well as encouraging people to come in with different qualifications. I accept if somebody is coming in later in life with a mortgage and family, we need to be able to look at that and see how we attract those types of people and make sure it is viable for them. That is where accommodation comes in and where paying for meals and other elements are important. We need to make sure it is accessible to people and they are not living in Donegal and having to go to Cork. We are looking at where training takes place and are trying to address all the different challenges, particularly when we have increased the age threshold. I welcome that and I witnessed the impact that had on recruitment to An Garda Síochána. I also see how it is starting to trickle through when it comes to our Defence Forces.

Both Deputies mentioned training. Whether it is maritime security strategy, the information sharing environment we are now part of at a European level, our PESCO programmes, the European Defence Agency or, indeed, the Partnership for Peace programmes we are involved in with the UN, much of what we do is around training. Our recruits are going to other countries and training troops on the ground there and exchanges that take place are a really important part of that overall training. For example, that type of exchange and training is a core part of the most recent memorandum of understanding with the UK. While I cannot speak directly to the Malta programme with Deputy Ó Feargháil at the moment, I am happy to follow up on that. I assure him that training and exchanges right across the EU and beyond and various different types of programme, peacebuilding or otherwise, are a core part of what we do. It is essential to the overall training of our own teams as well. The training we provide is seen as world-class. That is certainly something I am prioritising in every programme we are developing and in every exchange that is taking place with other international and European partners.

Question No. 77 taken with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

78. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the conciliation and arbitration scheme for the permanent Defence Force has been without an adjudicator since June 2025; when an adjudicator will be appointed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33416/26]

Deputy Duncan Smith: Why has the conciliation and arbitration scheme for the Permanent Defence Force has been without an adjudicator since June last year? This is the only place Defence Forces members can have grievances addressed. This process is being held up because of the lack of an appointment. I would like an update please.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I would like to see this resolved as soon as possible. It was raised with me by the representative groups when I met them. Every effort to nominate an adjudicator for the conciliation and arbitration, C and A, scheme for the Permanent Defence Forces is being made to bring it to a conclusion. Efforts have been under way for some time. As the Deputy will be aware, the scheme for the Defence Forces is the primary mechanism for addressing industrial relations issues in the defence sector. It is a voluntary mechanism that provides structures for management and the military representative associations to engage on issues as

they arise. I am glad these structures have helped to maintain positive industrial relations in the sector over a number of years.

The scheme provides for an arbitration process to assist in the resolution of disputes that remain unresolved following engagement and that become the subject of formal disagreement. The scheme includes provision for an adjudicator and an arbitration board. Under the agreed terms of reference of the C and A scheme, the adjudicator and arbitration board appointments are mutually agreed by both sides. While an arbitration board is currently *in situ*, the matter of the appointment of an adjudicator remains under consideration. For that reason, it is something that has to be mutually agreed on both sides.

There has been considerable engagement between the Department of Defence, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the military representative associations on the appointment. I look forward to the matter being resolved in the near future. I will continue to engage with all those involved to make sure we can have an individual who is mutually agreed by both sides. The Deputy will agree that the work the body does is essential so we need to make sure that it is functioning in the way that it should and that we have someone appointed as quickly as possible.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The continued delays and the recurring nature of this issue risks undermining the integrity of the C and A scheme in general. Given the unique restrictions places on the Defence Forces personnel, I have to say in the strongest terms, it is absolutely essential that this mechanism operates without interruption and with the confidence of all parties.

I will bring this up at every Oral Question session having been making continued representations to the Minister and I will work with the representative bodies as well to ensure that this matter is resolved at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Helen McEntee: While the post of adjudicator under this scheme has been vacant, it has not prevented the continued operation of the scheme. It is important to stress that. We want to make sure someone is appointed as quickly as possible but it has not prevented the operation of the scheme. We have engagement between the official side and the military representative associations. That has continued through the conciliation councils, where appropriate, and through facilitation as well. The Deputy will be aware the revised scheme introduced in April 2024 strengthened the role of the independent chairperson and placed a greater emphasis on early and structured facilitation with the objective of resolving matters before escalating to the adjudication or the arbitration. It is working and it is important it continues to work but I fully agree and appreciate it is important we have someone appointed as soon as possible. I will continue to work with all of those involved to make sure a person everyone can be supportive of is appointed as soon as possible.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

12 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Seo scannal bothán rothar eile - €127,000 caite ar bhothán rothar in Ospidéal Chiarraí. Tagann sé seo ag an am céanna ina bhfuil Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte ag rá go bhfuil sé ag dul siar ar a bhuiséad, go bhfuil smacht caiteachais i bhfeidhm anois, agus go bhfuil moratóir ar earcaíocht ar fud chuid den tseirbhís sláinte. Deirtear le hoibrithe cúram sláinte nach bhfuil go leor airgid ansin. Tá folúntais nach bhfuil líonta. Tá foireann atá traochta. Tá othair atá ag fanacht. Tá páiste atá ag fanacht míonna i gcomhair measúnuithe. Ach ar an lámh eile, níl fadhb ar bith ag an Rialtas €127,000 a fháil agus a chaitheamh le cúpla rothar a choinneáil tirim.

Another day, another bike shed scandal, and not for the first time involving the Minister's Government. We had a €336,000 Leinster House bike shed. Almost €100,000 was spent on a bike shed at Holles Street, and now we have another bike shed, costing €127,000, at University Hospital Kerry. It is another slap in the face to ordinary people right across this country, workers and families who are already at breaking point. This comes at the exact time that the Government is imposing a recruitment embargo across parts of the health service. Healthcare workers are being told that there is no money. Vacancies are going unfilled. Staff are working to exhaustion. Patients are waiting for longer and longer. Children are waiting for months for assessment, yet, on the other hand, somehow the Government, no problem, finds €127,000 for a designer bike shed, and that was signed off without blinking an eye. Does the Minister know what the most outrageous part of that is? Vastly cheaper options were available. The Government examined options that included one at less than €7,000, one at €10,000 and another at €21,000, but no the Government chose an option that was 20 times dearer than that. What was the excuse for all the Government's waste? What the excuse for this because it had tougher glass, because it looked nicer, because the spacing was a bit better and because the hospital green team thought it might be more publicly acceptable?

If this was satire, it would be unbelievable. Patients are being treated on trolleys in corridors in our hospitals, in Kerry and elsewhere. That is the reality. Families are desperately trying to access the care and supports they need. We have staff who are being burnt out and are leaving the system. Now, on top of all of that, the Government has imposed a recruitment embargo on parts of the health system. While essential posts go unfilled under the Government's watch, it has signed off on a luxury bike shed and lectures the public about value for money and the need to tighten their belts in these challenging times.

Let us be clear that this is not just waste. This is a culture of arrogance. It is the same culture of arrogance where there is always money for the vanity projects and the indulgence but never money for the patients and those on the front line. It is the same rotten culture that gave us the previous bike shed scandals. There is one rule for the ordinary workers and the ordinary people but when it comes to the Minister's Government and to wasting the public money, there is no end. People are told to tighten their belts. Hospitals are told to cut back. However, when it comes to the Government's waste and excess, the chequebook is always open. People watching this and listening to this story are working hard. They are paying their mortgage and their rent. They are trying to pay their bills, whether for electricity, groceries, fuel or energy. They are trying to do their best. They do not get to waste €127,000, shrug their

shoulders, and just move on. The Minister's Government does it again and again, and nobody is ever held accountable.

Let us call this what it is. This is not just bad luck. It is not oversight. This is pure waste. It is squandering the people's money but the Government keeps on doing it and nobody is held accountable. How can the Minister justify imposing a recruitment embargo across parts of the health service while defending €127,000 for a designer bike shed?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): Each and every one of us, whether Ministers in Departments or Deputies in this House, wants to make sure that every taxpayers' penny that is spent is spent well, goes to where it needs to go and goes to those who need it. That is across every Department, including health, education, active travel, and investing in critical infrastructure. With the €105 billion that was announced in last year's budget, there is a role for all of us, including Ministers, Departments, and agencies, to make sure we get value for money, spend it where it is needed, and that projects come in on time and on budget. That has to be a focus and priority for all of us. That is an objective of Government and of all of us in this House.

One of the Department of public expenditure and reform's key roles is the development of guidance, codes of practice, and circulars to make sure we get best value for money, that we adhere to critical infrastructure guidelines, that we have codes of practice in place that are adhered to, and that we make sure that what we are spending our money on is spent well, whether it is money invested in health, education, communications, large-scale transport, or any other larger projects. Before suggesting that is not happening, look at communications where we have the €3 billion national broadband plan which was delivered on time, on budget, and is ahead of schedule. We have large-scale transport projects that are coming in on time and within budget. In the health sector, which the Deputy referenced, more money is being spent than ever before. We will have more people working in our health service this year than we did last year. Of course, we have to make sure that where budgets are set within hospitals and within regions, people are able to stick to those because if you go over your budget, then somebody else in a different part of the country suffers.

When you look at the projects and the investment, we had acute facility expansions in 2025, with works to expand ward blocks in Cork University Hospital, St. James's, Connolly, Blanchardstown, and the Mater hospital. They have all been delivered on time and on budget. These are facilities for people where people will benefit day-to-day. The Mater hospital's Rock Wing was completed in 2023. I mention the national forensic central hospital and Merlin Park University Hospital. Look at further and higher education and at education.

We are absolutely determined that every cent that is spent of the €105.4 billion budget announced last year, which we will spend this year, and the money announced in the past couple of weeks, will go directly to those who need it but we need to make sure we have a balance, that we are investing in active travel, that we are encouraging people to cycle to work where they can, that we are investing in our communities and that it is not just going directly into services and infrastructure.

Nobody agrees with what happened here in Leinster House last year. That is why the OPW has put in place new measures and put forward changes to make sure something like that cannot happen again but the project the Deputy mentioned went through the procurement process and

the proper guidelines. What was delivered was what was decided was needed for the hospital in the place that it was located. That is in the scheme of a €105 billion budget, with additional funding already provided for this year. We have provided €750 million to people because we know that it is needed. Some €100 million has been provided directly to our farmers and contractors who are quite literally providing and putting the food on our tables, and there is €100 million extra for our hauliers, who are transporting our goods, food, commodities and people across the country. We are also supporting people directly with the reduction in overall fuel prices, whether it is the 32 cent, 27 cent, or the significant reduction in marked green diesel. All of this is because we appreciate and understand that while we need to continue to invest in our infrastructure and to spend money on our schools, hospitals, and directly on supports people need, we also need to invest in the here and now, and acknowledge that people are in a very difficult position because of the war in Iran, the conflict in Ukraine, and because of what has happened post Covid. All of this cumulatively has put immense stress and pressure on people. That does not mean that every single cent that is being spent is not being spent well and wisely.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The public is sick to the teeth of this. The Minister stands there and defends €127,000 being spent on a designer bike shed at the same time as the Government is imposing a recruitment embargo. Does the Minister not know how tone-deaf that is and what the family whose mother is lying on a hospital trolley in a corner of one of those hospitals feel when they hear that, or when the carer who is sitting at home cannot actually care for people because there is a recruitment embargo that does not allow the hours for home help to be provided? Does the Minister not understand that people are sick to the teeth of the Government, which is a serial waster of public money, spending money over and over again on vanity projects? That includes €336,000 on the Leinster House bike shed, €100,000 on the Holles Street hospital bike shed, and now the Minister defends €127,000 on a bike shed in the Kerry hospital. It was the most expensive option, at 20 times dearer. These are vanity projects and the Government has lost the run of itself on public spending and value for money.

The Government is tone deaf when it talks to people about how they will have to wait until next year's budget for supports and have to tighten their belts. Yet the Government signed the cheques for designer bike sheds and the Minister stands there and defends that at a time the Government is telling people it is imposing a recruitment embargo. Nurses are at breaking point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Front-line staff are at breaking point. These waiting lists are getting longer yet the Minister defends the indefensible. How does she square that circle?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Does the Deputy accept we are spending more money on health every year?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: With the cost of the bike shed, of course the Government can.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This time next year there will be more people working in our health service. We cannot have a situation where money is being spent and there is no accountability as to where it is going within our health service or anywhere else as well.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the problem; there is no accountability.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy talks about our budgets. We would not have the money to invest if we followed the tack the Deputy wants us to take.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: While I do not stand here every Thursday, I listen every Thursday and every single week, the Deputy comes in here and wants a new budget. Sinn Féin has put forward a new plan for €3 billion additional funding but does not take into account the fact that if we were to spend every penny-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the bike shed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----that the Deputy wants to spend-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Tax and spend, Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister has not mentioned the bike shed once.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Not only would we not have a surplus-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Tax and spend, Pearse.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the bike shed?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: How many bike sheds-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: Let the Minister speak.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and we would not actually have the money to spend. Sinn Féin does not want any taxes or to take in any money. It just wants to spend it. Sinn Féin does not take into account that the money it is proposing the Government spends would increase costs even more for people by about 5% or €3 billion.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer my question please, with respect.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have answered the Deputy's question very clearly.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the bike shed? I have asked the Minister twice now. How can she defend that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, allow the Minister to respond.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What we have is an infrastructure plan of €102 billion. The Deputy can talk about one project. I think we all agree we need to make sure whether it is a large or small project, that value for money is achieved.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: But it was not. The Minister should suigh síos. She has no answers.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What Deputy Doherty will never accept is that €102 billion is being spent in our schools hospitals, our road networks and our infrastructure-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----all of which people will benefit from.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should conclude. Deputy Nash is next.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We would not have a red cent of that if we followed the economic plans Sinn Féin has proposed.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ged Nash: PAYE workers need a mini-budget, and they need it now. Last October's budget, the first of this Government's new term, managed to pull off a quite extraordinary feat. It committed to spend over €9 billion more than the year before, yet left working families even worse off. This is an unparalleled achievement and all because of choices the Government made. Even before Trump and Israel's war on Iran, the ESRI, in its post-budget analysis, said working families would be 2% poorer this year, with those who depend on the State for all of their income twice as far behind.

Roll seven months on, and the picture for PAYE workers has worsened considerably. Working people were deliberately misled by Fine Gael before they went to the polls in 2024.

The Minister's party said that PAYE tax rates and bands would be indexed every year, making sure small pay hikes would be taken home. Instead, Fine Gael chose an economically stupid tax break for fast food chains and to subsidise the bank balances of developers against all of the expert advice, even from the Government's own civil servants. These are not the actions of a responsible Government.

Three weeks ago, a Government that was close to losing its authority caved in to sectoral interests and shelled out over €700 million to buy their silence for a few weeks. Nobody is saying for one minute that supports were not needed but there was nothing in that deal whatsoever for PAYE workers, and they know it. There was nothing to help with the day to day challenges that now have a permanence about them.

The truth is the Government has abandoned hard-working families on middle and low incomes. Money was no object before the votes were counted in November 2024. No vote buying gimmick was too madcap not to find its way into that year's pre-election budget in a transparent attempt to buy people's votes with their own money. The message to working people since has been clear: you are on your own. Ireland has the highest energy prices in the EU with a harsh winter ahead. We have had already high grocery prices, rising by a further 6.5% for the basics in the first part of the year. There is no sign of the promised €200 childcare rate and there were shameful sham fights this week over college fees, rather than knuckling down and cutting costs for families

This afternoon, Government will have a chance to show its support for PAYE workers. Labour's motion makes a very clear ask: do a mini-budget now, and put up to €1,000 into the pockets of average working families by: indexing bands and credits for PAYE workers backdated to January, bringing in a targeted €400 energy credit for households on under €80,000 annually and introduce a €100 groceries supplement to combat high prices at the checkout. In the absence of a mini-budget, it will not be Ireland that will be going nuclear; it will be Irish workers hit with high costs and no sign of relief and respite. Does the Minister plan to formally oppose Labour's motion later and if so, why?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Again, we all appreciate that we can all see the challenges people are facing at the moment. This has not happened overnight. We have had a series of events that have impacted inflation and our overall prices, from Covid-19 to the war in Ukraine and the most recent crisis in the Middle East where it is being said that if what happened in the seventies was coupled twice with the war in Ukraine, in terms of the impact on and access to fuel and prices, this is worse. We are dealing with what has been a cumulative impact and the need not just for a response of a direct financial support to people, but for structural change and investment. To the Deputy's point, that is exactly what this Government campaigned on, was elected on and what we set out to do in our programme for Government.

We have a programme for Government that is set out over the five years. It is important to stress that it is five budgets over five years. It is not possible to do everything in any one year. What we have been very clear on from this year's budget and will be clear again in the coming weeks and months with next year's budget, is that we want to make sure that with the surplus we have, because of the way in which the economy is managed and of our focus on developing

economies and making sure we have money to invest back into our infrastructure and in our services for people who need them most, we are in a position where we can provide support directly to people but also plan for the future and invest in those long-term structural changes while, at the same time, making it easier for those who are working and need our support as well. I appreciate that and we all accept that for those who are working, taking the average household - I hate to use the example we always use of a nurse and a garda, or two people who working in the public sector - we want to make sure people feel the benefit when they take home their pay packets every week or month. We have said we will make changes when it comes to income tax brackets and that is something we are committed to doing. We have made very clear that we have plans when it comes to reducing overall costs for childcare, something that can be like an extra mortgage for people, but that we also need to look at overall access to childcare. That is being worked on at the moment.

People are struggling most at the moment with energy costs and trying to respond to what has been a significant shock during the past few weeks. We have been clear that we want to do two things. We want to continue directly to support people. I do not accept the Deputy's comment that the general person who gets up and goes to work got nothing. The reduction in fuel costs overall was to support the person who gets into their car or gets public transport and goes to work every day. The €750 million package between the extension of the fuel allowance, the direct reduction and, yes, the specific package for the hauliers, farmers and contractors, was provided with a very clear focus on an industry that uses more fuel than ever because of the time of the year and the production they are involved in. We are making sure that, because of the choices we have made in the past and because of the fact we have a surplus, we are investing directly and supporting people as they need it now. We also have significant plans through our investment and infrastructure plan, and other plans whether they be for childcare-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister, Deputy Nash to respond.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----the delivery of more homes, investment in healthcare and education that we are making permanent invests and permanent savings for people going forward.

Deputy Ged Nash: With respect, nothing the Minister has said on the record in response to my question will make it any easier for PAYE workers between now and the budget to get some respite and help with the high energy costs and so on she directly referenced. We can trace all of this back to the poor decisions the Government made in budget 2026. The Government will have an opportunity to make amends for that this afternoon by withdrawing the countermotion and ensuring it sends a signal to PAYE workers and the self-employed that it is for a change in its sights. It has gotten off to a very bad start. Working people are much worse off this year than they were this time last year. They took the Government's pre-election commitments at face value that this would not be the case. I will make a prediction. When a lot of the adjustments that were made in recent weeks are exhausted shortly, the Government will roll them over. The best and most responsible way of organising a financial package is to do so in a responsible, structured way with a mini-budget that is holistically managed and that ensures PAYE workers are looked after and that their interests are prioritised as well over the next few months and in advance of the October budget.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Minister to respond.

Deputy Ged Nash: Working people cannot wait any longer for support.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In the past few weeks alone, the Government has introduced a support package of €750 million plus. If we were to add another budget, essentially, on top of that before we reach October, what will we trade off here? We fully appreciate we need to support people in the here and now.

To say that nothing is happening and no one is benefiting is inaccurate when the reduction in overall costs for fuel prices impacts every single person who gets in their car or uses public transport. What we need to do when we are looking at energy in particular is change how we build our new homes and retrofit existing homes. The figures alone total some 250,000 households. Many people who get up and go to work have had their homes retrofitted, which is saving up to €1,100 per year. A total of 73,000 homes are already targeted this year for retrofitting and there are 100% grants available for those who need it most. I think about 34,000 households have been provided with that support.

Well before anything happened in Iran, the national energy affordable task force was put together to make sure we can look at overall prices and structure and how we can reduce costs. The initial report recommended that we reduce our VAT on energy and electricity to 9%, and that is a decision that was taken by the Government last year, which will go out to 2030. The new report from this group will be published in the summer. Again, it will look at how we pay for investment in our grid, how we structure our bills and how we can bring down overall costs. A lot of things are happening. The Deputy keeps talking about introducing budgets every couple of weeks. Where is this money coming from? How would we end up having any money to do anything in the budget in October?

Deputy Ged Nash: You keep introducing €750 million packages without any-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Tá gealltanais bhriste. There are broken promises. Ar fud na tíre, tá daoine tuirseach de níos mó agus níos mó gealltanais briste. Bhris Fine Gael roinnt gealltanais a rinne sé sa toghchán deireanach. Fine Gael has broken promise after promise that it made in the most recent general election. Parents, students and disabled people were all told that help was on the way, but those election commitments were swept under the rug once the Government was formed. There is palpable anger and frustration with the Government's failure to deliver on its word. At the 2024 election, Fine Gael promised affordable childcare costing €200 per month. It quickly forgot that promise. Fine Gael promised to phase out third level fees. Does the Minister remember that? Instead, those fees were increased. Fine Gael promised a €500 cost-of-disability payment. Instead, in the last budget, it cut the income of disabled people by up to €1,400.

The Minister's party leader, Simon Harris, promised to pass the occupied territories Bill within the first year of the Government and yet, days, weeks and months pass with no sign of the Bill in the Dáil. The occupied territories Bill was initiated in 2018. We are waiting more than eight years for the Government to progress this Bill. Last year, the Tánaiste promised that the occupied territories Bill would be brought to the Dáil by the end of November. We are now

half a year past that deadline. That is yet another promise made by Fine Gael that has been broken.

The horrors in Palestine continue. The killing has not stopped and the illegal occupation is intensifying. Two weeks ago, Aws al-Nasaan, a 14-year-old boy, was murdered. While he was standing at the gate outside his secondary school in the West Bank, he was shot dead by an Israeli settler. This was part of a wave of settler violence in the occupied West Bank, primarily targeted at schools and children. Palestinian children are being murdered as they go to school while Ireland is still doing business with the companies profiting from this illegal occupation. We have a duty to stand up for the Palestinian people. We have a legal obligation to act when a genocide is taking place. Why does Fine Gael keep on making and breaking promises? When will the occupied territories Bill be brought to the Dáil?

Deputy Helen McEntee: In relation to what is happening in Gaza and specifically the West Bank, I am as appalled as the Deputy is. I think everyone in this House is equally appalled. We have what is supposed to be a ceasefire. Having visited the region and having been to Rafah only at the beginning of the year, it is clear to me that the terms of the ceasefire are not being adhered to in many instances. It is clear that what is happening in the West Bank is only escalating further. The level of settler violence is increasing. The level of destruction of homes and communities is increasing. It is for that reason that Ireland has acted throughout all of this conflict - we have led in many instances - to try to provide support to, first and foremost, bring the conflict to an end, but also to provide humanitarian aid where needed and make sure those responsible are held accountable.

We led efforts at a European level to recognise Palestine. We were one of the first countries to do so. We also have had a focus on the association agreement. Only last week at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, I wrote directly to the Chair of the Council, along with my Slovenian and Spanish colleagues, asking for the suspension or partial suspension of the association agreement between the EU and Israel to be up for discussion or on the agenda when it comes to goods. I also asked for us to focus on sanctions when it comes to settler violence in the region. For the first time in a long time, we are now starting to see movement in this regard. We are starting to see countries that had not supported any kind of progress in this regard moving.

I also know that Palestine needs our continued support and funding. When I was in the region in January, I announced further funding, which brings the aid and support we are providing to the region to about €144 million. It is unfair for anyone to say that Ireland is not front and centre in providing support, leading, bringing about change and working with colleagues where we can.

When it comes to the occupied territories Bill, I came into this Department in November. At that point, the Tánaiste, who held this Ministry before me, had worked with the committee and its ask for services to be included in the Bill that had been presented previously. That work has been done. I received advice from the Attorney General before Christmas, as is the case with any legislation, particularly where when there are complex elements in it. I asked further questions and that advice has come back to me. Of course, I will now make a decision in terms of the timelines and how we progress with this.

What I would like to see happen is what we have seen in the past where countries have worked together and made progress on issues, such as recognising Palestine, working on the association agreement, providing aid and calling out issues where they emerged. Where we have worked together, we have made a greater impact and seen greater progress. I have been engaging with colleagues across those other countries where similar legislation has been introduced or is progressing to see what progress we can make. My objective and that of the Government is to make sure that this war comes to an end, that we stop people being murdered and killed and that we support those innocent civilians. We must ensure the two-state solution, which has always been this country's focus and priority, remains a viable objective. The longer the violence in the West Bank continues, that becomes less and less viable. That is why we are taking the actions we are taking. That is why we are still committed to progressing the legislation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: We have to act because the situation is too extreme not to act. It is absolutely horrendous that school children are being murdered standing outside their school. That is taking place while Ireland still trades with companies that profit and operate in the occupied territories. That has to stop and it has to stop now. This Bill was initiated more than eight years ago. Fine Gael has been in government for all of that time. It has had ample time to get legal advice and do all of that. Eight and a half years later, it must act on the occupied territories Bill. The Minister said she has received the advice and subsequently sought clarification on that advice. Now all we are waiting on is for the Minister to make a decision. That is what she said. When will the Minister make a decision to progress this Bill? Will the Minister bring it to the Dáil in the next few weeks? Will it be passed before the summer recess? Will the Minister act urgently now? We cannot afford to wait on this any longer. When will this Bill, which we have been waiting eight and a half years on, be brought to the Dáil to get it passed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy outlined the timeline but recently, particularly as this conflict has escalated and as more and more people have been brought into the conflict, we have acted in a way that many other countries have not. We have led in recognising Palestine. We led in advocating for more support, financial aid and assistance. We have led when it comes to the suspension of the association agreement, which I believe would have a greater impact and effect in supporting people in the West Bank and Gaza more generally. That is why I, along with my colleagues from Slovenia and Spain, wrote recently to put this back on the agenda. It is why I have advocated to ensure there are sanctions applied for those engaging in violent settler actions in the West Bank. It is also why I am engaging with my European colleagues so that as we progress this legislation, we are working collectively together to have an impact. The objective here has to be-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: When will the Bill be brought forward?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----to make sure that we have an impact. As I said, I have received the advice. We are at the stage where I have received the advice. I have to finalise and assess that. I will then move forward after that. I have only received that advice in recent weeks. I will be able to make progress and move on it.

Everything that we do has to make sure we are able to make an impact and a positive impact for people on the ground. That is always going to be my priority when it comes to this.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise the Government's total inaction on the issue of Palestine. We have just heard the Minister talking about aid, recognising the Palestinian state and of trying to get a motion passed in the EU. These are the three things the Minister mentioned. The Minister did not mention a single sanction. I will raise a number of things the Government could be doing. In her role, it must be exhausting for the Minister trying to come up with new excuses about the occupied territories Bill with some new reason each time as to why it cannot be passed eight years on, when 350 lawyers have already signed a statement saying that it is perfectly in order.

I want to raise the plight of the people who took part in the Global Sumud Flotilla. As the Minister will know, Israeli naval forces attacked the flotilla off the coast of Greece and 180 unarmed humanitarian workers were kidnapped and assaulted. Two of them, Thiago Ávila and Saif Abu Keshek were abducted and are now detained in Israel and being tortured. I would fear for their lives. Thiago's mother has just died. Some 22 Irish people took part in the flotilla, of whom seven were also abducted by Israeli forces in international waters 1,000 km off Israeli territory and near an EU state. Three are in Greece continuing the flotilla. Martin Guilfoyle aged 75 had a gun put to his head. Catriona Graham said she was cable tied, manhandled and left without adequate food or water. They were dumped in Greece and the Greek authorities would not even help them either. Why are Irish people willing to take these risks? They are willing to do it because the flotilla was a response to the inaction of the Irish Government, of the EU state and of international states.

What exactly is Ireland's position on Israel? In theory we support the Palestinian people but in practice it is a litany of inaction. Let us consider the occupied territories Bill, for which the Minister has invented new excuses. Slovenia passed a similar Bill last August and Spain has followed suit. What is the problem with Ireland? Why are we so different? As I said, it must be exhausting. In regard to Shannon Airport, under the Minister's watch, there was a 56% surge in US military overflights last month, which coincided with the attacks on Iran and Lebanon. The Minister sees no connection between the two things and there are verbal gymnastics when she is asked to condemn these acts. When people say academic links should be ended, the Minister constantly says we should separate the two, even though the university links are with companies that are involved in the military assaults. Even with the Ireland and Israel match, the Government is pushing players to participate in that when it knows the Israeli team is steeped in apartheid, in racism and in the IDF itself. When will the Government sanction Israel?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Government has consistently been a strong voice for the rights of Palestinian people. Whether Deputy Coppinger would like to accept that or not, or whether she agrees with me or not, that has always been the case. With every opportunity, be it within the EU or the international community, we have advocated for the rights of the Palestinian people and for a two-state solution. We have not just advocated. On top of the areas I have mentioned, where others have pulled back, we have provided humanitarian aid. We have continued to advocate for other organisations whose members I have met and whose colleagues were killed and murdered in this conflict. We have continued to advocate for them and to

provide funding while making sure that at every level possible, at the UN level with our international partners, that we highlight the absolutely integral role they play. We continue to advocate for the suspension of the association agreement. For me, this is extremely important because the association agreement, or part of it, particularly when we talk of the West Bank, is at an EU level. This is where we have the greatest impact, where we effect change and how we bring about the response we need, which is that the killing stops, that what is happening in the West Bank stops, and that the pathway towards a two-state solution remains viable. When it comes to that, we have been part of an overall association that is working actively at the moment. While it seems difficult given what is going on, we are actively working to ensure that this remains the focus and the priority. We held one of the most recent conferences in Dublin with people from right across the globe, including Palestine, focused on how we can achieve that overall objective and how we can bring to bear our own experiences on our island of what seemed like an impossible solution in Northern Ireland, how we brought that to the fore, and how we brought the peace process to the fore. We are actively engaged with Palestine and with our counterparts. We are actively engaged with our colleagues right across the EU, and I am actively engaged with them to see what measures we can bring forward. We have to accept there is not a consensus in Europe at the moment when it comes to the association agreement and suspending it. I know from the discussions we had in the past few weeks that there was a shift and a change. My continued engagement with them will be to focus on how we can do more and how the EU can collectively respond and do more because I do not think we have done enough. I am happy to say, and I have said time and again, that at an EU level, I do not think we have done enough.

We have given a very clear commitment with regard to the occupied territories Bill. Legislation does not progress in the same way in different countries. Two countries have already introduced it but it was not through primary legislation and it was by a different route. At the same time, we know other countries are progressing it at the moment and I am actively engaged in working with them. Where we move in unison and where we act collectively together, we have a greater impact and we have a stronger response. This comes back to what is actually having an impact on the ground, how we are supporting people and what it is they need. When I was on the ground speaking to people, they said they need continued aid, they need continued support and they need us to advocate at a European level. That is the way to bring about the change that is needed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: An advocate and a voice but no action. That is all the Minister said, basically. Slovenia and Spain passed occupied territories Bills but Ireland will not because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have developed an economic model of Irish capitalism that is so interlinked with American multinationals and, therefore, they do not want to pass it.

I want to mention two issues, the first of which is the trial of an Irishman, Daniel Tatlow-Devally, in Germany. Mr. Tatlow-Devally's family has contacted the Minister and TDs to ask that his trial would be observed. Germany has become a police state, in effect, in its opposition to the Palestinian people. Daniel was led into a court with two-mile high bulletproof glass wall, so he could not engage with his solicitors, along with the other defendants. This is extremely concerning in an EU state.

With regard to the flotilla, I ask that the Minister do something concrete. They are asking for diplomatic protection, for a public investigation as to what happened, including to our own

citizens who were brutalised and for economic sanctions against this criminal act by Israel. Will the Minister take action on those three things?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am very clear that we are committed to the Bill. I am very clear on that and I cannot stress that enough. In terms of the flotilla, this is the second flotilla. With the first flotilla, our representatives on the ground responded immediately to those who were in Israel. They were some of the first citizens who were brought home. With regard to this current flotilla, I condemned outright the actions taken by Israel in international waters. This was a clear violation of international law. I made it very clear that this was a breach. We had officials on the ground who supported those people immediately and who made sure those who were brought to shore in Greece were provided with the support and assistance they required. I have to stress that our advice to people is not to travel in the region. I have condemned the actions of Israel. I have made sure our officials and our team are on the ground supporting those people but again I stress our advice is not to travel to the region. It was clear where they were headed to and the advice is not to travel. To anybody who is taken off the flotilla to decide to continue in that vein, our advice has to be to advise against that.

Again, it is not inaction and it is not just words. We are taking action. My actions in recent times in trying to bring together the European Union to respond more collectively is how I believe we will gain respect and make sure we have a greater impact.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ever since entering this House, I have always made it clear that my politics are pragmatic and solution focused, and I will not say things that cannot be backed with real figures. I understand that money cannot grow on trees. I am a realist. I like to be inside the tent not on the outside throwing rocks and getting nothing done. I was an engineer before I came in here, so I have always been focused on solutions. One of the most frustrating things to me is that since negotiating the programme for Government, I have learned how the systems in the Dáil need to be changed. If we take Dublin, for example, it is the economic engine of the country.

My constituents would like to know how much of our local property tax is going outside of Dublin. We generate hundreds of millions annually and while distribution is needed in some cases, I would like a clear answer on how much is being given out. The delays in Dublin City Council projects, the conditions of some of the public places in the area I represent and the lack of basic amenities are not good enough. Yesterday, we debated the Oliver Bond flats and I believe this needs to be addressed immediately. I will suggest one of the ways we can get some funding for this. In the programme for Government, we committed to examining the Dublin Airport cap as soon as possible. However, I would like an announcement on what is being done there because from speaking to airport officials and from meeting Michael O'Leary last week, nothing being done in the Department. We need to remove the cap because if we remove the cap, we increase the number of people who can come here. If we increase the number of people who can come here and if we give local councils the option of opting into a tourism tax, this would give councillors and councils more money to benefit the areas they represent. We need money and do not have an endless money tree.

I was contacted by a constituent recently about Kilmore. We need to address the Stardust all-weather pitch. Money generated by the removal of the cap and a tourism tax could be used by Dublin City Council. From her previous role, the Minister will be very familiar with Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. There is so much that needs to be addressed and my support is based on my priorities being addressed. Dublin Bay North needs proper sports facilities and investment in Dublin Bay but we need the money to do that. What is the update on Dublin Airport's passenger cap? Is there an update on the removal of it? Will the Minister give an update on the 2024 consultation on plug-in solar? As legislators trying to decide whether plug-in solar should be allowed, the submissions from private and public entities should be given to us because I want to know who is stopping apartment dwellers from reducing their bills and what they are saying to the Department. Do they have vested interests? Plug-in solar is used in the UK and Germany. Let us get to work and give it to the Irish people.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy will appreciate he covered a lot of areas there, so I will try as best I can to touch on all of them. When it comes to our capital city, we all want to make sure we are investing in a vibrant and growing capital city. It is not just about tourism but that people are able to live and work here and that we are investing in our schools and infrastructure while at the same time making sure the offer is as big as it can be. Obviously, the airport plays a huge role in that and that we open it up to as many people as possible. The programme for Government includes a commitment to work with stakeholders with the objective of lifting the passenger cap at Dublin Airport. This means working with local communities, not just in Dublin but in my county of Meath and the surrounding areas as well. The commitment the Minister for Transport made is to progress legislation that would empower him to make an order to amend or revoke the passenger cap. In advance of making such an order, he has to engage with An Coimisiún Pleanála, which will screen for, and if necessary, undertake a full assessment in line with overall environmental law. Pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme is nearing completion, with the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport expected later this week. In parallel, drafting of the Bill has been progressed and is at an advanced stage. A lot of things are happening at different stages that need to progress. In that regard, the Minister for Transport intends to finalise the Bill this month and at that stage will be bringing it to Government for agreement to publish. The commitment is to enact that as soon as possible, so it is very clear that actions are happening and progress is being made in that regard.

More broadly, the Deputy mentioned education and specific schools and investment in our sports facilities and complexes. While I do not have the timeline exactly, we do know that in the coming period we will have a new sports capital grant. This grant was introduced by a previous Fine Gael Government to specifically and directly invest in sporting facilities across our communities, in particular, but not limited to our cities, towns and villages. In Dublin, we have seen a huge investment in our sports campuses and I have no doubt that when that opens up again, appropriate funding will be provided for Dublin.

We have also seen significant investment in education. In the past number of years alone, over €6 billion has been invested directly in our schools. Of course there is a plan to do much more than that as well. When it comes to investment overall in Dublin city centre, of course, a huge amount of property tax is taken in but a huge amount is also being reinvested, whether through the national programmes or directly by Dublin City Council. Of course, we want to

work with the Deputy to make sure all our priorities and all these important projects can progress at various different stages.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: My constituents saved up, bought houses and are paying the property tax. What proportion of that directly affects them? Regarding the lifting of the passenger cap, the programme for Government clearly stated it should be as soon as possible, so that needs to be addressed. Regarding the 2024 plug-in solar, I know I have raised a lot of issues, so I hope the Minister's officials are watching and will get back to me. I believe this needs to be addressed.

When I wrote this speech, I was under the impression the Tánaiste would be here but since the Minister here, I would like an update on when the occupied territories Bill will be enacted and an update on what actions she has taken on the illegal abduction of Irish citizens on Global Sumud Flotilla. I was abducted by the IOF. I have seen how they brutally treat people who are trying to bring food and aid to a starving population under genocide. How are they able to have impunity in the EU? We need to act and bring in sanctions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In terms of the solar programme, the Deputy should speak to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Everyone in government is open to a way in which we can ensure individual householders and home owners can reduce their bills. I mentioned figures earlier in terms of the investment that has already taken place. Some 250,000 homes have been retrofitted. Over 73,000 homes are targeted for this year. How can we do more and go beyond those overall targets? We need to ensure that for any new scheme, we have the right oversight in place and the right type of technology. When you look at the UK, which has moved farther ahead than us on this, problems have arisen in older homes where the wiring and the network is not capable of sustaining or taking on the new solar panels. With anything we do, we have to make sure there is oversight and that it is put in properly so that problems do not arise. There is very much an openness to delivering this and working with innovative companies that have solutions to reduce overall bills.

Regarding the occupied territories Bill, I am committed to bring it forward. A process has been taking place over the past while with the Attorney General but I intend to make progress on it soon.

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

Deputy David Cullinane: Some €78 million was collected in car parking charges in hospitals over five years and a record €17.5 million was collected last year. In 2018, Simon Harris was so concerned about hospital car parking charges that he promised a review and that action would be taken. Here we are in 2026 and no action was taken. In fact, hospital car parking charges have increased. The programme for Government gave a commitment to examine again reducing the cost of car parking charges at hospitals but it simply has not happened. We have seen them go up and up. It varies from hospital to hospital and site to site. Where is the programme for Government? Why is it taking so long for any action to be taken? Patients who have recurrence and repeat appointments and people who visit sick people in

hospitals are paying more and more. It is not fair. It is an out-of-pocket expense on people being sick and the Government simply has to do more.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I would again stress that the programme for Government is a five-year plan. We want to make sure that we can get to as many of our commitments as soon as possible. I appreciate that for many hospitals, it raises revenue. However, like the Deputy, I have constituents who have raised concerns with me, particularly when they have to attend hospital on a regular basis and the impact and the cost that is having on them. We need to find a way to reduce the costs for people overall. I will come back to the Deputy with an exact timeline from the Minister for Health as to where that is at.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Will the Minister explain why the Government has chosen to impose expenditure levies on Departments given that the State is currently running a surplus of more than €9 billion? The State has run surplus budgets for 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, all while the top 10% hold nearly 50% of total net wealth in this country and the number of super rich has doubled in the past five years. Successive Governments did not apply this approach to the Department of Health, despite repeated overruns and Supplementary Estimates year after year.

Yet, now Departments such as the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are being required to absorb levies and make reductions, including the pay and pensions levies. Can the Minister explain the rationale for imposing cuts when the Exchequer has the resources available? As a Cabinet Minister who has been in many Government Departments, can she confirm whether all Departments are being treated equally under this approach or whether some Departments are receiving exemptions that others are not?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I think the Deputy would agree that our budget year on year has increased. We had a budget last year of €105.4 billion. Within that, each Department is given a specific budget and within each Department, we are all expected to work within that overall budget. In terms of health, it is the case, and has to be the case, that if the HSE is given a particular budget, we work within that and where there are overspends or changes that are required, that is all done in line with that overall budget because if we overspend in one area, there are potential implications for a patient in another part of the country and we start to see that impact. Irrespective of what Department it is, we are all given budgets that are set for us. It is always important to try to stick within those budgets. However, we have a process in place where if there is a need or demand, Departments can engage with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. We have a process later in the year when it comes to our budget if there are overruns or there is need for overspends. Insofar as possible, however, Departments have to stick within our budgets. The Deputy will see that our budget was €105.4 billion last year. That is to cope with the increased demand and the need for increased services, including in health.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I raise the issue of the failure to regenerate social housing flat complexes. The Government is giving billions of euro away in tax breaks to wealthy investor

funds, yet it has turned to our most disadvantaged communities living in substandard housing conditions in social housing flat complexes and told them it cannot fund their regeneration. Does the Minister have any sense of embarrassment or shame that after being in government for 15 years, Fine Gael has failed to address the housing conditions of the most vulnerable in this country? The community of Oliver Bond flats are devastated. Similarly failed are communities in the north inner city like Greek Street and Henrietta House. Social housing tenants across this city, from Ballymun to Ballybough House, have been left living in unacceptable conditions, with mould and damp. They were promised improvements by the Government, but all they got was a rent increase this year, pushing them over the edge in a cost-of-living crisis. I have met families with children growing up in mould and damp, which is making them sick. Babies are being hospitalised because of respiratory illness caused by mould and damp. This is the Government's legacy. This is Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's legacy. Why should anyone living in a social housing flat complex believe the promises of a better future from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We need to understand fully what has happened when it comes to the Oliver Bond complex. I appreciate that there is a huge amount of frustration and anger when it comes to this specific project. We need to understand how we have got to this point and how the direction has suddenly changed and the project has not been approved. More broadly, in terms of social housing, between July 2020 and the end of last year, almost 60,000 social houses have been built. There is an absolute commitment there to make sure our local authorities are not just acquiring and taking on-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: These are existing social homes.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----accommodation but also delivering new accommodation. A group has been established specifically to make sure the process by which local authorities can build and develop new homes is sped up and that authorities understand it and know how to use it. That forum has brought together all our local authorities to make sure that everybody is delivering more social housing as well as making sure we are investing in private, affordable and rental accommodation as well. We are committed to that. We see that in the figures, with over 60,000 houses in the last few years alone.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I suspect quite a few people voted for Fine Gael in the most recent election because it promised that it would reduce childcare costs for everybody to €200 per month. It has spectacularly failed to deliver on that promise, which is a very serious cost-of-living issue for many. To give the Minister one instance, this week, in my area, I have been inundated by emails from parents whose crèche provider has pulled out of core funding. To cite one case, their monthly fees have gone from €1,500 up to €2,400. They are already paying a mortgage; that is now a double mortgage. There are many others like them. The Government said it is going to deliver 800 State-led crèche places. One of those crèches is in my area of Shanganagh. It is now very clear that those places are not going to be €200 either, despite the Government's promise. When is it going to deliver childcare costs of €200 per month for everybody? At the moment, it is failing a lot of parents very seriously.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have over the last number of years, in particular in previous Governments, invested hundreds of millions of euro in childcare and making sure we can provide early childhood care and education, ECCE, spaces for children to which every child has access. About 96% or 97% of children are accessing the ECCE programme, which is available to parents. Beyond that, we have set out a very clear commitment in the programme for Government not just to make childcare affordable but to make sure that, with a growing population, there is access to places as well. That has become a much more significant challenge in areas with a growing population. We have a five-year programme for Government. We have made very clear commitments that we will provide the places and reduce the costs for parents. The plan and intention are that, over a series of budgets, we will be able to deliver that for people. We have not moved away from that commitment. That commitment is there.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about the people I mentioned?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality is setting out and working on a plan as to how we can achieve that overall.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about these people? How are they going to pay?

Deputy Michael Collins: Early years providers across the country are contacting me in distress after receiving commercial rate demands from their local authority. These are essential community services already under enormous financial pressure and now they are being hit with unexpected bills that threaten their very viability. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has stated that rates decisions are a matter for Tailte Éireann and the local authorities, yet she also acknowledges the critical importance of early learning and childcare for families and communities. The Minister met the Minister, Deputy Browne, and said they were seeking a resolution. The providers need clarity now, however. Will the Minister tell the House what concrete steps this Government is taking to ensure early years services are not forced to close their doors because of commercial rates liabilities? When does she expect a definitive solution to be delivered?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is the case that commercial early years providers have always paid rates. However, there is a long-standing agreement or exemption for community not-for-profit services, that is, those that solely offer early childhood care and the ECCE programme. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is aware of a small number that are now starting to be charged and where issues are emerging. She wants to respond, given the importance of early learning and what the Deputy has raised, and she is giving her full attention to the matter. She has met the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, specifically the Minister, Deputy Browne. She is hoping to be able to come to a conclusion or find a solution to this. She is very aware of the problem and obviously wants to address it. It is a long-standing practice that where a not-for-profit body is solely providing this service, it would not be included in rates. We just need to work through this.

Deputy John Connolly: There was widespread relief among the general population in Galway, and particularly among the local authorities and transport authorities, following the recent decision of An Coimisiún Pleanála to grant approval for the Galway city ring road. This will obviously allow for the development of the road but also enable the city to develop a new metropolitan transport strategy. One group of people for whom the road development has had a direct and probably greater significance are the 54 homeowners who will be subject to compulsory purchase as part of the process. These families were first advised in the winter of 2015 that their homes were along the preferred route corridor of the new road. There has been a long period of uncertainty for these families. We are at a point now where we need the transport authorities to engage proactively with the families in a sympathetic, purposeful but definite and direct manner to reduce that uncertainty and give clarity to where they currently are and also to recognise the challenging circumstances these families have endured for the past decade. This was the second time planning was granted for the road. These families require some certainty.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy. Most of us are not from Galway, but we see the importance of the road and its approval recently. It is, however, important that any new project engage with families locally in a sensitive way. I will relay the Deputy's concern directly to the Minister and ask that the transport authority engage directly and as quickly as possible. I know people locally want to see the project move as quickly as possible.

Deputy Emer Currie: The proposed scrapping of the 70 bus service under BusConnects represents a downgrade in public transport for Littlepace residents. This is a direct commuter service into the city centre, operating with reasonable frequency at peak times and then once per hour during the day. Under BusConnects, peak-time services would remain direct but during the day, they would be replaced with a connection at the Blanchardstown centre. I met the National Transport Authority, NTA, a month ago and it said the community will have access to a more frequent service. However, this is coming at the cost of a direct service. The community should have the final say on this.

I o'clock

It is its service, not the NTA's. The NTA should learn from similar outcries in communities such as Chapelizod and Finglas and meet the residents now. Otherwise, we are heading towards the same pattern of community resistance and frustration at decisions being imposed instead of discussed. I ask the Minister to encourage the NTA to meet residents now while trust and goodwill remains, not after they have been lost.

Deputy Helen McEntee: A core objective of BusConnects is to have a better network, with a more frequent service that reduces journey times and provides better service for people. My understanding is that under BusConnects, the 70 route will be replaced by other bus services, including the L64, which will provide an all-day frequent service to my constituency, in Dunboyne, Cloness and Blanchardstown, and the peak-hour P64 service, which will provide a direct service between those places and Dublin city centre. It is being launched among other services. Where this has applied in other areas, we have seen that it means people having to change buses and not having direct routes. I appreciate the challenges that might create for constituents who do not have a direct route and I will ask the Minister for Transport to engage

with the Deputy, with a view to perhaps engaging with the NTA. The service is not due to be introduced until 2027, so obviously there is time to engage further with it.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I raise with the Minister the case of Oisín Pollard. At nine years of age, Oisín was diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia. For the past 18 years, he has battled on. For most of those 18 years, he was told there was no treatment. Now, for the first time, there is hope. Skylarys has been rolled out by other EU states with great effect. It is life-changing. However, little progress has been made here. The HSE remains locked into a haggling war over price. For the small number of people suffering with this rare condition, time is precious. It has been nearly two years since Biogen applied to the HSE for reimbursement of this drug. I ask that the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health engage with the HSE to ensure that a solution is found so that Oisín and others get the urgent support they need.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am really sorry to hear about the particular case. Where possible, where there are particular rare conditions, we need to support people insofar as we possibly can, with the HSE working closely with the companies as well. If the Deputy passes on the details of the specific case, if that has not already been done, I will certainly raise it again with the Minister for Health.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: It relates to the reimbursement of the money. It has to be done.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will engage directly with them.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I welcome recent comments in this Chamber by the Taoiseach in which he acknowledged that the abolition of town councils was a huge mistake. My home town of Clonmel was one of five former boroughs established by royal charter in 1608. It was self-governing for more than 400 years and that 400 years of history was wiped out by pen in 2014. I am conscious of the consequences for those representing a region in Spain who flirted with independence recently. I make a similar call for independence for Clonmel - independence from Tipperary County Council and financial independence from the power base that is Nenagh. When the local democracy task force report comes before Cabinet, will the Minister be a strong voice for the restoration of town councils above a certain population threshold, in particular, the restoration of borough status for those five towns, including Clonmel?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I commend and acknowledge the role of town councils. We had some in my constituency in Meath. I have worked with councillors since then who perhaps share the same view as the Deputy and would like to see things resumed as they were. I understand the local democracy task force is due to make recommendations or findings on this matter soon. When we are presented with those findings, I will be happy to engage with colleagues to see what is the best way forward.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Minister might get a sense of *déjà vu* because I spoke on this matter during Questions on Policy or Promised Legislation last May. For those who need these

vital services in Louth, it is Groundhog Day. I raise the need for additional funding and resources for the three housing adaptation grant schemes in Louth. On 1 May, just over a third of the way through the year, Louth County Council had to close its applications for anything other than priority one applications. As the Minister will be aware, very few applications are categorised as priority one. This is not the first year that Louth County Council had to stop taking applications for these scheme only a fraction of the way into the year. Every application represents a person struggling to stay in their own home with the support of loved ones and, in many cases, in horrendous and substandard conditions. The fact remains that local authorities are under-resourced and citizens are suffering. Under-resourcing these vital schemes not only leads the elderly and vulnerable struggling, but pausing them also strips them of any viable pathway for a more comfortable life in their home for the rest of their days. The Minister for local government urgently needs to release more funding to Louth County Council for the housing adaptation schemes. I ask the Minister to take that message directly back to him today as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Department's budget for this year has been set. The housing budget has been set. At the same time, we have a new budget coming up. All of these different matters have to be taken into consideration, to make sure funding can be most impactful and support people who need it most. I will certainly raise this issue with the Minister.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the allocation of additional gardaí. Of the 140 allocated for Dublin, 113 will go to Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north and west. In particular, so far this year, 37 new gardaí have been allocated to Finglas and to Ballymun. While I welcome that, I also want to see the roll-out of high-visibility policing. It has made a difference in the city centre. It has been rolled out to some other urban villages. People in places such as Santry, Whitehall and Beaumont want to see that high-visibility policing on the ground. I hope those new numbers will make that difference.

I also note the request by the chair of the implementation board for Ballymun, which the Minister established in her time in the Department of justice, to meet the Taoiseach has been dealt with. However, we need more gardaí beyond those that have already been allocated.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will sound like I am taking on my previous role, but the deployment of An Garda Síochána is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. The most important thing is that we are starting to see, in all of the changes that have taken place in recent years, the numbers of recruits coming through at the high level that we need and, most importantly, that they are now flowing down to various parts of the country, including Dublin which has a huge population. I have no doubt that the chief superintendents on the ground will ensure these gardaí are deployed in the best manner possible. From my time engaging with many of them, I know that community policing and visible active policing are core to their overall objective of keeping people safe.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Paramedics and emergency medical technicians, EMTs, play a crucial role in the healthcare system, despite the fact that they are incredibly stretched, with personnel numbers approximately 1,800 short of the target. They are often running on fumes as they try to respond to situations. They are going on strike on Tuesday, as things stand.

They do not want to be on strike. They want to be out there responding to emergencies but the reality is they feel that they have no other option because the report that has been sitting around for six years with recommendations to ensure they get basic pay that reflects their responsibilities and duties has not been implemented. Will the Minister for Health intervene to ensure this strike is prevented, there is dialogue and paramedics and EMTs get the pay and conditions they deserve?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Nobody wants to see the National Ambulance Service or paramedics on strike. I commend the fantastic and unbelievable work they do. The Minister for Health has assured me that she, the HSE and the Department are open to further engagement with the National Ambulance Service and want to engage with them through the industrial relations mechanism. That offer, I believe, is there and it is open to the NAS to engage. The Minister very much encourages it to do so before next week.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I raise a serious issue regarding access to dental care for medical card holders. Corporate dental providers are withdrawing from the medical card scheme because, under current legislation, they cannot legally hold contracts directly with the HSE. The legislation governing this area has not been substantially updated since 1987 despite the fact that the structure of the dental profession has changed significantly in recent years. As a result, more than 200,000 medical card procedures that were previously carried out annually in these practices will now have to be provided elsewhere. These patients are finding it difficult to find replacements, as many traditional dentist practices are already operating at full capacity and cannot take on additional medical card patients. Will the Minister raise this with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Health as a matter for urgency and examine the need for legislative reform to protect access to dental care for medical card holders?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to raise the matter directly with the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and, in particular, the Minister. It is essential, whether through legislative means or financial support that is required, that people have access to dental care. I am happy to raise that directly.

Deputy Grace Boland: Fingal is one of the fastest growing areas in the country but transport needs to keep pace with housing delivery. We need buses that connect the new developments in sprawling towns like Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk to the town centre and, crucially, also to our rail links. Rush and Lusk train station is actually in the middle of nowhere and is surrounded by fields. The car park is at capacity. When I brought this up with the NTA I was told all the focus is on the eastern rail corridor, but the reality is there is no bus to connect people to the train station. We need to have local public transport that moves people around our towns and villages and connects them with the rail infrastructure.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Overall, the Government fully recognises the need to create more connectivity to make sure that people living in rural and not-so-rural areas are able to use public transport and that there is greater investment. A huge focus of the €102 billion investment in our infrastructure plan is for public transport, investing in our roads, railway networks and bus networks to ensure that they are joined up and connected insofar as possible. Obviously, it is about making sure that we are working directly with the Deputy on the area that she outlined. The Minister for Transport, the NTA and our agencies are working directly with the community

to identify where the gaps are and how we fill those gaps and that plans are in place and ready to progress as funding is allocated.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: The pupil-teacher ratio currently stands at 23:1. The programme for Government contains a commitment to reduce it to 19:1, which would be more in line with EU averages. We all know the importance of having a low ratio. With the multiplicity of needs that teachers now face in the classroom, having a lower ratio leads to a better learning environment, more individual engagement with pupils and better outcomes overall. Unfortunately, I am aware of a school in my constituency where two senior infants classes will have to merge, increasing the overall class number to 33, which I think we can all agree is not acceptable. I urge the Minister to convey to her colleagues in Cabinet the urgent need to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. It is something we have to do and we need to press ahead with the commitment in the programme for Government.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There is a very clear commitment in the programme for Government. We have seen a reduction in recent years, in particular under the previous Government. We know the impact it has on students and on teaching, coupled with the significant increase in the number of teachers, including special or additional needs teachers who are supporting our mainstream classes. We know when we walk into a classroom now there are more teachers there and more support there at the same time. We need to make sure that no classes go beyond the number that we have clearly identified. We all know there are some schools where the numbers are higher than they should be. We want to do everything we can to reduce that overall number. That will take time and will have to happen over a series of budgets, but it is something we are committed to.

Deputy Mark Wall: The waiting time for occupational therapy, OT, services in Kildare and west Wicklow is now 169 weeks, or 3.25 years. I have received replies to a number of parliamentary questions related to constituents who have to wait that long to see an occupational therapist. They are waiting for motorised scooters, chairs and simple rails to help their quality of life. Some of these people cannot wait three and a half years; they are in their golden years. I ask the Minister to talk to the Minister for Health and the HSE to see what we can do for OT services. This is a quality-of-life issue. These people need assistance. They cannot wait three and a half years. I ask the Minister to ask the Minister for Health to look at this urgently for those people who need it most.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to raise this matter directly. There are a number of things we need to do in response. We need to ensure we have enough qualified people and ensure we have enough courses and training opportunities working with our universities. That is happening already through the Department of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, working with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. We also need to consider where legislative changes are required, in particular when it comes to assessments where more OT time is being spent on assessments as opposed to providing services, not just for children but for people more broadly. Those changes need to come into effect soon and I know the Minister is working on that. We also need to make sure we have the funding to be able to support the hiring of new staff to provide these services more broadly. I will raise the matter directly.

Deputy Charles Ward: There is currently a capital advance leasing facility application for 60 new homes in Carndonagh in County Donegal. I cannot overstate how important this development is for Carndonagh. Families across Donegal are desperate for the opportunity to secure an affordable home and build a better future for themselves. The cost of houses has risen, soaring rents have left many unable to afford suitable accommodation and thousands remain on the social housing waiting list. New housing development can play a vital role in easing the housing crisis and provide people with a safe secure place to live. I ask the Minister to encourage her colleagues to look at the 60 applications in Carndonagh and to review the 17 houses in Milford that have already been refused.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Obviously, if this is a planning matter, it is something for An Coimisiún Pleanála. If it is about any scheme, the need for funding or investment, I can raise it directly with colleagues. Some €40 billion will be provided over the next number of years directly for housing development and water infrastructure. There will also be additional funding to make sure that grid access or any other type of infrastructure to open any new housing development is developed as quickly as possible. If the Deputy provides me with details of the specific projects, I can relay those. If it is planning related, that is obviously a matter for An Coimisiún Pleanála.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will the Government back a plan to introduce nuclear power? Who and what are behind this latest kite the Government is flying? Is this pandering to vested interests, tech companies which want to expand data centres even further in this country? Those data centres are currently consuming about 25% of all our energy. We should not be introducing nuclear power to power data centres. I just want to nail a few lies. Nuclear is a dangerous option; it is not safe. It takes 200,000 years for the waste to become safe. Mining is dangerous. It is not carbon neutral and not sustainable. Accidents are not in the dim and distant past. There have been 57 serious nuclear accidents since 1986. Nor is it cheaper; nuclear energy is three times more expensive than renewables. The small modular reactors may lower the construction costs but they do not deal with the issue of waste. The Government is not able to build housing in this country, yet it is willing to undertake potentially going nuclear to fund multinationals and their data centres. This is a bogus argument. The Government needs to lower electricity costs and there are other ways of doing it without introducing nuclear power.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Our laws are very clear: it is illegal to create nuclear power in Ireland. Any proposal to change that would have to be done with agreement and debate, not just here in the Houses but more broadly. At the moment, there are no direct plans but given the situation in which we find ourselves on a global scale, we should not rule out discussions about things. However, the law is very clear at the moment: nuclear power is not allowed and not applicable. I know this came up yesterday. Whether it is the French interconnector which will be connected soon or even the UK interconnector, there is an element of nuclear energy that comes into Ireland. However, from an Irish perspective, I think we are a long way off even having that overall discussion.

Work Life Balance Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide an entitlement to employees to request certain flexible working arrangements, to make certain provision for amending or terminating any such arrangements that have been agreed with an employer, to give further effect to Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and to provide for related matters.

This is the first Bill I have brought forward myself. I was privileged to bring forward on Second Stage a Bill that Senator Alice-Mary Higgins had worked on. As I came into this job to be a legislator, this is a really exciting moment for me. I thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, for its work on this project and the assistance it provided to me. Most of all, I thank my team, particularly my parliamentary assistant, for the work they have done in bringing this Bill to the House.

The justification for this Bill is that it brings about significant reforms to the area of flexible working, which affects a huge part of the population now. As we have heard in recent contributions, both in committee and here in the Chamber, the current legislation does not deal with the issue. There is a mechanism by which the right to request remote working is dealt with but, unfortunately, it is just not working and the numbers tell the tale. Only 70 workers have achieved flexible working through formal processes in the courts. That is obviously nowhere near the nearly 1 million people who have different arrangements of flexible and remote working.

The Bill deals with the objective proof required to refuse a request for flexible working.

Those reasons relate to the unreasonable burden for the employer to a point where corrective action would have to be taken, the detrimental impacts on the work of the employee and the pre-existing structural plans made by the employer, which are contrary to flexible working. It makes the case that the employer has to put forward much stronger.

This Bill also rewrites the process of consideration of a request, which removes ambiguity and reduces the maximum potential time for consideration. The Bill ensures that changing and cancelling is done on the same objective grounds that I have discussed. That means it provides significant protection to the hundreds of thousands of employees who are currently in flexible working arrangements, many of whom have entered into those arrangements in informal ways and ways that are simply not protected by law.

It also protects them from penalisation. I have worked in the corporate sector and the private sector, as well as in the public sector, and I have also run my own business. It is the reality that there are people who will not approach their employer because of the fear of penalisation for even asking for flexible and remote working arrangements. This legislation looks to protect that as well.

The Bill looks to provide balance and give workers who are engaged in flexible and remote working the exact same rights that workers who are not in those arrangements enjoy. It deals with the legislation that is necessary to do that, as well as the ways in which existing legislation will be altered. In summary, what the proposed Bill does is bring legislation into line with the reality that we are all in right now. Since Covid, remote and flexible working has been

transformational in the lives of many people. People in Ireland make decisions about their lives based on flexible and remote working. However, right now, there is an imbalance. For example, it is easier to access in the public sector than in the private sector, and in many cases, it is done in informal ways. As we see in so many areas of employment, the imbalance of power between the employer and the employee means there is nothing that people can do to protect it, build around it and feel secure within the arrangement.

Of course, this disproportionately affects women and others who take on the additional care burden. I am a single mum. I raised my daughter alone and it would have been really nice to have flexible working arrangements available to me when I was dealing with many of the challenges of balancing that care and work. It also affects people with disabilities who have been able to take up employment since Covid in ways they were not able to do before.

As we have seen, many companies right now are simply saying, “Come back to work. That is our decision. We are not consulting with you.” They do not have to because, in this country, we have a voluntarist system under which they do not have to recognise trade unions. Ultimately, that is what this Bill boils down to. During Covid, it suited employers to deal with it in that way. Right now, we are starting to see that in the existing fuel crisis, it is once again going to be the case that they are looking for people to avail of flexible and remote working arrangements, or at least the State will. Once again, however, the employer has all the cards to play here and the employee has none. In the public sector, there is more room for negotiation and collective bargaining because there is greater trade union recognition but because of the voluntarist system, that simply does not exist for others.

The Bill addresses the specific area of flexible and remote work-life balance in the context of that power imbalance. I look forward to debating it in the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 to abolish the mandatory three day wait rule for access to a termination of pregnancy.

This is a straightforward and targeted Bill. It does just one thing. It proposes to remove the mandatory three-day wait for access to an abortion during early pregnancy. It does not require an abortion to happen on the day of a first consultation, but where a woman is certain that this is what she wants, it allows her to make that decision for herself in her own time about her own pregnancy without a mandatory delay.

Under the current law, where a woman attends a doctor seeking a termination of pregnancy within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, the doctor cannot certify the procedure until three days have passed. Our Bill deletes that requirement. It allows certification to take place as soon as may be, but before the pregnancy has exceeded 12 weeks. This is important because the clear feedback from women and the review of the principal Act was that some women were being pushed beyond the 12-week threshold by the three-day wait, which denied them their choice to end a pregnancy.

This is not a complicated proposal. It is a focused, practical and compassionate change. My party has always been clear and consistent that we did not approve of the mandatory waiting period, that it put women in difficult positions and that it was not compassionate to women who had suffered rape or sexual assault, women who learned of their pregnancy late or women who are subject to controlling or abusive partners, for whom that first appointment may be the only appointment they can get.

The three-day wait has long been recognised as unnecessary. It was examined as part of the review of the operation of the Act. Its removal was one of the clearest recommendations arising from that process. We have all recognised, in law and in policy, that a woman should have access to abortion services in the first trimester on the basis of her own free choice. This was the compassionate position put before the people in 2018, which I and many in this House supported, and it is the basis on which services have been provided since. The question before us now is whether the State should continue to impose an arbitrary delay after a woman has made her decision and presented to a doctor. I do not believe that it should. The waiting period does not provide care. It does not provide support. It does not make the service safer. It simply makes access harder and more difficult, especially for those who can least afford delay.

It can create real difficulty for women - women who have travelled long distances, women arranging time off work or childcare, women in crisis or women living with coercive, controlling partners or domestic violence. For many women, having to return days later is not a small inconvenience. It can be a very serious barrier. Removing the mandatory waiting period does not mean that a termination must take place on the first day. It does not remove a woman's ability to take more time if that is what she wants. If she does, all of the supports should be made available to the woman at that point. That option should and will always remain for women.

What this Bill does is remove the requirement that the State must force every woman to wait, regardless of her circumstances, her decision, her health or her needs. The Bill clearly sets out the Sinn Féin policy that was endorsed at our Ard-Fheis a fortnight ago. I thank the Bills Office for its swift facilitation of this Bill, which I am introducing as soon as possible following the Ard-Fheis, as mandated by our party membership. The Bill strikes the right balance. It is the right change to make. It is overdue. It respects women's decisions and it removes an unnecessary barrier to care.

There are many other issues that these Houses should and must work through arising from the review of the Act. It raised many issues that we have to carefully work through, which will take some time. While that work is being done, there is no cause for delay the passage of this Bill. The review of the Act was clear. The view of women who have used abortion services is clear. The mandatory wait is a barrier, and it should be removed. I commend the Bill to the House, and note that we intend to move this Bill on Second Stage when we get an opportunity to do so.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.29 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.11 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.29 p.m. and resumed at 2.11 p.m.

Europe Day: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Is mór an onóir dom labhairt sa Dáil inniu ar ócáid Lá na hEorpa. As Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, I am proud to speak today to mark Europe Day. In less than eight weeks' time, on 1 July 2026, Ireland will take on the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the eighth time. The European project was not built for easy times. It was built precisely for moments like this, and it is delivering for Europe and for the people of Europe. Ba mhaith liom trí rud a dhéanamh inniu. First, I want to acknowledge the significance of this Europe Day, in the context of our Presidency of the Council. Second, I want to set out the priorities Ireland intends to pursue. Third, I want to speak honestly about what is at stake, for Ireland and for Europe, as we prepare to lead.

Before I turn to the work ahead, I want to spend a moment on what the European Union has meant for Ireland because it is important, particularly in this House, to say it plainly. In over 53 years of EU membership, Ireland has been transformed. When we joined in 1973, we were an economy heavily dependent on one trading partner, the United Kingdom, with limited access to international markets and no seat at the table, in any of the decisions that shaped our Continent. Our membership of the European Union changed all that. It gave Irish businesses access to a market of 450 million people. It gave Irish students the freedom to study across Europe. It gave Irish workers the right to live and work in 27 countries. It underpinned the Common Agricultural Policy, which supports our farming communities. The European Union

protected the peace process in Northern Ireland during Brexit - when the protection of that peace was our first priority - and I restate my thanks to our fellow EU member states, their citizens, parliamentarians and government members for their solidarity during that time. Our EU membership helped us through the financial crisis. It helped us through a global pandemic. For Ireland, EU membership is not a political abstraction; it is the lived reality of every business, every farmer, every student and every family in this State.

The Taoiseach has described Ireland's EU Presidency, as a Presidency that will be defined by action. This is a commitment rooted in a clear understanding of what a Council Presidency is, and what it demands. During the Irish EU Presidency, we will act as an honest broker. We will chair the Council's work, across all its formations. We will set agendas, build consensus, broker compromise and move forward a legislative programme of enormous breadth and consequence. We will do this in the interests of all 27 member states. That impartiality is precisely what an EU Presidency is about, and what gives it its authority and influence. The scale of what lies ahead is significant. In Brussels and Luxembourg alone, our Ministers will chair dozens of formal Council meetings. Our officials will lead the work of approximately 180 Council preparatory bodies, most of which meet on a very regular basis. We will lead the Council's legislative engagement, with the European Parliament, across dozens of policy areas. We will chair negotiations in a range of international multilateral forums, including in the UN framework.

Here in Ireland, the Taoiseach will host a meeting of the European Political Community, the largest event of its kind ever held in this State, bringing together Heads of State and Government, from 47 European countries to Dublin. I think about the founding fathers and mothers of this country and how proud they would be to see a Taoiseach of Ireland leading 47 Heads of State and Government in Dublin as an equal partner with all of them. We will host an informal meeting of the European Council. We will host up to 22 informal ministerial meetings, with approximately a quarter of these taking place outside Dublin - in every corner of this country - ensuring that the EU Presidency is truly national in its reach. We will set out our full EU Presidency priorities and policy programme in early June, as is traditional. What I can say today is that our work is organised around three broad thematic pillars - competitiveness, values and security. This reflects the pillars of the EU's strategic agenda for 2024 to 2029. The pillars are not independent of one another. They are interconnected and dependent. Without security, there can be no prosperity. Without competitiveness, we cannot sustain our societies, our jobs and our economies. Without values, without democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, none of it matters, and none of it, quite frankly, exists.

Competitiveness is what ensures that the European economy thrives, and that its citizens prosper. It is what delivers good jobs, good wages, and a good of life, and it is a genuine priority for Ireland's EU Presidency. The context is clear. Europe faces real and serious competitiveness challenges, exacerbated by the fallout of the conflict in the Middle East, to which I will return. While our Single Market is very successful, it remains a work in progress. The IMF has estimated that internal barriers to trade, in the Single Market, amount to the equivalent of tariffs of 40% on goods and 110% on services. Energy costs are elevated and continue to rise. Investment in research and innovation has lagged. The regulatory burden on businesses, particularly on SMEs, is too high. At the informal European Council in Cyprus, European leaders signed the One Europe, One Market roadmap to address these issues. This has given us firm targets, and a clear timetable. There are approximately 28 proposals, which

the joint statement called to be agreed, by the end of the Irish EU Presidency. We intend to deliver on that agenda. We will spare no effort in doing so, and we will rely on a matching level of commitment from other member states, from the Commission and from the European Parliament.

Simplification of EU rules is a top priority for this Government, and will be a top priority for our Presidency. The European Council, the democratically elected leaders of the member states of the European Union, has called for a simplification revolution. That language reflects a genuine political consensus around that table, that the regulatory burden on businesses and citizens must be addressed. The Commission has set a target of reducing administrative burdens by 25%, and by 35% for SMEs, by the end of its current mandate in 2029. It has proposed ten simplification packages, known as omnibus packages, to date, covering sustainability reporting, due diligence, chemicals, digital regulations, environmental rules and more. Today, we got political agreement between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament on the AI omnibus package. Irish members of the European Parliament and the Council were involved. I thank the Cypriot Presidency for its work. This is a democratic process that is happening here to deliver not just easier rules for business but, in this case, more protection for minors and other people affected by nudification use in AI.

The savings for businesses that are estimated from the simplification process are about €12 billion a year in the packages that have already been proposed by the Commission. As Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, I sit on what is known as the General Affairs Council of the European Union. During the EU Presidency, it will be my job to steer this simplification agenda on the General Affairs Council, where it sits. Our primary focus and my primary focus is not deregulation; it is on better regulation. It is cutting red tape. It is about ensuring that the rules we have serve their intended purpose but do not create unnecessary costs and complexity for business. It matters for Ireland too. Simplification can help us address some of our most pressing domestic challenges in infrastructure delivery and housing. Recently, along with six member states in total, I have written to Commissioner Dombrovskis, calling for simplification of permitting and planning rules in order to help us to continue to build more and more houses. That agenda is gaining some considerable traction around the European Union.

The Single Market is the engine of our success. Deepening it and completing it in services, in digital and in capital markets is an Irish priority of the longest standing.

The savings and investment union, the so-called EU Inc. proposal for company law and progress on the capital markets union are all central to our competitiveness agenda.

Another critical area of work for our Presidency, which falls under the General Affairs Council and then with the leaders, will be the negotiation of the new multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which is the EU's long-term budget for 2028 to 2034. The Commission has proposed a budget of €2 trillion to support competitiveness, decarbonisation, security, cohesion and Europe's global role. The shape of the budget will determine what kind of EU we will have for the next seven years and it will be one of the most consequential pieces of work that any EU Presidency undertakes. I am more than happy to come into the Dáil, the Seanad or a committee at any point to update Members on the work as this negotiation continues. Ireland will approach this with seriousness, with ambition and with a commitment to outcomes that

work for all member states; including the smallest, the most peripheral, and those most dependent on cohesion funding.

We have also set out our national priorities last year, which take a somewhat second place as we take on the Presidency. However, those national priorities are very clear. Central to them will be the Common Agricultural Policy and funding for research and innovation through the Horizon programme based on excellence. We will work very seriously on this.

Energy policy is, of course, to the fore again. The conflict in the Middle East has again precipitated an affordability crisis with a direct impact on Irish households and businesses. In response to the impact of events occurring in the Middle East, the Government has responded with a package of substantial measures to help alleviate the pressures on Irish households and businesses. In the medium to long term, decarbonisation and the adoption of green energy will be central to our energy security and competitiveness, and this has been a key focus of the response at EU level. The Government welcomes the Commission's package of proposed measures recently outlined in the AccelerateEU communication. We will take this work forward during our EU Presidency, and we are committed to making meaningful progress on the grids package and other key files, which will expedite the deployment of renewables and bolster the EU's security of supply.

The renewed agenda for EU-UK co-operation will be a priority during our EU Presidency. This is something that is on the agenda regularly at the General Affairs Council. I welcome the agreed ambition to conclude negotiations on a youth experience scheme, a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement and on linking our respective emission trading systems by the next EU-UK summit. In a challenging geopolitical environment, we see the UK as a vital, like-minded partner and it is in our mutual interest to have a close relationship also in the area of foreign and security policy.

The EU is, first and foremost, a union of values. They are set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. They are not aspirational guidelines. They are legally binding on us and they are the foundation on which everything else is built. We will be an unambiguous champion of those values. We will address challenges to the rule of law, including democratic backsliding, wherever they arise. I will steer the ongoing work in this area, as chair of the General Affairs Council, making full use of the rule of law toolbox, and by paying close attention to the findings of the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report. The rule of law is not a peripheral concern. It underpins the effective functioning of the Single Market. It is essential to the Single Market and I always say Ireland's own adherence to the rule of law over many decades has been essential to our economic success. The rule of law and our values is what makes EU membership worth having and we must maintain it with conviction and without compromise.

Values also means enlargement. It is more than 13 years since a new member state, Croatia, joined the Union. That is too long. The enlargement process is one of the most powerful instruments the EU possesses for security, stability and the long-term prosperity of our Continent. Growing our Union is the best way to secure our Continent. I believe we have a generational opportunity and a generational obligation to keep moving forward.

I was in Kyiv six weeks ago to mark St. Patrick's Day with the Ukrainian people and our diplomats in Kyiv for the occasion of the first official St. Patrick's Day reception held at

Ireland's Embassy in the city since it opened in 2021. During that visit, I met with senior figures in the Ukrainian Government and gave them Ireland's personal assurance that we will do everything we can during our EU Presidency to advance Ukraine's accession process. Ukraine's destiny lies in the European Union. That conviction will underpin Ireland's work during our EU Presidency as Ukraine continues its fight against Russia's illegal and barbaric war.

Moldova too has shown deep democratic courage. Its people voted in favour of an EU path for their country, despite relentless external interference. Montenegro might be small in population but it is determined in purpose and it is working to meet the criteria for membership. Albania is advancing. The western Balkans and the former Yugoslavia must not be left waiting indefinitely. As holder of the Presidency, Ireland will work to sustain the momentum on enlargement and to ensure that bilateral disputes cannot be allowed to slow down individual candidacies.

We support the use of qualified majority voting when deciding to open negotiating clusters, as proposed by Germany and Slovenia. We believe this is a practical measure to keep progress moving forward while preserving unanimity for the final decisions.

In the context of a deteriorating, and increasingly contested international security environment, the need for greater international engagement and co-operation, especially through the EU, is vitally important for Ireland. Ireland is supportive of the initiatives at EU level to increase resilience and capabilities of member states. We see value in member states and partners working together to mitigate the threats and challenges we collectively face. Ireland is investing significantly in its own security and defence architecture to confront new threats and to protect our citizens and our economy. We have increased national defence spending by 43% since 2020. In December, we launched the €1.7 billion Defence Sectoral National Development Plan 2026–2030, which includes major capability upgrades across land, air, maritime and cyber domains. It represents an increase of 55% in capital funding allocated to defence up to 2030 and is the most significant investment package in the Defence Forces in the history of the State. We will adopt a constructive, positive approach to the development of the proposed new European security strategy, including during the upcoming Irish EU Presidency.

The Government has consistently been a strong advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people and we continue to use every opportunity within the EU to stress our grave concerns about the situation in Palestine. Over six months into the ceasefire, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire. The majority of Gaza residents are displaced in dangerously unsanitary conditions, while access to essential supplies and services are severely restricted by arbitrary regulations imposed by Israeli authorities. Meanwhile, the situation in the West Bank is deteriorating, where Israeli military operations have caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes and significant displacement. Extremist settler violence is also rampant and continues in an environment of impunity.

Ireland and Spain first called for a suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement in February 2024. In June 2025, an EU review concluded that Israeli actions breached Article 2, which is the human rights clause of the agreement. At the most recent Foreign Affairs Council, Ireland called for the suspension of the agreement. We will continue to press for appropriate

EU action. If we do not act, the viability of the two-state solution and the credibility of the EU is at stake.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Iran, Ireland has been closely engaged with its EU and wider European partners in monitoring and reacting to the developments. We must see the full reopening of the Strait of Hormuz to international shipping to mitigate the economic impacts, which are affecting households across Europe. We have jointly welcomed the ceasefire agreements in the Gulf and the Levant while calling for further negotiations to turn these into lasting peace agreements. Israel and Hezbollah must fully maintain the ceasefire in Lebanon. Ireland has been at the forefront in calling for international law to be upheld at all times. All parties are obliged to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure during conflicts.

We also demand the protection of UN peacekeepers. I am deeply saddened by the death of six UNIFIL peacekeepers and the injuring of others in Lebanon. When I went to meet my counterpart in France recently, the first thing I mentioned was that France had recently suffered the deaths of two soldiers and expressed my sympathies to the government of France and to the families. We know Irish families have had similar experiences over many years there and we must constantly remind ourselves of the sacrifices our peacekeepers make. I offer my condolences to the families, comrades and nations of those who were killed.

The conflict in Sudan has sadly entered its fourth year, and has become the world's worst humanitarian and protection crisis with over 150,000 dead, a figure estimated to be much higher in reality, and almost 12 million Sudanese forcibly displaced. We remain resolute in our commitment to ensuring this crisis is not sidelined or forgotten. We regularly raise this at EU level. We will continue our active role on the political and humanitarian tracks when we assume the EU Presidency later this year.

The Presidency is not only about the six months in which we hold the chair; it is about building Ireland's long-term influence and presence in the European institutions.

That is why I believe that the Career for EU strategy, which I launched in 2021, when I was previously Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, matters. The officials who draft proposals, shape regulation and turn political agreement into operational law are central to how the Union works. The more Irish people in these roles, the more the Irish perspective is heard and understood. I am pleased to report genuine progress. Ireland has increased the number of permanent officials at the key entry grades in the European Commission from 30 in 2022 to 43 by the end of last year. Earlier this year, the Commission ran its main graduate-entry competition for the first time in seven years, and more than 1,700 Irish citizens applied. This is the tenth highest application rate per head of population in the entire Union, so we have come a long way. When I first took the office of Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, the advice was that this had now reached a crisis point and that we had to do something about it. That is why I launched the Career for EU strategy, which we have continued to push, and we now see the results of that.

One other area we emphasised at the time was the provision of more seconded national experts into the European Union system. Now we have the highest number of seconded national experts *per capita* of any member state in the Commission. These are striking figures, and this is something I am pleased to see success on. It is a project that is very close to my

heart. These figures are also a vote of confidence in the European project from a new generation of Irish people who want to shape the European Union's future from the inside.

The EU Presidency happens in Ireland as well as in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. I am committed to taking the EU Presidency to communities across the country. The Presidency belongs to all of Ireland. We are the European Union. The county pairings programme, which pairs individual Irish counties with EU member states, is one way of doing this. It is creating new connections, new conversations and new relationships at a local level that will outlast the Presidency itself. I have been struck by the enthusiasm the county pairing project has generated. The Communicating Europe initiative is another. It funds local civil society organisations to engage their communities on EU issues. More than 270 events are planned throughout Ireland during the Presidency, ensuring that this is a genuinely national moment.

On Saturday this week, we mark the 76th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration. We mark it in a world that Robert Schuman would recognise in its instability, its danger and its need for the kind of creative, principled co-operation he proposed. No institution is perfect, and the EU is not perfect. It moves sometimes frustratingly slowly. However, we must always distinguish, I believe, between the institutions of the European Union and the people we elect to put in the institutions. We should guard the institutions with dear life, and then we can vote for the people whom we want to represent us in the institutions, either through governments or through the European Parliament when those elections happen. I pay tribute - I have done this already in the Seanad - to the current crop of MEPs. There are different political viewpoints from Ireland in the European Parliament, but all the MEPs are visible, working on particular files and doing great service for the country. They are in touch with people. People know what is happening in Brussels and in Strasbourg more than they ever did, and that is welcome because it adds to the democracy. It reminds people that this is a democratic project and that no law can pass through the European Union unless it is approved by the European Parliament, by the member states. The Commission merely proposes. The democratic process, of course, requires compromise, patience and goodwill from 27 very different countries, but the European Union is our institution. It is an expression of the values we share. It is a framework for acting together in the world.

The European Union is a guarantee - and we know this guarantee - that no EU member state faces the challenges of our time entirely alone. When Brexit happened, there were MPs in parliaments all over the European Union who all of a sudden became experts on the Irish Border, the North of Ireland and our specificities. It is so encouraging to meet them still, and they are very proud of the work they did. Ireland has always punched above our weight in Europe, since the very day we joined. We have shaped European Union legislation, led European Union negotiations, built European Union institutions and championed European Union values, while also fighting for our national interests at every turn. We have done it as a small state with big ambitions and a genuine commitment to the European project. This is exactly what we will do from 1 July. The challenges that Ireland's EU Presidency will face in competitiveness, in security, in upholding our values, in enlargement and in negotiating a new long-term budget for Europe are real and serious. We need leadership, judgment and determination. We are ready. On Europe Day, let us remember that we are Europe - we are the European Union. Is é mo thuairim go mbeidh Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar cheann de na hUachtaránachtaí is éifeachtaí a chuir an tír seo ar fáil do Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh. It

is my firm belief that Ireland's EU Presidency in 2026 will be one that truly delivers for Ireland, for Europe and for generations to come.

It is a matter of considerable pride to me, as an Irish speaker, go mbeidh seo an chéad Uachtaránacht ina mbeidh an Ghaeilge mar theanga oifigiúil de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh. Táimid tar éis conradh a dhéanamh maidir le haistriúchán agus ateangaireacht a bheith ar fáil anseo in Éirinn do na cruinnithe a bheidh ar siúl. Anois tá an Ghaeilge, sa Chomhairle ar a laghad, comhionann leis na teangacha eile ar fud an Aontais Eorpaigh. It is a matter of considerable pride to me that the Irish language is an official language of the European Union for the first time in an Irish Presidency. We have recently concluded a contract for the provision of interpretative services at the Presidency council meetings for Irish to be available. I can go to a council meeting of the European Union since 2022, and now for the first time in a Presidency, and speak Irish and my Lithuanian colleague on one side can hear me in Lithuanian and my Cypriot colleague on the other side can hear me in Greek, English or whatever they want. That is an extraordinary achievement and shows that the diversity of countries actually finds expression in the European Union, and the Irish language is the classic example of that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Tosóidh mé le rá go n-aontaím leis an Aire Stáit gur rud an-dearfach agus gur ábhar dóchais é go mbeidh an Ghaeilge in úsáid mar theanga oifigiúil le linn na hUachtaránachta. Tá sé sách tábhachtach go mbeadh an Ghaeilge feiceálach agus in úsáid anseo, sna hinstiúidí Eorpacha agus in imeachtaí na hUachtaránachta.

These statements on Europe are an opportunity to reflect on what the EU was intended to be, its purpose, our place in it, what it is not intended to be and where it is failing. There is no doubt in my mind that Ireland's place is in the EU and that there have been benefits, but there is considerable scope for criticism as well in terms of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and a wide variety of other issues. The Presidency is an important opportunity for Ireland to demonstrate leadership and to identify some of the items of most particular concern to Ireland and Ireland's interests, but also to redress what I think is a serious deficit on the values side as well. I will return to that.

In relation to our own interests and priorities, I will raise two items that maybe have not got as much attention. In my opinion, there is an opportunity, or there should be an opportunity, in the context of the EU Presidency in terms of Irish unity. I say that in the context of a thoughtful, considered approach to that. Previous Irish Governments, under the former Taoiseach Enda Kenny, ensured that were the North to reunify with the South, it would access the European Union without any particular constraint. That was something we welcomed at the time and something Sinn Féin and others lobbied for at the time. It was an important step. Clearly, that will be an important part of the constitutional debate at that moment in time. It is my view that it is reckless and short-sighted of the Government not to plan and prepare for Irish unity. No one says that this needs to be rash or rushed, but if we fail to do anything at all, that is the reckless and the thoughtless approach. I think there is scope to have some discussions with other member states about the role the EU can play. I think it will play potentially a crucial role in the event of Irish unity, and we should be thoughtful of that and consider it. There are other items we need to discuss, but this should be part of the debate.

The other issue is the whole area of competitiveness. It is true that we need to ensure competitiveness. In my view, from an Irish point of view, we need to ensure that our reliance

on energy from other sources, in terms of fossil fuels, is reduced, that we build up our renewables capacity and that we invest in infrastructure and a whole lot of other areas.

Too often, the competitiveness agenda becomes a proxy for deregulation and undermining workers' rights. I am particularly concerned, as is the trade union movement, about the Irish Commissioner, Michael McGrath's file and the proposal for a single unified legal entity for companies across the EU. There is a danger that this will allow companies to sidestep Irish labour law. I encourage the Minister of State and the Government to be watchful for that. There are also areas in which we are falling short of EU norms. Collective bargaining is a particular example. That is also something that needs to be addressed.

I will return to the issue of values. If any area has shown up the flaws and hypocrisies of the EU at times over the last number of years, it is the area of values. I refer particularly to Gaza and Palestine and the unconditional and unqualified support for Israel from Ursula von der Leyen and Kaja Kallas on behalf of the EU at a pivotal point. That gave political cover for the genocidal destruction that subsequently unfolded. In addition, the EU leaders' muted and almost non-existent response to people from the Global Sumud Flotilla being effectively abducted on the high seas and in international waters, completely contrary to any international law, is completely unacceptable. This should be a priority for the Irish Government. Ireland needs to speak up for international law not only in this region, but in general.

The Minister of State might comment on the issue of Israel breaking sanctions against Russia in relation to stolen Ukrainian grain. It is important that the EU make a clear statement against that. Along with its occupation of south Lebanon and its genocidal policies in Gaza, these breaches of sanctions against Russia need to form part of the case for suspending the EU-Israel trade agreement.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Europe Day is meant to be a celebration of peace and unity, when we mark how a continent that emerged from war resolved to work together to ensure future harmony and prosperity. My party, Sinn Féin, is often accused of being sceptical of the EU. That accusation is often thrown around in this House. It may happen in this debate. However, it is simply not the case. Sinn Féin's policies towards the European Union have always been focused on critical engagement. Where measures are in the interests of the Irish people and the peoples of Europe, we support and seek to further them. When they have not been in Ireland's interests, we have opposed them and campaigned to change them, but always from within and always in a constructive manner with a view to creating an inclusive Europe that reflects the needs and aspirations of all its people, not just the few or the elite. We are not anti-EU and we do not want to see Ireland outside of the EU. We simply see a different path forward in Europe. We seek what is in Ireland's best interests, as do Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and others.

We are critical of many of the EU's stances, most often in the area of foreign relations, especially where Palestine is concerned. Along with many others, I believe the stance of the EU when it comes to foreign relations is totally out of step with the stances of the majority of its citizens. We do not support a European Union in which a small number of large member states take it on themselves to dictate economic, security or foreign policy to smaller states. As a bloc, the Union provides political cover and trade deals to those who commit genocide and it turns a blind eye to wars of aggression that have had catastrophic impacts on our economies and on the standards of living of workers and their families. Why are we so afraid to say "No"

to Israel and the US? Why can we not come together as 27 member states and say what is wrong and what is unacceptable? Why can we not refuse to do business with those who are ethnically cleansing Gaza and the West Bank? Whether it is the result of cowardice or something worse, we have decided that doing business with the oppressor is worth more to us than our principles.

Europe Day should not be simply about the end of a world war, but should also be a rallying cry to work towards a world without wars. We have huge diplomatic and economic levers. We can use these to effect real change not just in ending conflicts, but also in preventing conflicts from ever occurring through dialogue and sustainable investment to build up economies in the developing world and through divesting from fossil fuels.

The EU has been incredibly passive when it comes to threats and bad actors. We are expected to simply weather the impact of high fuel prices caused by the Russian war in Ukraine and the war of aggression against Iran. The European Council's recent meeting was more concerned about a fresh flow of migrants than about stopping the war against Iran and rebuilding what little peace the Middle East has seen in recent decades. We saw how one powerful state can torpedo any attempts to hold Israel to account by revoking the sweetheart trade deal it has with Europe. The EU could be a powerful force for preventing interstate violence and war. It could be a beacon of hope and solidarity among nations. However, right now, it is an inept bystander that is led by the nose by external actors who have no regard for Europeans or their lives. Surely the time has come to stop being so passive and to work together in solidarity to bring peace, stability and economic prosperity to peoples around the world.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The European Union has contributed incredibly positively to Ireland in many ways. Of course, there was the significant investment by Europe through structural funds and support for the peace process, especially through PEACEPLUS funding, which remains vital. The European Union also stood with Ireland throughout Brexit. I put it to the Minister of State that a united Ireland should be high on Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's agenda during the EU Presidency.

It is right that we acknowledge the work the European Union does and the benefits of our membership but, to some in this House, it seems that any criticism of EU policy amounts to an attack on the concept of our ongoing membership, which is utter nonsense. It seems that we must treat the EU as unique among political organisations and above reproach or critique. It is actually Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that do the EU a disservice in behaving in this way. Ordinary people will naturally think that there are things the EU does well but also things that it does badly. Failing to acknowledge that contributes to the perception that the Irish Government's attitude to the EU is that you simply do as you are told. Being a real friend and partner means being willing to have difficult conversations, when appropriate. It means standing apart when faced with repugnant behaviour that you simply cannot stand behind.

While some in this House today will speak about the EU's contribution to human rights and the rule of law, the fact of the matter is that across great parts of the world the EU has lost all credibility due to its ongoing refusal to sanction Israel for its blatant war crimes and genocide. I acknowledge that the Minister of State's Government joined cause with others in seeking the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement but it supported Mrs. von der Leyen's reappointment and now laments that her Commission takes no action and blames it for

preventing it from fulfilling its commitment on the occupied territories Bill. I caution the Minister of State that it is his Government that undermines the credibility not only of the EU here in Ireland, but of our own political institutions.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: "Europe Day is a chance ... to celebrate the community of values we represent and are jointly working to protect and nourish." That is something I read today. Yesterday, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, talked about establishing an international claims committee for Ukraine, which we support. There is rightly outcry and outrage against Russia across the EU. Russia has committed atrocities and there are quite rightly demands for reparations and sanctions. However, Israel has done the same against the Palestinian people. We see apartheid and the daily theft of homes and land by illegal settlers who are paid to travel from all over the world to settle on land that is not theirs and that is stolen. We have seen entire villages obliterated over the past couple of weeks and even in the most recent days. There has been ethnic cleansing and destruction not seen since the assault on Gaza, which still continues. I do not believe there is actually a ceasefire. People are dying every day. The illegal war in Ukraine is horrific and rightly condemned by all right-thinking people. I can understand why people here and abroad see the EU as being hypocritical. A poll that was carried out and published in the last couple of days showed that 45% of people believe the EU is moving in the right direction.

Less than a majority of people believe it is going in the right direction. That is a worrying statistic.

Imagine the outrage and horror here if the Russian Parliament passed a law to execute Ukrainians only. Israel has passed such a law. The Minister of State complained and expressed outrage but the EU, of which Ireland has been a key member for decades, still gives Israel preferential economic treatment. That money supports genocide and a parliament that will execute Palestinians only and supports money being raised under this agreement to bring settlers in to steal land. The EU is Israel's largest trading partner, with total goods traded reaching €42.6 billion in 2024, representing 32% of Israel's total trade. Economic support includes deep integration into EU research programmes, with €1.1 billion in Horizon Europe funding earmarked for Israel. In trade relations, the EU-Israel Association Agreement enables preferential access to the EU for Israel. Israel is in a research and innovation association that involves aerospace companies which have ties to the defence sector – I would not call it the defence sector as the Israel Defense Forces are a murderous sector - in bilateral funding, education and culture. According to the European Union - the Commission - the State of Israel is responsible for an unprecedented level of killing and injury of civilians, a large-scale displacement of population and the systematic destruction of hospitals and medical facilities in Gaza. Israel also implemented a blockade of humanitarian aid that could amount to starvation as a method of war. Israel is in breach of multiple rules and obligations under international law and fails to prevent the crime of genocide as ordered by the International Court of Justice. The hypocrisy in the EU in relation to Israel's apartheid and genocidal regime knows no bounds. While billions are traded with that apartheid regime, Israeli leaders, some Cabinet members and military leaders are wanted for war crimes. Unfortunately, today the EU is stained with the blood of the Palestinian and Lebanese people. The EU cannot avoid its responsibility and its complicity in this genocide.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): We move next to the Labour Party. Deputy Smith has six minutes.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I will be sharing time with Deputy O'Donoghue and we will have five minutes each. I will pick up on one of the final points the Minister of State made. He said that 76 years on, Robert Schuman would probably recognise the instability that exists now. I agree with him in that regard. If we look to the east, we can say that what is happening now represents the realisation of the worst fears from back then. Russia has literally rolled tanks into Ukraine, is carrying out proxy attacks, proxy wars and cyberattacks, and is ultimately operating to destabilise Europe. That has been the fear for many decades and it is being realised. We see the unexpected aspect of this rupture when we look to the west. Throughout the European Union's evolution, the United States was a dependable ally of the Union. That came with concerns - there were issues in relation to the build-up of US military personnel and facilities in mainland Europe - but the US was a dependable economic ally. That is no longer the case. In the last week, the US has announced that it is moving 5,000 troops from Germany. That is something that President Biden had put in train but the notable aspect of the method used by the Trump Administration to carry that out was that there were no negotiations and no forewarning that it was going to happen. Again, we have seen yet another snap decision. It might not be a big deal in and of itself – perhaps it was welcomed by some – but when we look at the first 15 months of Trump 2.0 with a wider view and when we examine the wider trend of tariffs, Greenland and a US approach to NATO which impacts a lot of our European Union allies, we realise that Europe now needs to look away from the US, away from the self-appointed leader of the free world and away from isolationism. This is bringing up some difficult questions for Europe and for Ireland, chiefly in the area of security.

We hold our military neutrality very dear. I have been at conferences in Europe over the last 18 months. It is clear that many people in Europe want to move towards a common defence union. That is something we must resist and we can resist. We must do so while improving our own security, however, because the charge against Ireland is that we have not taken our own security seriously. It has been a decades-long embarrassment that we have been reliant on Britain, the US and others for our own security. The security threats have changed - the new threats are potential cyberattacks and attacks to undersea cables – so we need a sophisticated approach. It is not the build-up of tanks, jets or troops; it is the build-up of capacity and of sophistication. We need to work with our allies and, in doing so, to be forthright that we not want to join NATO or a common defence union and nor will we ever. It may be a delicate path but it is a path that we must take with clarity. We must not be afraid and we must not hide behind vague definitions of this, that and the other.

I note recently, the Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, was the first non-European leader to attend a meeting of the European Political Community. That is more than merely symbolic. It is an important indication because it is another signal following Prime Minister Carney's speech in February that we cannot follow, and the European Union cannot follow, the United States into isolationism. There is a troubled and uncertain road ahead, but Europe needs to pull together and answer and meet hard challenges and hard questions with honesty and forthrightness.

Europe has consistently let itself down in the last number of years in its approach to Israel. It is inconsistent, inhumane, unethical and downright wrong that Europe is not calling out Israel

for the genocide that is being carried out on the people of Palestine, for what it is doing in Lebanon and for its continued expansion of the illegal settlements in the West Bank. Europe will not retain any moral leadership, will fail to bring along allies and will fail to bring along the people of Ireland if it continues to treat Israel in this exceptional manner by excusing these despicable acts that continue.

Ireland and the Irish people remain, by and large, positively disposed towards the EU. I think Brexit had a lot to do with that. Without doubt, a lot of EU states stood by us during that process but we cannot take that support for granted. We must be honest and forthright. We must be committed to Europe but we must also be able to pursue our own sovereign interests.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I am glad the Minister of State mentioned the Schuman Declaration from more than 70 years ago. I always feel like Jean Monnet always gets hard done by. It was the diplomat who did most of the work but the politician got his name on it. The EU is unique. It is the longest lasting confederation of states probably in the history of the world. Is it perfect? No. Is it the best we have got in the world we have? Yes. The European Movement study published this week showed that 82% of Irish people believe being in Europe is where we should be, as do I. We should be at the heart of it.

On Saturday, as we mark Europe Day, we celebrate not just a union of countries, but a shared vision that is based on co-operation, peace and opportunity. For Ireland, membership of the EU has been nothing short of transformative. It has shaped our economy, strengthened our voice in the world and helped to define the kind of country we are today. When Ireland joined the European project in 1973, we were a very different nation. We were economically limited and we depended heavily on a small number of trading partners. Membership opened doors. It connected us to the Single Market, one of the greatest achievements of the European Union and something that needs to be finished. Through it, Irish businesses can trade freely across Europe without tariffs or barriers, giving companies access to hundreds of millions of consumers. For a country of our size, that access has been vital, driving growth, creating jobs and helping to transform Ireland into one of the most open and successful economies in the world. That is more important than ever now, given Trump's tariffs.

Perhaps even more importantly, the European Union has amplified Ireland's voice in the world as a small nation. At the European table, Ireland helps to shape decisions on climate action, digital innovation, workers' rights and global trade. We are not just participants; we are contributors to our collective future. The value of that solidarity became especially clear during Brexit. I thank the Minister of State for mentioning that. When the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, Ireland faced unique challenges, politically, socially and economically yet through that process EU member states stood shoulder to shoulder with us.

3 o'clock

It recognised the importance of peace on this island, that we needed not to have a hard border on the island, and it safeguarded the economy in the long term. That unity ensured that Ireland's concerns were not sidelined, but prioritised. In a moment of uncertainty, EU membership provided stability, support, and strength. We reject that very British concept of euroscepticism. I said it last year and I stand by it.

For young people in Ireland, EU membership means opportunity. The freedom to live, study, and work abroad has broadened horizons of both young people and the country, and created connections that span cultures and countries. It has made Europe not just a place on a map, but a shared home. Of course, membership is not without its challenges. Being part of a union requires compromise, responsibility, and engagement. The institutions of Europe need fundamental reform. I think the Minister of State would agree with me on that. It is through working together that we enhance our sovereignty and Europe's by deepening the pool together.

As we look to the future, the importance of Ireland's place in Europe remains clear. In a world of uncertainty, co-operation matters more than ever. The European Union gives us a platform to face challenges collectively, whether climate change, economic stability, or global security. Europe Day is a reminder that unity is not about losing identity, but is about strengthening it through partnership. Ireland's story within Europe shows what is possible when countries choose collaboration over isolation. On Saturday, we celebrate not just what Europe has given us, but what we contribute in return, our ideas, our values, and our commitment to a shared future.

Deputy John Clendennen: Over 70 years ago, Robert Schuman delivered his declaration that would change the course of European history. One of his key declarations was, "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a *de facto* solidarity." His vision was both bold and quite simple at the same time, to make war between larger member states not just unthinkable but materially impossible, by pooling their coal and steel production. The European Coal and Steel Community laid the foundations of what has become the European Union today. Since Ireland joined in 1973, we have seen significant and material progress on our shores and across our country, whether it be development of our infrastructure, support and funding for our agricultural sector, access to the Single Market, or foreign direct investment through our gateway to Europe. I would strongly question whether we would have seen the foreign direct investment that we have had if we were not an important and integral member state of the Union.

There is also the adoption of the euro. When the euro was adopted, I happened to be living in Switzerland. I remember getting in a car and travelling to Germany with one of my friends from Germany, Italy and France on a road trip to get a few euro notes just to say that we had them. That was a day when I had first-hand experience and a memory of solidarity with European counterparts that was beyond just being Irish. That has only grown today and we all have our own memories of how we are not just Irish but Europeans, and long may that continue.

Other speakers have mentioned a study about European Movement Ireland. Overall it is relatively positive. Some 82% still believe that Ireland's membership of the EU is important. That remains strong and it demonstrates that despite the challenges of our time, the vast majority of Irish people recognise the benefits of European engagement. Looking deeper into the figures, we need to ensure that we listen, learn and act on some of the sentiments coming through. Less than half of the respondents believe that the EU is moving in the right direction, with concerns about migration, EU regulation, and sovereignty. These are legitimate concerns and demand our attention. They remind us that the European project is not a static entity but a dynamic one that must continuously adapt and respond to the needs and anxieties of citizens. As a member of Fine Gael and of the European People's Party, I am proud to be European, but

when we listen to those sentiments and concerns, we need to have a realistic debate and conversation about our defence and security and how we can co-operate with other member states. We also need to ensure that Europe is not only economically robust but also secure and capable of protecting its citizens and interests, while also looking at the likes of the cost of living, which is a top concern for us here at home, and migration and housing.

I will bring it closer to home in relation to the need to inform and educate the next generation of citizens. The Minister of State recently visited my constituency where we went to Sacred Heart and Coláiste Choilm in Tullamore to share the insight and inform students of the importance of Europe. We cannot take that for granted. We need to see more of that and investment in it. As we move from being a net beneficiary to a net contributor in the European Union, we need to structure ourselves better to identify funds and allocations to continue on that pathway to support agriculture, infrastructure and foreign direct investment. I attended a public meeting in Tullamore last night about we move Offaly forward. We would resource an EU funding officer in local authorities to identify ways and means to maximise the effectiveness of those finances. We have made a lot of great progress in towns with the likes of the public realm, both with Government investment and European investment, and that needs to be continued. We also see the likes of just transition funding and what it has done.

Just last week, I was at Ballycowan Castle where a new accessibility biking scheme was introduced to make the most of the Grand Canal greenway. This could not be done without European funding, and just because we are moving from being a beneficiary to a net contributor does not mean that should be lost. We have to identify ways to keep those channels open and keep those revenue streams coming to areas that need it most.

Deputy John McGuinness: I compliment the Minister of State on his input into European affairs. I know he is dedicated and that he participates at all levels within the European Union. I commend him on the work he is doing. I know the value of the European Union, of the Single Market, and how valuable it is for Ireland to be a member of the European Union, but that does not mean that, in a debate like this, we cannot raise our concerns about Europe and the direction it is taking. From the beginning, Europe was about people. It was about the people whom we represent and the people who elect those in all other member states to represent them in the European Union. Irish people believe that is the way it should work. Democracy should work in that fashion, but it does not really, in the European Union. That is why I will call on the Minister of State to highlight the need to overhaul the bureaucratic structure in the European Union to make it far more transparent and usable, and to have far more emphasis in those structures on the people we represent.

The Minister of State said the European Union is about us. We are European. We are the members, but sometimes it feels as if you are outside the door and that somebody else, other than those we elect to the European Parliament, are actually making those decisions. That approach can be seen by way of the various regulations, legislation or direction that is sent to us here in Ireland, to the Government, to transpose into Irish law. That happens regularly and we do not have sufficient input here to analyse what is actually going on, to raise our criticisms, and to raise suggestions to make things better, because it is done and dusted and we do not have a say. That is not democracy. That is simply bureaucratic structures imposing their desire to have the European Union go in a particular direction and not take into consideration consequences for its members. For example, the consequences of the financial crash were that

we picked up the debt. Germany, France and Italy insisted on it, yet in Ireland, Jonathan Sugarman highlighted the fact that the Italian bank was bust.

Did the Italian bank get sanctioned? No. Did Jonathan Sugarman get sanctioned? Yes. He is living a life that is far from perfect and ideal and was never recognised for the work he has done. We - Ireland and the Government in question - used Europe as a dumping ground; we sent stuff to Europe. For example, people such as Noel McGree, and Dan Brennan in my own constituency, raised an issue in the European Union and had it dealt with, but there has been almost no outcome, other than constant deliberation and nonsense to pretend that something is being dealt with when it is not. Julie Grace is another example of a whistleblower who went to Europe, aired her case and the European Union just turned a deaf ear. We in Ireland did the same thing. We provided the direction for these people to go to Europe in order that we would get them away somewhere else and we would not have to deal with them under the whistleblower legislation.

I would like to see farmers and the farming community better recognised in the European Union. Take away the red tape and bureaucracy and start understanding that it is the farmers and those who live in the countryside who care for it. Then, make it easier for them to draw down whatever financial supports might be available so they can continue their work without having to fill out a huge number of forms and tick boxes and then be caught at times because they have either not ticked the box or have ticked the wrong box.

Where is Europe in terms of leadership on the cost-of-living crisis we are going through? Where was it on insurance and banking? Why can we not access low interest rates, banking institutions and insurance? Why? I have not heard any of this raised in the European Union and I urge the representatives we have elected to do so.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: This week, we mark Europe Day, a day to recognise the positive contributions the European Union has made to Ireland, to this region and on the world stage. We also need to apply a level of self-criticism to the work of the European Union because it has become painfully clear over the past number of years that the EU has shifted far from its core vision and values. Right now, the EU, in particular the European Commission, does not appear to be acting with respect for the collective position of EU citizens and elected Members of the European Parliament. Late last year, we saw widespread opposition to the ratification of the EU Mercosur trade deal by everybody, from farmers to environmentalists. A majority of MEPs voted to refer the Mercosur agreement to the European Court of Justice, yet the Commission chose to cast those concerns to the wind and press ahead to enact the trade deal. How does it look to our farming communities to have their concerns ridden over roughshod by the power of the European Commission?

Our farmers and rural communities are feeling the pressure. They are struggling and they are frustrated that their concerns are not being taken on board. There is deep worry for the future. CAP funding is clearly under threat as the Commission seems more keen to increase the budget for arms and bombs than to continue to invest in our food security. If those billions were put into the agri sector instead, we could transform agriculture and our wider food sectors. We would be able to deliver a Common Agricultural Policy far greater than the limits of the current CAP, one that would rejuvenate farming and rural communities and deliver generational renewal. Our food products and those of other member states are among the highest quality in

the world. The sky should be the limit for our agri sector. Instead, we see from the Commission a rush to outsource food production to South America and other countries.

The majority of people on the island of Ireland would vote for Irish unity as part of the EU. This would hugely help with disease outbreaks in the farming sector, such as the bluetongue virus and bovine viral diarrhoea, BVD. Europe will play its part. We need a referendum because farming knows no boundaries. We have a great opportunity to hold talks during the EU Presidency, and I hope we will.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to the Social Democrats. Deputy Gibney is next. I note there are four Deputies due to speak. If the fourth Member does not arrive, we will divide the time by three.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I will message the Deputy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: He sometimes cuts it fine, so I hope he will be here shortly. I welcome the opportunity to make these statements to celebrate Europe Day because I am a proud European. It is important to remember and celebrate the very positive influence European Union membership had has on Irish society, as did, prior to European Union membership, co-operation with European member states post war and post conflict. I want to emphasise first that this is for me a really heartbreaking moment, whereby what started as a peace project in post-war Europe - the European Union was called something different then - to end and prevent conflict between European nations and to prevent wider global conflict is at a point where we are now approaching essentially a European defence union and the level of militarisation in the European Union - the Minister of State shakes his head at me and at other speakers-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I do so because these are scare stories the Deputy is putting out there. They are totally false.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Deputy to have her time.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Excuse me. These are not scare stories.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is misinformation and it scares people.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: This is not misinformation or scare stories.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is total misinformation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Stop the clock, please. The Deputy must have her time. The Minister of State will have ten minutes to make closing remarks and he can address that then.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have to stop this misinformation about the militarisation of the EU from Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the way to address that. There is a format to the-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is wrong to be frightening the people of Ireland in that way.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You are the one doing that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State is not listening.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is wrong.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Then have a referendum about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The rules are the rules. You will have ten minutes to address the issues at the end of the debate. I ask Deputy to continue, please.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am the people of Ireland and I am frightened by the level of militarisation the EU is pursuing. The fact that the multi-annual financial framework has pivoted towards rewarding arms manufacturers over small and medium businesses and that the countries that will benefit most from that are the largest countries in Europe that have those weapons industries is so far removed from the social cohesion and promotion of democracy this Union was started for. Of course, I am afraid and fearful, and it is absolutely right that we call it out.

This Government's version of EU membership is to blindly follow that, to go with the EPP and Renew Europe groupings' vision of what this EU should be. Instead, we could be a vital voice. Ireland is one of only 27 members of this Union and we could be a vital voice, that same voice we heard in John Hume, one that talks about peace, solidarity, cohesion and democracy. I was at the launch of the European Movement Ireland survey yesterday. The values of the EU were captured in that survey as being democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights. It is my opinion that we have drifted far from those values in the pursuit of appeasing big business through deregulation across the EU and increased militarisation and military spending. If it upsets the Minister of State that I come into the Dáil Chamber and say that, then I am sorry but he will have to deal with it.

I will touch on something I raised last week, which was dismissed as not being relevant to the post-European Council statements, even though there was a relevant post-European Council statement on this matter. It is the Irish attack on the European Convention on Human Rights. Only couple of years ago, the Government criticised the UK for its attack on the ECHR, yet only a few months ago, the Government joined in that attack. The European Convention on Human Rights has done nothing but bring good for all the states that signed up to it. This Government, along with others, is happy to start hacking away at it, in an attack on the separation of powers, which I think is just incredible, and judicial independence. It is politicising the entire process at a time when we have an active inter-state case based on the third article of the ECHR - we had two successful inter-state cases before that - and when we know the ECHR is what underpins the Good Friday Agreement and peace on this island. I asked the Minister of State about this last week and he dismissed it but I want to, again, be

reassured of this Government's commitment to the ECHR and the European Court of Human Rights and that it will not pursue the Chişinău process and deviate from it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The EU is built on partnerships and collaboration. It works because member states commit to pulling their weight, particularly on cross-border challenges like climate change. Climate change policy within the EU relies on the key principle of trust that every country will do its part.

Today, we learned in *The Irish Times* that Ireland might be trying to buy its way out of delivery by funding renewable projects abroad rather than meeting targets at home. That is not partnership; that is avoidance. That avoidance will come at a cost to Irish households and the Irish environment. We cannot adopt an attitude where we deal with failure by paying someone else to cover it. Failure is dealt with by addressing and correcting it. Writing checks to send abroad will not save our environment. It will not put solar panels on roofs or help households cut their electricity bills. It will not protect them from energy shocks or increase their energy resilience. Ultimately, climate action is energy security action.

Writing checks to send abroad will export opportunities. It will improve conditions abroad while ignoring the struggles of people at home. All this does is weaken trust in this Government, which is already fragile. People have been asked over the past decade or so to change their attitudes and how they travel, live and heat their homes all in the name of climate action, and people have done so. Those asks coming from the Government, however, are unfair if the Government is not willing to act with the same urgency it expects of everyone else. Climate action is not just a box-ticking exercise; it poses a real threat and it must be met with action on the ground in our communities. This Government cannot outsource that responsibility or our environment will pay the price.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Europe Day is a celebration of peace, solidarity and the shared values across our Continent. As someone who is proudly Irish, I am also proud to be European and part of a German family. Given the number of people who live in Ireland from elsewhere, it is important to celebrate our differences and what brings us together. I come from a proud bilingual family. We speak both German and English at home, and I am also learning Irish again. When a person speaks another language, they have a view into another culture, world and way to live. When many young people are learning different languages, not only are they learning how to communicate to buy something in the shop, or whatever else it is, they are seeing how other people live. Speaking another language allows people to understand a culture at a different level. They understand it in a way that cannot be achieved by just visiting and observing. They become part of the culture. Europe gives us the opportunity to do that.

At a time in this world when there is such a focus on what makes us different, Europe has the potential to show us that although we are different, we have shared values. It gives us a way of examining what makes us different and similar. It allows us to reach out and ensure that the negativity that seems to be seeping across the world of difference is challenged.

At this time of year, a lot of college students are getting ready to figure out what they are going to do in the summer. I am sure their parents are asking them what they are going to do. They might hope they get a job. Some of them will have the opportunity to travel. The interrailing initiative, DiscoverEU, gives many people the opportunity to do that. I would love

to see that scheme expanded to more young people. It allows them to travel in a climate-friendly way. They interrail rather than take short-haul flights. Most European cities and countries have excellent networks of rail. We need to look at expanding the scheme to more young people because the more young people who travel to explore differences, learn new cultures and languages and see something different, not only will it give them pride in themselves but also pride in being a part of Europe.

I would love to see more young people going abroad to study. There are such excellent schemes. Studying abroad allows them to be able to learn in a different education system and experience different work ethics and way of working. There is so much we can learn from one another in Europe. At a time when many differences are being highlighted, I want us to hold onto that in our country.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Europe Day is an important day for us to reflect on what Europe means to us and what we mean to Europe. It also allows us to apply a lens to the current issues of the day. I will speak to that first. Ultimately, at its heart, Europe is a peace process. For many hundreds of years, a kind of toxic nationalism existed in Europe. While that toxic nationalism is certainly been diluted as a result of the European Union project, we should never take it for granted. In some ways, we took the peace of the Good Friday Agreement for granted prior to the Brexit referendum. We saw how quickly some of those tensions could arise again. The idea that peace and mutual co-operation in Europe is a given is something we should be fearful of. We have to be careful of any one country asserting its nationalism above others. The European Union gives us the structure to do that. At its very heart, the European Union is a model to perpetuate peace.

It is also a model of ensuring that national governments step up to the plate when there is a common European norm. With issues such as gender rights and climate policy, we have seen how Europe has challenged Ireland over many years to go further than perhaps national governments would have.

The third leg of that stool is economic prosperity. At different times over our history with Europe, Europe has contributed to our economic prosperity and growth. It has challenged us at times as well. The post-crash period was incredibly challenging for many European Union countries. We cannot forget that this is about those three stools - peace, the idea of stretching beyond national horizons to adopt a pan-European policy on big issues like climate and economic growth.

With any peace process, there must be parity of esteem. We have to recognise that there are other European Union countries with different views. There are democracies in each European member state. One of the great tragedies for me is that while we have been able to respond almost with unanimity on the issue of Ukraine, we have not been able to do so on the issue of Palestine. I have to accept that, in a democracy, people will come to the table with different views. While I fundamentally disagree with the approach of many of the European Union governments on the issue of Palestine, our interaction with Israel and so on, I have to accept that there is that difference within a union. Sometimes, people in this House speak about the European Union as if what happens here in Dublin happens everywhere in the European Union or that the views expressed here in Dublin are expressed everywhere in the European Union.

We have to accept that, in a partnership, other people may have different views and priorities. We must work within that framework.

There is no doubt that the current crisis with regard to the cost of oil and petrol is having a real impact on people's lives. We need to have an approach similar to the way the European Union excelled in the delivery and procurement of the Covid vaccine. The AccelerateEU programme will be at the centre of the EU Presidency for Ireland. We need to ensure that the changes we make will have a practical impact on people's lives.

We have talked about solar. The big difficulty with the transition from, let us say, gas heating in a home to something like a heat pump is that people are relying on the expense of electricity. There is no easy technology transfer from a traditional gas boiler over to a full retrofit installation with a heat pump. We need to find new technologies to do that. That is an area where the European Union could lead the way. We can do more in the area of solar energy as well. It can help subsidise those electricity-consuming heating systems in homes. There is a lot of talk in this House about plug-in solar but we have to ensure that we get the safety, electricity and regulation right. We can do more in this regard. With the better energy warmer homes scheme for those on fuel supplement, we can do far more in terms of solar nationally. All that can be done better by working together in Europe.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Ireland has benefited enormously from our membership of the European Union. From the huge value of structural funds to the attraction for American multinationals of having an English-speaking base in the EU, Ireland has been transformed for the better by this membership. This has led to a standard of living our grandparents could never have imagined, not only economically but also culturally, socially and educationally. Witness the enormous success of the Erasmus programme.

I will refer to the huge positives I have experienced personally in Europe. As a young man, I lived for a number of years in the 1980s on mainland Europe in France, Germany and Switzerland. I experienced the extraordinary culture and history of many European countries. In Switzerland, I lived in St. Gallen, a city founded by the Irish monk St. Gall, after whom the city is called. Ireland has contributed enormously to the common European culture, heritage and values that go back a very long way. We were known as the island of saints and scholars. St. Columban and other monks founded monasteries all over Europe. One of the founders of the European Union, the French statesman Robert Schuman, in 1950 described St. Columban as the patron saint of all those who wish to build a united Europe. I lived in Hanover in what was then West Germany during the Cold War. Nearby was the so-called German Democratic Republic, more accurately called East Germany. I crossed over the Iron Curtain, as it was called then, a number of times and visited the totalitarian states on the other side. I shared an apartment with a young man who was caught trying to escape over the Berlin Wall only to be caught and imprisoned for a year and then allowed to leave.

This division ended in 1990 and eastern Europe was freed but today that freedom is under serious threat. Vladimir Putin, who lived in Dresden in East Germany in the 1980s, wants to recreate that totalitarian world. The evidence is there. This can only be stopped by European countries being prepared to defend themselves. If this does not happen, our way of life may disappear.

It is especially important that Germany, always the political and strategic focal point of Europe, builds its defence capability. This is not anything like the 1930s. This is Germany using its economic strength to defend European values and deter an aggressor. There was a phrase used in Europe called "realpolitik". The realpolitik of today is that Europe is under threat and it must be prepared to defend itself.

With Ireland holding the EU Presidency shortly, we need to stamp our mark on European policy. For me, the stand out one is to push for implementation of the Draghi report, which addresses the European Union's lagging productivity and economic growth relative to the US and China. As the most successful economy in the European Union, we are well placed to push for the implementation of the Draghi report. Europe is lagging behind and has become enormously dependent on the US. We rely on Amazon and Microsoft for cloud services. We have very few at the forefront of AI. While regulation may be justified on a one-by-one basis, taken together it has stopped business development and has made us dependent on the US. We must look to implement the Draghi report.

Ireland has a proud European history and we are European but we have a unique perspective in Europe and we have a unique link to the US. We should use these factors to foster continued prosperity in Europe.

Deputy Réada Cronin: This week we mark Europe Day. The European Union likes to present itself as a peace project founded off the back of two World Wars in quick succession and built on the promise that never again would Europe stand by while genocide unfolded. It talks about multilateralism, co-operation, solidarity and international law - all the right words but those words ring hollow because when it matters most and when people are being slaughtered the European Union has not led; it has failed. The peace project is taking a battering. What we continue to see in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran has shattered any claims the EU has moral leadership on the world stage.

In Ukraine, the EU has no plan for peace only a plan for the unlimited supply of arms and weapons that continue to slaughter innocent people, both Ukrainian and Russian. Ordinary people can see it and they are not fooled. They see a Union that lectures about human rights while turning a blind eye to genocide, or worse enabling it, when it suits. Member states continue to trade with Israel, supply arms, and give political cover and silence where there should be disgust and outrage. Ordinary people wonder why Palestinians, Lebanese and Iranian schoolgirls should be forced to pay with their lives for the crimes of the Weimar Republic 80 years later. Yet there are those, led by our Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, who want Ireland to cosy up to EU warmongers, who obsequiously agree that increased militarisation is the only way forward for Europe, who want more alignment for Ireland with military blocs, and who think we should abandon neutrality, fall into line and succumb to the war machine.

The truth is that Ireland could close all its hospitals, all its schools, all its universities and pour every penny into the bloated pockets of weapon manufacturers and still we would not be able to defend ourselves from any threat, real or otherwise. International law is the only protection small countries like Ireland have and we have a unique opportunity with the EU Presidency. We can choose to go along with the hypocrisy or we can challenge it. We can

stand up for what the EU was supposed to be about, peace, co-operation and solidarity, by demonstrating that international order must be upheld and international law implemented.

That means looking to the future as well for our Presidency because a place where the EU did play a positive role in supporting peace was on our island. I am sure the Minister of State was pleased to note the Amárach Research poll yesterday showing the growing majority, North and South, in favour of a united Ireland within the European Union. Now is the time for this Government to get on with that preparation. Now is the time for this conversation. The demand for unity is growing stronger and louder every day and it is beyond time for the political leadership in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to catch up with where the people of Ireland are, North and South. A united Ireland is not a far-off dream for another generation to deliver. We must have the courage to reach for it now during our Presidency, and do the work so we can finally make the dream come true. Anois an t-am don aontacht.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, lauded the European Union as being a place of values. He talked about its commitment to international law and to the rule of law and was somewhat aghast that people suggested Europe was guilty of a move towards militarisation. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, that if he was to characterise the major value of the European Union currently, it is precisely that it is the biggest contributor to a massive increase in global arms expenditure, which is now up to €2,887 billion, which is €2.8 trillion. The biggest contributor to that increase, with a 14% increase last year, is the European Union. That should hardly surprise us because Ursula von der Leyen, a former arms seller when she was a minister in Germany, selling arms to all and sundry, has argued for the rearmament of Europe and for massive increases in European expenditure on weapons. This is what Europe is actually doing.

By the way, it spends four times more on weapons than Russia. Then add to this the trillion dollars the United States spends. Clearly, militarisation and spending money on weapons does not do anything to deter war. That is very clear when we look at the balance of global arms expenditure.

Where this notion of commitments to international law or any kind of values is exposed as complete nonsense is when we look at the European Union's relationship with the State of Israel and at the crimes Israel is committing. Even before the genocidal assault on Gaza, Israel had shown itself to be the world's number one enemy of international law. It refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but we all know it has about 200 nuclear weapons. Israel does not think that law applies to it. Trump thinks it is okay to bomb Iran, as does Israel does, because Iran might have nuclear weapons but Israel will not even sign the international treaty to restrict their use.

Since 1948 when it ethnically cleansed nearly 1 million Palestinians, Israel has denied under international law the right to return that Palestinians have, leaving millions of Palestinians displaced all over the Middle East. It has a law explicitly denying the Palestinians the right self determination and has granted that right only to people of the Jewish faith. It presides over an apartheid regime, according to every serious human rights organisation, and since 2016, it has been collectively punishing the two million people of Gaza with a criminal siege. Then we had the genocidal massacre of the past few years.

Who provides the weapons? The European Union and, to a very significant extent, Germany.

As we speak I have just had a message from Mimi Tatlow-Golden. Her son, an Irish citizen, was with four other people protesting against Elbit Systems, the major provider of weapons to Israel to commit genocide against the Palestinians, in what was an act of civil disobedience where there was no threat of violence to anybody. His mother was saying that in the court at the moment the judge is likening them to terrorists and organised criminals, and really setting them up as horrible, dangerous people. This makes it very worrying about their treatment. The family appeals again to the Irish Government to send monitors to the trial, which is an absolute travesty of justice.

The European Union is showing complete moral bankruptcy in the face of genocide, the worst crime it is possible to commit. Next week, the Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill will come before the Dáil. It states that because Ireland is a signatory to the Genocide Convention, it has a legal obligation not just to punish the crime of genocide, but to prevent it, and to use all reasonable means to do so. The Bill calls for across-the board-economic sanctions. Will the Government support the Bill next week when it comes before the House? I very much doubt it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have participated in a lot of Europe Day debates. In fact, the first time I ever spoke in the Dáil was before I was a TD when as an MEP I was invited to address the House on Europe Day. Of all the set piece annual debates we have, this is the most sickening. Every time we get the same platitudes trotted out about Europe being a peace project and the European Union being a defender of democracy and being founded on the basis of fundamental rights. This bears no resemblance to the actually existing European Union.

In particular, in terms of the biggest crime that is happening now in the world, namely, the genocide that been going on in Palestine for more than two years and the EU's role in that. We are all expected to just ignore that. We heard earlier from Deputy McAuliffe that he would prefer if the European Union really did something about the genocide but, at the same time, he accepts that, well, that is it and different people have different opinions and so on. Do not try to claim that it is a peace project if it is involved in supporting, facilitating and arming genocide. Let us drop the pretence that it is a peace project when it has a strategy called ReArm Europe and when it is, as Deputy Boyd Barrett outlined, a driving factor in the process of militarisation, which the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, tried to deny by suggesting it is somehow not true. It is there in black and white. He can go and read their strategy documents. He can look at the figures in terms of the extra amounts spent. Let us not hear talk about the European Union being a bastion of democracy when the most powerful, dominant state in the Union, Germany, right now is treating people, including an Irish citizen, Daniel Tatlow-Devally, as a terrorist for an act of civil disobedience. It is treating people as terrorists for honourable, legal acts of civil disobedience trying to prevent the continued commission of genocide. The speaking of Irish is banned by the German state at Palestine protests.

Let us not hear about fundamental rights when the Fortress Europe project is responsible for the deaths of thousands of people in the Mediterranean Sea every single year. It is an absolute joke and, of course, there is no greater illustration of this gap between the rhetoric we hear once a year or more often, unfortunately, and the reality of the situation in Gaza. We are

two and a half years into an accelerated genocide carried out by Israel against the Palestinians. There is a so-called ceasefire now, but people in Gaza are being murdered every single day. Documented killings in Gaza now stand at over 72,000 people, with 21,000 children, which is the highest percentage death toll of children in any war. UNICEF has said that tens of thousands of babies born in Gaza since the start of the war have been delivered into hell. As of February last year, 25,000 wounded children had no surviving family. The reality is going to be worse than all of those nightmarish figures when the truth comes out. Israel has resumed its slaughter of civilians in Lebanon. It is breaking its ceasefire there on a daily basis too.

What is the European Union doing about any of that? Nothing. Nothing to sanction the State of Israel. Let us compare that to how swiftly sanctions were imposed on Russia after its illegal invasion of Ukraine, proving that it can do it, but instead it has spectated while the genocide has continued. It has looked on as European countries are some of the biggest, after the US, deliverers of weapons to Israel and it has treated Israel as a favoured nation in terms of trade, effectively equivalent to as if it was in the European Union. The Government has delayed and refused to act on the occupied territories Bill. Why? Cowardice and a calculated decision to prioritise financial ties with Israel and the US over human life. That is why we are moving our Bill next week for comprehensive sanctions on the State of Israel. Why? Because of genocide, apartheid and crimes against humanity. It is time for this State to act. The Government knows that public opinion is strongly in favour of that. Will it ignore that as well as the genocide or will it finally take meaningful action? Will it allow a conscience vote on our Bill? If the Government can have a conscience vote on the issue of abortion, why can it not have one on the issue of genocide?

Deputy William Aird: Today we mark Europe Day 2026. It is a chance to reflect on how far Europe has come and what Europe stands for, namely, peace, working together, democracy and opportunity. For Ireland, being part of the European Union has made a real difference. It has helped grow our economy. It has supported our communities and has backed our farmers. We have seen that clearly in County Laois and across the midlands. I know people at home will often say that Europe can be heavy on rules and that there is too much red tape at times, and, yes, some of this criticism is very fair. However, taken as a whole, Ireland's membership of the European Union has been overwhelmingly positive. Ireland makes a significant net contribution to the EU budget. That is a fact but we do get strong investment and real value in return in our communities, infrastructure and economy.

From farming to small businesses and from roads and infrastructure to education, Europe has brought real benefits to areas that were once left behind. As we prepare for Ireland's Presidency of the European Union, we have a real opportunity. We must make sure that regional Ireland, including the midlands, is front and centre. Ireland's Presidency cannot just be about meetings in Brussels. It has to be about delivering to our towns, businesses and farming families. For a county like Laois, I see three clear priorities, namely, enterprise, industry and agriculture. Regarding enterprise, the midlands has huge potential. We have good connections, a strong workforce and a real sense of enterprise. We should use our Presidency to push for better support for all small businesses, easier access to finance and more investment outside the big cities. The midlands can lead the way in balanced regional development.

The second priority is industry. The move to a low-carbon economy has to be fair. The midlands has already gone through major change. New jobs and investments must come to

towns and rural areas and not just cities. We need the support for infrastructure, energy, training and new industries. There is great potential for the midlands in renewable energy, manufacturing and logistics. We need proper backing to make all this happen.

The third priority must be agriculture. Farming shows the value of Europe to Ireland. The CAP has supported rural communities for years, but farmers are under real pressure now. As President of the EU, Ireland must stand up for food producers. We need practical, working policies that support farm incomes and recognise the laws that farmers are already using. Farmers in Laois want to play their part on climate and sustainability but they need fairness and certainty.

Europe Day is about people. It is about giving the next generation in counties like Laois the chance to live, work and raise a family in their own communities. Ireland's Presidency is a chance to make the case that regional Ireland and rural communities matter and that places like Laois and the midlands must be at the heart of Europe's future.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Europe has worked as a peace project. We all know Europe was incredibly facilitatory and really useful in our own peace process. The solidarity we were shown during the lunacy of the Brexit process was a necessity. I assume it also shows the power of the Single Market, even when it came to those from Germany or France who wanted to sell into Britain. However, we cannot say there are not issues in relation to the European Union and how it is constituted at this point in time. We all understand that we are in a very changed geopolitical set-up from a couple of years ago but the European Union is meant to have credibility. It is meant to have credibility in the wider world, particularly when it talks about international law and the rights of supporting the Ukrainians in the context of the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine.

I will take one headline from the RTÉ app, which reads: "Call for EU to deter Israel from building in West Bank". The article states: "Nearly 450 former EU ministers, ambassadors and senior officials have called on member states and EU institutions to take action deterring Israel from constructing a controversial Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank which, say critics, would separate East Jerusalem from the main Palestinian population centres." We all understand the genocide that was carried out in Gaza and a ceasefire that is not really a ceasefire. We have seen the attacks by Israel in Lebanon. We have seen how it has dragged the United States into absolute madness as regards the attacks on Iran. I am not entirely sure how they manipulated Donald Trump into it. Everybody out there who is paying huge fuel rates knows they are paying for that. The fact is that we have these sorts of actions by those who are ensconced within the European project at the same time we have member states, particularly Germany, selling arms to Israel and the continuity of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. It is sickening to anyone not only that trade with Israel remains, but the fact that they are giving such beneficial agreements to themselves. It is utterly wrong. I reiterate that we need to take the actions we can and that means implementing the occupied territories Bill for goods and services. It is fair enough to say that people would like to see the Irish Government put pressure on the FAI and that we would not see the Irish team playing Israel as it continues with its genocide, lunacy and madness. The European Union has to stand up for something more than it is.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí mé ag éisteacht le gach duine agus mé i m'óifig ansin. Aontaím le go leor rudaí ráite, go háirithe faoin gcaidreamh idir an tAontas Eorpach agus Iosrael. I mentioned it earlier in the House. Níl sé maith go leor nach bhfuilimid ag déanamh ár ndícheall le haghaidh sanctions agus the OTB. I welcome that the Minister said that she has consulted with the Attorney General. I urge that this be done urgently.

Europe Day is a moment to reflect not just on what the European Union is, but what it can be. I welcome Deputy Ó Murchú's acknowledgement of how the EU did help with peace and how it will hopefully continue in the future. We have benefited enormously. I have been speaking to some of my senior constituents about times gone by and how times were a lot different. We have better infrastructure and better economic development. One of the things I would love us to take from some of our EU counterparts and the UK, which have left the EU, is their energy policies on private wires and plug-in solar. The EU should make it easier for member states to roll out these systems.

Ireland knows better than most that targets are being set relating to strategies, working groups and clearing houses. We are continuously discussing this at the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy. Action is what we need. We are generating enough renewable energy and it is being turned off. Many studies show that the use of battery energy storage systems, BESS, gravity storage and any long duration energy storage, in conjunction with private wires or the national grid, if it is being done fast enough, will help the Irish people. We need to be serious about energy independence because otherwise, our Government can be dictated to by foreign wars as it is at the moment. We saw a 23% rise in the cost of liquefied natural gas, LNG, in 24 hours. For energy security reasons, the Government is considering an LNG terminal. For energy security reasons, we need to decentralise our grid and have the alternative solutions in place. People should be allowed to have plug-in solar battery systems rolled out faster. Air-to-air heat pumps should be allowed. Solar meitheal projects should be brought in across social housing and we should benefit our country with what we already generate from offshore renewable energy.

It is ridiculous that we cannot invest in ports at the moment. There was a loophole where we got €90 million into the Port of Cork. Currently, one of the only alternatives to Cork that can build these giant structures for offshore renewable energy, ORE, is Belfast. We need to have the guidance of the EU and our European counterparts in Norway who rolled out the system and have a more energy independent state. If we can reduce energy costs and grid capacity, we will help the Irish people and reach our climate targets or close to them. The solutions are available today and they are used across the EU. This will reduce electricity bills.

I also hear talk about nuclear power. Look at the UK and what happened with Hinkley Point C. The UK has a lot more resources than our State. When I was doing engineering, we did a small module on nuclear energy and we learned about the basic workings of it. We do not have the mechanics or nuclear physicists in our country, so we will have to externally source them. To bring the economics of the UK comparably to a decentralised, more renewable-focused grid, Ireland would be better positioned now than if we go down the nuclear route. I am not completely against nuclear. I understand the efficiencies but as a short-term effect, it is not ideal. As a long-term solution down the road, when small modular reactor systems get more developed and are used at a higher rate, we will possibly have a cheaper option. Hinkley Point was approved in 2016. The estimated cost was £18 billion. The latest estimated cost is £31

billion to £34 billion, and it is at the higher point now. It is actually even higher when we take into account inflation. That is the UK Government. We have seen how some of the State contracts have gone overboard here with small projects. Think of a nuclear power plant and any small change that can happen. Hinkley Point was originally expected to be functional by 2025 and it is now expected to be closer to 2031. If we are serious about benefiting and being a leader in the EU, we need to benefit the Irish people with our offshore renewable energy, including wind.

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 the application of capital acquisition tax to partners in comparison to married couples.

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the status of the Cork Life Centre.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss issues surrounding animal welfare.

Deputies Dessie Ellis and Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the new school building for Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin, Bóthar Ghlas an Éin, Finglas East, Dublin 11.

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

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss funding for youth service in Kerry.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss proposals for the use of the old prison site at Rathmore Road, Cork city.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss expanding the communications allowance to include broadband and mobile data.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss supports for those with frontotemporal dementia.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss community safety and the need for intervention in Ballymun.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss creating mechanisms to facilitate a greater uptake of employment within the European Parliament and related institutions.

The matters raised by Deputies Jen Cummins, Louise O'Reilly, Barry Ward, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Jennifer Whitmore have been selected for discussion.

4 o'clock

Europe Day: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am grateful to the Deputies who contributed to this important annual debate. We take time in the busy Dáil schedule every year ahead of Europe Day, on 9 May, to reflect on contemporary historical and future issues facing the European Union and the wider European project.

I will address three points in the Chamber today. I will go into a little bit of detail about our upcoming Presidency of the rotating Council of the European Union, respond to some of the points made by some of the Deputies, and reflect on where the European Union is going and where the debate that we have can impact that.

In relation to the upcoming Presidency, the exact detail of our policy priority areas will be laid out in the coming weeks by the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, as is appropriate. Certainly, one issue that will dominate the Presidency, even though the conclusion will not be reached until afterwards, is the negotiation of the European budget for the next seven years, also known as the multi-annual financial framework. Bearing in mind that I am Minister of State with responsibility for international development, I emphasise that a key part of that is the Global Europe debate, which is of massive concern, most importantly due to the real, clear backsliding by so many countries across the world when it comes to support for humanitarian activities, for the international development infrastructure and for multilateralism. The United States, through the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, was once responsible for over 25% of global development, that was abolished overnight. As a result, Europe is now by far the largest player, both as the European Union but also on a member state basis. Ireland was one of two EU member states to increase its development budget last year. I hope and look forward to the ability to do that again next year. In the face of cuts by a number of EU member states which have been traditionally viewed as strong donors, we need to see that level of protection from the European Union in budgetary purpose for development and humanitarian activity. When you remove funding from development programmes and remove support from humanitarianism, you merely fuel the issues that fall at our doorsteps and into our constituency clinics on a daily basis. This matters. It matters to everyone in our country. It is not some object at a remove. When you remove development support from communities and when you turn your back on allowing humanitarian actors to get support into the most dire situations around the world, you simply provide fodder for the sorts of movements that lead to political extremism; force people into forced migration, which in turn leads to irregular mass migration across the continent of Africa and other parts of the world; lead to extreme hardship for those most at risk from the impact of the climate emergency; lead to food insecurity; and lead to energy security. All of this has a massive consequence for the people of Europe.

In that further regard, and in the context of the second part of my own brief, I would like to look at the impact of the work of the European Union on the Irish diaspora. Close to 150,000 Irish people live in other EU member states. They are absolutely free to live, work and study in those countries. They can make sure they can play a full part under the four freedoms of the European movement. Last year, we welcomed over 26,000 EU citizens to live, work and study in this country. They continue to contribute warmly.

I want to pick up a few points that were made during this afternoon's debate. I was quite taken by Deputies Bennett and Cronin, who spoke in vicious tones about the European project.

They laid out their criticism of the project in many areas and at the same time, in parallel, said it is okay to be questioning or critical of the European project. Deputy Aird said the same, and he is dead right. At some stage, hiding behind the veneer of somehow being a questioning authority becomes quite revealing because they are speaking on behalf of a party that has opposed every European referendum and has consistently opposed European efforts. It deliberately used the term "No to an EU army" during European election debates even though there was no proposal for an EU army. People talk about it, but there is no official proposal. There is no Irish support for it, whether people want to believe that or not. The facts matter.

I am delighted my friend Deputy Boyd Barrett - I do mean that - returned to the Chamber. We have debated this for as long as we have known each other and it is good, healthy debate. The Deputy's vision of Europe differs from mine, and that is good. However, I suggest that when talking about a genocide happening in the Middle East - I agree with the Deputy on that matter - it is unfair not to refer at all to the absolute horrors that are happening in Ukraine, which were not cited in the Deputy's interventions or those of his party colleague, Deputy Murphy. When the Deputy spoke about armaments and security, it is unfortunate that he did not reference the biggest conflict happening on European soil since the Second World War. The Deputy has addressed that in other debates, and I agree with him that no one wins from this war, but the Deputy cannot approach it in such an *à la carte* measure when we are trying to combine a debate.

A couple of other points that were made are of real relevance to our Presidency and deserve response. First, I will respond to Deputy Timmins's point about the Draghi report. I sat around the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council when we discussed this at length. When we look at the three key policy priorities for the Presidency - values, security and competitiveness - the full implementation of the Draghi report, and the response and respect for an EU of equal 27 member states, is so key.

Deputy Aird said at length that, taken as a whole, the European Union has been beneficial for Ireland. Any independent analysis can say that the Ireland of today is fundamentally better in every scoring matrix than the Ireland of 1972. When certain Members who sit in certain corners of the Chamber - certainly, not those present in the Chamber - talk about a return to the good old days in a way that mirrors the sort of discussion we have seen far too often in Britain and in parts of the United States, I question what part of the good old days they are looking for. Are they looking for a return to an average lifespan of 62 or the reintroduction of the marriage bar? Are they speaking about a time when there was an absolute inability for people to achieve greater educational attainment? If so, they want a poorer, backwards Ireland. Deputy Aird makes the key point that food security is one of the key components of the European project. The Common Agricultural Policy was set up in the 1960s to make sure that Europe could always be able to feed itself. We have to make sure that food security, not only within Europe but within our partner countries, is a key part.

Deputy Heneghan referred at length to energy security. He proposed a number of areas where progress could be made more quickly. People have had debates over the last number of days, in this Chamber and in the media, in relation to the possibility of nuclear energy. They are all valid arguments and I have no issue with them, but we have to look at how Europe secures its energy better. Europe secured its food coming out of the 1960s, coming out of the era of rationing and great starvation. We now need to secure our energy because our

overdependence on outside actors is clearly telling, and is clearly felt in every homestead across the country as well as in every business.

I would like to comment on some of the tone and some of the rhetoric used consistently in the debate. Some of it is misplaced. I agreed fundamentally with Deputy Ó Murchú when he spoke eloquently about his belief, unlike what we heard from other members of his party in their contributions, that the EU peace project has worked. The Deputy suggested that during Brexit, France and Germany somehow wanted to change the negotiations because of their export strategy. Now this matters. I have a lot of time for Deputy Ó Murchú, and he knows that, but when he says that he is placing a piece of misinformation on the record of the Dáil. We all remember a campaign by various right-wing economic think tanks in the United Kingdom and newspapers in that country, such as the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. The Ceann Comhairle played an important role during the Brexit debates in her professional career. We all remember the consistent misinformation that the EU was going to buckle at any moment and that Europe was going to throw Ireland under the bus. Ultimately, that never happened. There was no such proposal from the German or French Governments because we saw that level of tolerance.

Yesterday, European Movement Ireland, an organisation that I used to work with for quite some time professionally as well as still being a member of, produced its annual report, which has been referenced by most speakers in the Chamber. It showed that 82% of Irish people want Ireland to remain within the European Union - the exact same as it was last year. It is not the heady 93% of the peak Brexit years, and that is what we are all talking about, but it is still well ahead of the years when this report started when we were talking about the troika coming to Ireland and the fiscal stability treaty, etc. That 82% level matters. When you dig into the figures, however, you can see that people are worried about the direction in which the European Union is going. We have to reflect on how we talk about Europe in this Chamber. We have a debate every year. I share some of Deputy Murphy's cynicism, perhaps from a different angle, about this set-piece debate. How many times have we got up to blame Brussels for something? How many times have we used the European project as a handy scapegoat? British commentators will tell you that when politicians spent 40 years blaming Brussels for everything that was inconvenient in their lives and then spent six weeks trying to convince people to remain within the EU, the debate was lost.

The UK's people and economy have been suffering desperately ever since.

I am very grateful to the Oireachtas for putting together its programme of Europe Day events. I am very grateful to the Blue Star programme that is running in schools around our country. If we are going to debate Europe, just as we debate other tricky issues in this Chamber, let us do it from a basis of fact and with language and rhetoric that are reflective of good tolerant debate. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and happy Europe Day.

An Ceann Comhairle: You too.

Cost of Living Mini-Budget: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Ged Nash: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- Budget 2026 failed to provide for indexation of income tax credits and bands, providing instead untargeted Value-Added Tax (VAT) cuts for the hospitality and construction sector;
- despite clear evidence of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the Government withdrew energy credits and cut pre-election once-off payments, that in recent years had cloaked the inadequacy of existing social welfare payment rates;
- the analysis by the Economic and Social Research Institute of Budget 2026 measures, shows that it resulted in household income losses averaging 2 per cent of disposable income, with low-income households hit hardest;
- the illegal war launched by the United States of America and Israel against Iran, has created an energy crisis that has already led to increased inflation, with further price rises still to come on energy, food and other commodities;
- the energy sector is reaping windfall gains, with British Petroleum reporting more than a doubling of profits in the first three months of 2026;
- last year, in advance of Budget 2026, Department of Finance officials warned that the hospitality VAT cut was a blunt measure, would be poorly targeted, and comes with a significant amount of deadweight, while Bord Bia consumer spending in food services data shows that 60 per cent of the benefit goes to fast food outlets and hotels;
- sectoral fuel supports and cuts to Excise Duty have been introduced by the Government, which includes changes to the Diesel Rebate Scheme that were backdated to January 2026;
- struggling households will have to wait over five months, until October, to find out what supports may be introduced to ease the increase in the cost of living; and
- the State has yet to deploy the Apple windfall funds, and carries significant cash balances;

recognises that:

- Pay As You Earn (PAYE) and self-employed workers have received no targeted support in the cost-of-living crisis, and are now subject to effective cuts in their disposable incomes due to Government budget decisions;
- rising grocery prices continue to impact on household budgets, as 14 per cent of households can't afford to warm their home, and nearly half a million households are in arrears on their energy bills;
- those most at risk of energy poverty, and reliant on fossil fuels, will continue to be hit hardest by further increases in energy prices;

- Ireland has the highest energy prices in Europe, due to an overreliance on natural gas for electricity generation leaving us exposed to geopolitical shocks and international market prices; and

- only by rapidly transitioning away from fossil fuels through faster rollout of renewables, and electrification of transport and heating, can prices be permanently reduced;

calls on the Government to immediately introduce a Cost of Living mini-Budget that will:

- reverse the VAT reductions and use the savings to provide for indexation of income tax bands and credits, backdated to January 2026;

- introduce a windfall tax on energy profits to fund targeted energy credits and social welfare supports, including a summer bonus double payment;

- provide a one-off €100 grocery supplement to Child Benefit, restore the €100 previously cut from the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, and remove State exam fees;

- increase the bank levy to €500 million, and provide targeted energy grants for small businesses, and tailored supports to increase uptake of Electric Vehicles for households and businesses;

- introduce pilot trials of free public transport, to reduce fuel use and cut school transport fees; and

- deploy the windfall Apple funds to turbocharge retrofitting, the installation of solar photovoltaic and offshore wind, and the electrification of heating and transport, to bring down the cost of bills; and

further calls on the Government to introduce a Budget in October that puts the interests of middle- and low-income households first.

I will be sharing time with colleagues. I am pleased to move the Labour Party motion which calls for the introduction of a mini-budget targeted unashamedly at Ireland's 3.5 million PAYE workers. Working households are bearing the brunt of the cost-of-living permacrisis. This is no longer a fleeting problem. We have the highest energy costs in the EU; childcare which is a veritable second mortgage; rising college costs which Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil would rather have a public fight over than sort out; workers paying more income tax this year than last; extortionate housing costs; and the long-fingering of a living wage. I could go on.

The Government made choices in last year's budget that are now coming home to roost. For example, it went all in on plain silly VAT cuts for a hospitality sector that is adding jobs by the day instead of easing income tax for workers. The Minister of State's own party, Fianna Fáil, clearly still has the hots for big builders as is shown by the dopey decision to transfer a few hundred million euro to apartment developers to boost their bottom lines on homes, many of which were already under construction. The ESRI and others set out how decisions made last October which came into effect on 1 January of this year would leave working families worse off. They did so and then some. The Government has to own those decisions. Those choices are now coming home to roost.

All of this was before Trump's and Israel's misadventure in Iran. While the situation is worse now than could have been envisaged by anybody last October, it will get worse still. All the while, the cost of energy has gone up to the tune of well over one week's wages for a worker on the national minimum wage. I thought it was tone deaf of the Taoiseach, Monty Martin, and his sidekick, Waylon Smithers O'Connor, to be extolling the virtues of a shift to nuclear when this Government has proved itself completely incapable of developing the offshore wind we need to decarbonise to make our bills cheaper and secure our economy's future by ensuring that Ireland becomes a net energy exporter. What kind of message does this send to possible wind farm developers who have enough to contend with from a Government that has not been exactly all in on wind and solar? Are they being given the message now that Ireland is taking another look at renewables like offshore wind and will instead focus on nuclear? This is the distraction of the decade. By all means, let us have the debate but the Government's timing is badly off and quite frankly it is an insult to the intelligence of the Irish people.

It is also quite something to think that the Tánaiste's signature contribution to the debate on household finances since he took office has been the 563rd announcement of a proposed new retail savings and investment scheme, which, while it has merits, will do absolutely zero to help working families who are not worried about savings and investment schemes, but rather are concerned about the day-to-day problems of keeping the fridge and the presses stocked with food. As for the Taoiseach's musings to the Sunday newspapers on inheritance tax changes, I think we should leave that argument to another day.

What the Labour Party is proposing today is simple, straightforward and impactful. If adopted, it would make a real difference to the lives of working people now. The Labour Party's mini-budget would provide almost €1,000 in income supports for working families and make a real difference in helping them to cope with the escalating cost of living. Our proposals would transfer profits from the big energy companies, big tech, the infamous burger barons and the banks to the pockets of PAYE workers and the self-employed who are struggling to make it to the end of week three of the month. Our proposals would reverse the indefensible decision to give a VAT cut to fast-food chains and instead give workers a break.

The Labour Party is calling for the indexation of tax credits and bands to allow workers to hold on to more of their wages. This would be worth €400 to someone earning €50,000 and ensure the real value of their pay is not reduced due to rising prices and wage increases. We want to see this backdated to January, just as the diesel rebate scheme changes were backdated by several weeks. We want to see targeted energy income tax credits worth €400 for working households with incomes of less than €80,000.

We would also introduce a double social welfare payment just like the Christmas bonus. The Minister of State will know that hot school meals are a real help for families but they end when the summer holidays start and grocery prices continue to climb. That is why we would provide a one-off summer grocery supplement of €100 for each child through the child benefit system, giving real help to families. We would cut school transport fees, which are due to rise sharply in September, and we would scrap the reimposed €116 charge on students to take the leaving cert and €109 for the junior cert.

We would reduce public transport costs in a really targeted way and include a trial of free public transport that would cost an average of €90 million a month. A number of cities and

countries around the world have made public transport free as part of their response to the energy shock and there is no reason we cannot do it here.

For the longer term, we would increase investment in retrofitting and renewable energy. Colleagues will expand on this later in their contributions. We want to turbocharge the retrofitting process across the country and use the profits of big tech in the form of the Apple tax windfall to fund it.

The Labour Party is always careful with the public finances and we have set out precisely how this package is to be funded in a responsible way. We propose €1.3 billion in revenue-raising measures to cover the cost of these measures to help working families to make ends meet. The increased revenue will be drawn from a windfall tax on energy companies, which seem enjoy record profits every time there is an oil crisis. The rest of the money will come from a reversal of the VAT reduction due to come in in July as well as an increase in the bank levy.

In short, this is an old-fashioned transfer of wealth from big business to the pockets of working people who keep this country going day in, day out but are far too often absent from the thinking and considerations of this conservative coalition. It is quite extraordinary that the Government has chosen to oppose this modest motion. Before the last election, Government parties bought voters' support with their own money. There was no shortage of hare-brained wheezes that Jack and Paschal were happy to fund. What we are proposing now is a fiscally and socially responsible initiative to assist households that need extra help today. This would be done in a focused way and before the benefits of October's budget are seen next January. Working people simply cannot wait until October for a signal that they will receive some respite through the budget process. They need support now and I am happy to propose our motion.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am delighted to second this motion. I commend my colleague Deputy Ged Nash on proposing a mini-budget on behalf of the Labour Party in order to stand up, as he says, unapologetically for hard-pressed PAYE workers and their families, who have been left behind by the Government's policies. Ged has been a voice of reason as our finance spokesperson. He has consistently called out the crazy VAT cuts that the Government introduced for burger barons and big builders. Unlike the Government and uniquely among other parties, the Labour Party has opposed those VAT cuts.

Indeed, we are against narrowing the tax base. As socialists and as a socialist party, we stand for transfer of wealth, for redistribution and for equality. Unlike the Government, we are not kite flying on issues such as inheritance tax and nuclear power. We are putting forward a costed and clear set of proposals, a mini-budget to help struggling households and families. Since the escalation of Trump's war in the Middle East and with Putin's continued assault on Ukraine, we have seen a cost-of-living crisis that is biting deeper for families and households across the country, with nearly half a million households now in arrears on energy bills as energy prices in Ireland skyrocket.

There was confirmation this week of what we already knew: Irish electricity prices are the highest in Europe. Far too many households are feeling the pressure as we learn that rising costs are blowing a €2,000 hole in average household budgets this year.

What has the Government done? It has withdrawn energy credits, it has not put any cushioning in place and it has failed to index tax bands. That is before we talk about its slashing of VAT for Supermac's, with zero evidence that it would help households. Far too many are feeling the pressure every day at the till and in their bills. Despite working hard, they are being crushed by a cost-of-living crisis. This is no accident. It is down to the Government's policies. It is not an inevitability. We can look elsewhere, and I have called out the Taoiseach on this. The Government can look to Spain, where a socialist Government has ensured that Spanish households enjoy some of the lowest electricity prices in Europe. Why? It is because their Government invested heavily in renewables. By contrast, the Government's response to this crisis is to subsidise fossil fuels, further locking us into polluting, unreliable energy.

The Government had other options. It had progressive options. It could do what we are proposing in this mini-budget and introduce a windfall tax on the energy profits of big companies, ensure that we have a real retrofitting revolution, ensure that households receive supports to fund the rollout of solar panels and ensure that we see wind power being generated at pace, instead of slowly and with delays.

The Government's crypto set of *ad hoc* measures should amount to a mini-budget but they do nothing for those who are struggling because the Government has no coherent vision for how to support them. It would have been more honest to call the drip-feed of measures what they are - a mini-budget released in segments - because that would have allowed people to judge it on its merits. The Government has not done that. It knows its package is doing nothing for families that are already stretched to breaking point. We ask the Government to adopt our motion and implement the clear measures that we have set out here - targeted measures that will support struggling families in a cost-of-living crisis. Stop wasting time and money that people simply do not have to spare.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank Deputy Nash for his considerable work on this motion and for bringing forward the Labour Party mini-budget. Too many workers and self-employed people who keep this country going, day in, day out, have nothing left by the end of the week, and struggle to simply put food on the table. The older people who built this Republic are forced to choose between heating and eating, while carers, who work 24-7 and save the State billions every year, get little or no recognition of the extraordinary care they provide. These are the people the Government left behind, not just in the budget of 2026, but also in the recent fuel supports, as announced. Those protests were not just about fuel costs. They were also about much more than that. They were about energy bills, renting, house prices, childcare fees, education costs and more. Fundamentally, the social contract has been torn up by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Previously, a decent salary was enough to help people buy a home but now it is just enough to get them from bill to bill.

This is what shocks me most about the attitude of the Government. The Government has no idea of the level of anger and frustration out there. The people who are coming to my office in Kildare South are barely surviving, yet these same working people would have been described as comfortable not so many years ago. Every single day of the week, I have people telling me they are under pressure - young families and workers who earn too much to qualify for social housing but nowhere near enough to buy their own home; small businesses stretched to their limits, with some forced to close; and carers and older people afraid to turn on their heating simply because they cannot afford the bills. It is clear the Government has no plan to

address the cost-of-living crisis that is impacting so many workers, self-employed people, carers and older people. This is why people took to the streets. They are looking for a lifeline but the Government simply has not delivered for these workers.

Our motion brings forward a number of measures that will support the people who need help the most. We need to put money back in the pockets of working people by indexing income tax bands and credits. We need targeted energy credits to help struggling workers and low-income households to keep the lights on and make their houses comfortable once again - those who are lucky enough to have a home. We need energy credits that will support the small businesses that need help the most at this time. We need to make "free" education actually free by abolishing exam fees and cutting school transport fees. We need to bring down the cost of the weekly food shop for working families with a €100 grocery payment on top of the child benefit. These are the real and practical measures that can immediately bring down the cost of living for so many people who are struggling in this State right now. These are the measures that put the worker and the carer of this country first for once, where they deserve to be.

I have listened to Minister after Minister say they cannot bring in a mini-budget in advance of the formal budget in October. It is time for the Government to put working people, those who have worked so hard to shape this country and the carers who save the State billions, first. For many of them, it is raining heavily now. If they have to wait until October for help, many will not be able to put their heads above the floods.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I pay tribute to Deputy Nash for his immense work in preparing this mini-budget, which I commend to the House. After Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the energy crisis that followed, the Labour Party was the first party to call for a windfall tax on the gross and excessive profits that were being made by energy companies. It took the Government a year and a half to do it but a temporary solidarity contribution, as it became known, was enacted in 2023 and covered the excess profits of fossil fuel energy companies for the years 2022 and 2023. Some €267 million was raised; it was ring-fenced and helped to reduce the burden of high energy costs on vulnerable households. Then, this really progressive and useful tax was just stopped but the cost-of-living crisis has never stopped. Energy prices have never returned to what they were prior to the war on Ukraine. Fossil fuel companies continue to make record profits. The time has clearly come for this windfall tax to be reintroduced, and that is what we in the Labour Party are calling for today.

This fossil fuel crisis has touched more or less every household and small business in the country. We know that 500,000 households are already in arrears on their energy bills. I know people with good jobs and steady careers who are simply not able to pay their bills currently. However, it is low-income households, in particular, who need a lifeline. That is why we are calling for the introduction of targeted energy credits for those with an income of less than €80,000. Before the Government gives out that we only ever want to spend, spend, spend, the credits would be funded by the windfall tax on energy company profits and the other measures that my colleagues have outlined.

The Government cannot dither on this again. I hope the Minister for energy will lend his support to us on this. If he does not want to listen to us, he might listen to his party colleague, Barry Andrews, MEP, who has made a similar call. Our costings put the revenue raised from

this windfall tax at €476 million, €270 million of which would be used for energy credits, with the remainder put towards social welfare supports, such as a bonus double payment.

On many occasions in this House, I have called for a crackdown on profiteering by energy companies in the midst of this cost-of-living crisis. Time and again, we have seen them hike their prices despite very healthy profits. Just last week, when another price rise was announced, I called on the Minister to ensure that the State-owned energy company, Electric Ireland, did not follow the private operators and increase its prices. I repeat that call today. To its credit, Electric Ireland has held off recently on price rises, as is only right and proper for a State-owned company. That must continue.

Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war in the Middle East shows very little sign of ending soon. Part of the solution has to be reducing our fossil fuel use. That is why we are proposing a pilot programme of free public transport. Along with introducing a real right to remote work, this is the best way to protect people from the high costs of petrol and diesel by cutting out the cost of commuting altogether. We must offer supports to people in the here and now but the longer-term ambition has to be reducing our dependence on the fossil fuels that have caused this crisis. That means putting the supports in place to help people switch to EVs, particularly in more rural areas with a less developed public transport system. I raised the abysmal uptake of zero emissions HGV grants with the Minister last week.

That scheme and the incentives must be reviewed so that they are actually availed of and used. We also need to seriously scale up and deploy our renewable generation capacity. The theoretical musings we have heard about nuclear power this week from Fianna Fáil are simply a distraction. They are fundamentally unserious at a time when we need to just do the simple things right. We know where our renewable potential is, and it is primarily in wind. Now more than ever, we need urgency and focus from the Government in getting offshore wind built. We are told it will be another four years before we even start construction on any offshore wind farms. Just get it done. People are hurting. The Government must heed the calls in our motion to give people support in the short term and focus its attention on the resources we actually have, not fantasise about new energy sources when we have not built an offshore turbine for 20 years.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

- the conflict in the Middle East has, once again, exposed the vulnerability of the Irish economy, and Irish society more generally, to imported fossil fuels;
- these strategic dependencies have major macroeconomic implications, and the risks to macroeconomic and fiscal stability cannot be ignored;

- at a minimum, the large upward shift in energy prices is likely to impart a stagflationary impulse to the global economy, with a combination of lower levels of economic activity alongside higher inflation;
- by reducing Excise Duty payable on both petrol and diesel, the Government has dampened the pass-through from higher wholesale price to retail prices;
- this burden-sharing has been complemented by other support mechanisms, including an extension of the fuel allowance season and targeted measures for the most exposed sectors;
- the total budgetary cost of these measures is of the order of €750 million this year, one of the largest interventions of any country in the European Union (EU), and these measures reduce the annual rate of inflation in April, May, June and July by about 0.6 percentage points;
- the Government has also extended the 9 per cent Value-Added Tax (VAT) on gas and electricity bills until 31st December, 2030, one of the lowest rates in the EU, which will have cost over €1 billion from the time it was introduced in May 2022, until the end of this year;
- Budget 2026 focused on building more homes and protecting jobs;
- the 9 per cent VAT rate for hospitality and hairdressing will take effect from 1st July, 2026, to support businesses in services sectors, supporting over 150,000 jobs across the country;
- Budget 2026 delivered weekly welfare rate increases, benefitting approximately 1.5 million people, including pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and lone parents;
- for low-income families, Budget 2026 increased the weekly rate of the Child Support Payment; and
- the Government has increased the rates for the Fuel Allowance, extended it to the recipients of the Working Family Payment, and recently extended the season by four weeks, to protect those at risk of fuel poverty;

recognises that:

- a package worth €750 million of supports has been introduced by the Government;
- rates of Excise Duty (Mineral Oil Tax) applying to petrol, auto diesel and marked gas oil (MGO) have been temporarily reduced;
- the National Oil Reserve Agency levy has been reduced by 2 cent per litre of fuel, to 31st July, 2026;
- the total reductions, will reduce the cost of:
 - petrol, by 27 cent per litre;
 - diesel, by 32 cent per litre; and
 - MGO/green diesel, by 7.4 cent per litre;

- the Government deferred the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled for 1st May, until October, to provide additional support for consumers of green diesel and other affected fuels;
- to protect those at risk of fuel poverty, the Government extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks, which will result in additional payments of over a quarter of households;
- in Budget 2026, Government announced that VAT on electricity and gas will remain at the lowest possible level of 9 per cent to the end of 2030, to mitigate costs and address energy poverty;
- the Government increased the maximum repayment allowable under the Diesel Rebate Scheme from 7.5 cent up to 12 cent per litre of diesel, which will apply until 30th June, 2026;
- these interventions have been designed to provide timely and proportionate relief, indeed, the Government's approach is underpinned by the need to balance short-term supports with longer-term objectives, including:
 - maintaining fiscal discipline and building fiscal buffers;
 - supporting continued employment growth and economic stability;
 - strategic capital investment and infrastructure delivery;
 - advancing Ireland's climate commitments and energy transition; and
 - strengthening energy security and resilience;
- the Fuel Support Scheme for farmers is now open for applications, and a scheme for hauliers will open in the coming weeks;
- Budget 2026 was the first of five budgets to be delivered by the Government;
- this Government has committed to, and will stand by, its Programme for Government commitment to make progressive changes to personal income tax, if the economy remains strong;
- preparation for Budget 2027 is already underway, and decisions regarding policy measures should be taken in the context of the annual Budget and Finance Bill processes;
- the bank levy has raised €1.8 billion since 2014, with a further €200 million due in 2026;
- the National Development Plan, includes the once-off receipts arising from the Court of Justice of the European Union ruling of 2024, to advance key capital projects;
- the Irish economy is facing its second fossil fuel shock in less than half a decade;
- fossil fuel dependence, especially imported fossil fuels, is a major economic vulnerability;

- analytical work will be undertaken by the Department of Finance, to set out the key macroeconomic principles that should guide the medium-term transition towards energy independence; and

- the Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce, to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses, while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability; and

acknowledges that:

- the geopolitical and economic outlook continues to be highly uncertain;

- in the Department of Finance's reference scenario, inflation is projected to average 3.3 per cent this year, 1.5 percentage points higher than assumed at budget time, but still significantly lower than the 8.1 per cent rate recorded in 2022, after the last energy price shock;

- the economy is still expected to grow this year, albeit at a slower pace than previously forecast, and Government has committed to a range of temporary measures to mitigate the impact of increases in energy prices on households and businesses;

- the overall approach to budgetary policy must remain balanced and sustainable over the medium-term; and

- the Government will consider the continued impact of the energy shock on households, and make proportionate decisions in the forthcoming Budget."

The Government opposes the motion initiated by the Labour Party. Nonetheless, I thank it for giving me the opportunity to discuss the Government's management of the public finances, the supports we have put in place and the preparations already under way for budget 2027. I will do so without resorting to petty name-calling of any individuals.

Nobody can honestly say what the future holds in regard to the war in the Middle East. This is contributing to a deeply uncertain global picture. No government can totally shield its country against the worst global energy crisis we have seen since the 1970s. For a small, highly open economy and, importantly, a net importer of energy, this situation presents a particular challenge for Ireland. The Government has already taken action, in a targeted and affordable way, to protect households, businesses and key sectors of our economy from the recent energy price shock. Our response goes much further than the responses of many other nations around the globe. This is a testament to the prudent management of public finances, which I will touch on later. We may disagree on what supports we have initiated, but it is simply wrong to say that nothing has been done.

Our status as a net importer of energy means that movements in international energy prices are transmitted quickly into our domestic economy. We are acutely aware that this places real pressure on households and businesses. I acknowledge the fear and frustration which were evident around the country in recent weeks. We are responding to those concerns, and will continue to do so. That is why the Government acted in a decisive and responsible manner, providing supports of over €750 million. These interventions were built on permanent targeted supports which were introduced as part of budget 2026 and budget 2025, including the 9% VAT

rate for gas and electricity, increases for social welfare, higher child support payments, increases and extensions to the eligibility for the fuel allowance, the further roll-out of free school meals, which Deputy Nash acknowledged as a good initiative, further roll-out of the free books schemes, a significant increase in housing spend - last year, the highest number of social houses were built since the 1970s - and a significant increase of 20% in the disability spend. It is simply wrong to say that nothing is being done.

It is important to be clear about this Government's approach. The choices we make in responding to these pressures will have longer term consequences, and that is why the Government has been very deliberate in its response. Our response has been targeted, temporary and proportionate. This allows us to support those most vulnerable, avoid embedding measures that add to inflation and retain capacity to respond to future challenges. The Government has introduced both tax and spending measures, including reducing the excise duty on diesel by a total of 32 cent per litre, on petrol by 27 cent per litre and on green diesel by 7.4 cent per litre. This means a saving of roughly €16 on diesel and €13.50 on petrol for motorists for an average 50-litre fill at the pumps. Every single motorist is benefiting from those interventions.

We are enhancing the diesel rebate scheme. We are delaying the scheduled May increase in carbon tax until later in the year. We are reducing the NORA levy to a nominal amount. We are extending the fuel allowance season, directly targeting energy costs, benefiting the widest range of cohorts, focusing on pensioners, carers, lone parents, people with disabilities and long-term unemployed people. For the first time, the Government is extending the fuel allowance to people who are in receipt of the working family payment. These are all direct, targeted measures helping the most vulnerable in society, which the Deputies failed to acknowledge.

The Government is also introducing a transport support scheme for haulage operators, Local Link providers, school transport providers and certain commercial passenger operators, to a maximum of €40 million per month for a period of three months from March to May 2026, providing a flat-rate payment based on the number of vehicles operated. This is helping to keep food on our shelves and preventing further increases on the cost of doing a weekly shop, ensuring that children can continue to go to school on a daily basis. These are all direct, targeted interventions. The Government has also introduced a fuel subsidy support scheme for farming and fisheries, totalling €20 million per month for the five-month period from March to July 2026, to provide funding support equivalent to 20 cent per litre for green diesel to be paid based on usage, again supporting our primary food producers.

These measures have been put in place because the Government has had sound management of our public finances in recent years and we had the capacity to make the interventions. Many countries across the globe have had to borrow to make their interventions. There is not, as some on the Opposition benches might describe, a sort of endless money tree to pick from. Our economic position of strength requires careful management, something which not all in opposition appreciate. We have vulnerabilities in our tax base, particularly when it comes to corporation tax. The Government has been effectively managing these windfalls and investing in the future of this economy through the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. This will allow us to plug the infrastructure gap to make our economy more competitive.

This motion tabled by the Opposition seeks to have us spend not only in the future but also in the past, reopening tax credits and income tax bands on a retrospective basis. What will the Deputies forgo to make this happen? Will they deprioritise investments or scale back on everyday services? Those are choices they will have to make. This Government is honest. It is time for the Opposition to be honest too. The Government was elected to maintain sound public finances. As such, an inappropriate fiscal response would risk undermining our ability to take further action in the future as the situation evolves.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is a jammy Government.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is jammy when things are going right and when things are going wrong, it is the fault of the Government. That is a very simplistic approach.

If the economy remains strong, we will stand by the programme for Government commitment to make progressive changes to personal income tax rates. We have full employment. I suppose that is jammy and good luck too. From my perspective, as a Minister of State in the Department of Finance, this budget should be about rewarding work. In budget 2026, it was about supporting jobs, record investment in housing and record investment in disabilities. We must ensure that budget 2027 is about supporting those who are working and there are significant tax measures to support them.

I remind the Opposition, the Labour Party in particular, that the programme for Government is a five-year programme. We have delivered one budget in that timeframe, yet the Deputies seem somewhat disappointed that every measure has not been introduced in year one at a time of huge global uncertainty. It is not about political gameplaying. Preparation for budget 2027 is already well under way. Next month, the Government will host the national economic dialogue. We will be listening to stakeholders from across society and discussing the necessary reforms and priorities for the upcoming budget, all with a view to shaping a secure future. The Government has shown that we are not afraid to act swiftly and forcefully when required, but we have always been clear that the best way to debate and manage fiscal policy is in the context of the annual budget cycle, rather than through multiple fiscal events a year.

It is also worth stepping back for a moment and looking at the broader economic context.

The Irish economy has continued to demonstrate remarkable resilience. Our unemployment rate has remained below 5%, a level consistent with full employment, for almost four years now. This strength reflects the resilience of our economy and enterprise base. We cannot take this economic resilience for granted. In the current environment, risks remain firmly tilted to the downside and the outlook continues to be shaped by developments beyond our control. Inflation now stands at 3.6% for April. Four years ago, in 2022, that rate was over 8%. While still lower than at the peak of the energy shock in 2022, Irish electricity prices are high compared to those of our European neighbours. We are responding to that previous shock and the one we are feeling now. It is important to acknowledge that Ireland's exposure to this energy price shock is, in part, a consequence of our reliance on imported fossil fuels. Reducing that reliance is imperative. We are making significant investments in renewable energy and grid infrastructure and rolling out supports to improve the energy efficiency of our homes and workplaces.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank my colleague Deputy Nash for bringing forward this Private Members' motion on the cost-of-living crisis. I listened carefully to the Minister of State's words. He talked about acknowledging the fear and frustration that were evident around the country in recent weeks and how this Government is responding. The Government is responding all right to those who blockaded our streets. While we had genuine sympathy for many of those people, we, the Labour Party, are standing for the people who could not get to work, who had to spend hours getting to their health appointments and for whom this Government has delivered nothing. That is why we are calling for a mini-budget.

Most of us have weekly or monthly clinics and we knock on doors on a regular basis. However, because we have a by-election in Dublin Central at the moment, I am knocking on doors on a daily basis. I have to tell the Minister of State that there is a serious level of bitterness and resentment towards this Government. That bitterness is because people felt bought before the general election when, for three winters, there were energy tax credits worth €2.77 billion and then when household arrears topped €500,000 last winter, there was no support. I am talking to women in flat complexes who are putting in €50 every two days into prepaid meters. They cannot afford to continue.

There is bitterness among workers on average incomes - the mechanics, office administrators, bus drivers and social care workers. These workers on average incomes of €52,000 are now somehow deemed to be high earners in our income tax system because they are paying the higher rate of tax. We have a tax system that is seriously out of kilter when the marginal rate of 52% kicks in for those on just above average earnings. We need to see changes to that to make sure average workers pay the standard rate of tax. Among so many other working people, many of whom vote for the Minister of State's party and other Government parties, there is a real sense of bitterness and resentment about what the Government is doing with their hard-earned taxes. They are being told to weather this storm until October, to sit it out, yet they see the prospect in July of a VAT cut for the hospitality sector, with no guarantee that it will save jobs or businesses.

We hear all these excuses from Government about the war, the energy markets and whatever else. There is some sort of post-colonial feigned helplessness in the way this Government responds. There is always someone else to blame. That has to change and the Government has to control the controllable by using the might of our public finances to permanently reduce the cost of living and cut people's bills by retrofitting homes while also reducing emissions. It must use the might of the public finances to keep people healthy and out of hospital by actually purchasing available vaccines, such as the shingles vaccine and the enhanced flu vaccine, rather than throwing its hands up in the air, saying these vaccines are too expensive. We had the extraordinary situation in March whereby the Government concluded a multibillion euro three-year deal with the pharmaceutical companies in this country for the purchase of drugs for people who are sick and there is not a single mention of vaccines.

The prosperity we see in our public finances will not be there forever and I very much worry about when those days are going to change. The last major economic expansion in our country was 21 years ago. We are now 14 years into our current run. It is vital that we make the most of what we have. We have to make sure that with the money we have, clean, cheap energy is for the many, not just the few; that the system of grants is overhauled so that when households look at solar grants they do not see the actual cost quadruple; and that we achieve scale and put

in place incentives to have a number of properties retrofitted together in order that we get to the point that 500,000 houses are retrofitted by 2030.

We need ambition from this Government. We are not seeing that. We have to use the resources we currently have and that may not be there forever to ensure we resolve the cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It was incredible for the Minister of State to say our motivation for calling for the introduction of a mini-budget was impatience and that it was because the Government is not bringing in its budgets quickly enough. We do not support the programme for Government. If its first budget is anything to go by, the Government has no interest in helping ordinary workers and families given that it prioritised the hospitality sector. We are proposing this mini-budget because it is pouring down on people out there.

We are in the midst of the worst fuel crisis in the history of the planet. What does this Government decide to do to distract people this week? It says we should discuss nuclear power. If anything highlights the poverty of the Government's ambition in this area, it is that. It is an utterly brainless idea when states like Germany, Italy and Lithuania decommissioned nuclear power a long time ago. Belgium, Spain, Switzerland and others are actively winding down nuclear power because they know it is not the power source of the future, but the power source of the past. What is the Irish Government doing? It is going to start a conversation about it. The Government is utterly without ideas.

We know what the future is but this is about what we can do now. Food prices are absolutely crippling people. In this mini-budget, we are offering a €100 credit. Yes, it is blunt but at least it will help people right now. We are proposing targeted energy credits for households that are struggling to pay their energy bills. All the Government says in opposition to this is that people should contact their energy company and draw down their hardship fund. That shows an absolute poverty of ambition and absolutely no ideas. PrepayPower Energy announced last week that electricity prices are going to rise by nearly 10%. We know the other companies are going to follow. We know food prices are increasing week on week, yet the Government has no answers.

We are not just looking to shake the magic money tree. We are putting in place a plan, through windfall taxes, to fund what we are asking to do. This is not voodoo economics from us, but a plan for how to raise the money and where to spend it properly. The Government does not care about that because it is listening to who shouts the loudest and sectoral interests. It is letting down workers, families and households all over the country and it just does not care.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I must note the irony of a Fianna Fáil Minister coming in here and trying to lecture the Labour Party on fiscal responsibility. It is unbelievable. Fianna Fáil crippled the country and allowed the Labour Party to try to bring it back from the brink and the Minister of State comes in here and tries to lecture us on fiscal responsibility.

This is a vital and timely motion. It is clear to many of us in this House that we urgently need intervention to support ordinary working people in this country. I was genuinely shocked when the news came through that there are to be increases in school transport costs. The

Minister of State told us about a transport support scheme for school bus operators. What about the parents who have to pay these school bus costs?

Deputy Ged Nash: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: What about those parents who are struggling to get their children to school, predominantly children in rural areas who the Minister of State professes to represent? Education in Ireland is supposed to be free. It is clear to parents across the country that it is only free in name.

Prior to the general election in 2024, the then Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government implemented supports to households to cope with soaring energy bills. Since the election, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have cut those supports from right under families while energy costs rise. These increases affect the lowest income households the hardest at a time when one in seven children lives in households that are below the poverty line, with over 264,000 children living in households experiencing deprivation. I repeat that there are 264,000 children in this country experiencing deprivation.

We had post-election tax cuts for industries that are raking in the money and for which nobody in this country voted. The Labour Party understands many small businesses, farmers and contractors are under pressure and need support.

We backed the package, and the Minister of State will see for a fact that we voted for it to support them, but the lack of targeted measures is galling. There is the example of the Panda waste collection company increasing monthly fees due to the fuel crisis and being outside of the scope of the support package. An increase of €12 a month is not nominal. How are you supposed to absorb additional household fees if you are already struggling to heat your home or put food on the table for your children? The cost of groceries in this country has skyrocketed in the past five years. The price of chicken breast has increased from €5 to €12 or more. That increase is a snowball continuing to build.

We have proposed to the Government that it provide a one-off €100 grocery supplement to child benefit, restore the €100 previously cut from the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance and remove State examination fees because these are not optional extras but everyday necessities for people. On the face of them, these measures are normal and would help ordinary working people, but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have never represented the ordinary working people in this country. The Minister of State can throw his eyes to heaven all he wants, but I know that for a fact. They have never represented ordinary working people in this country-----

Deputy Ged Nash: When push comes to shove.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: -----but we profess to and do represent ordinary working people in this country - for example, by putting forward this mini budget, with practical, real-life solutions that will help in the here and now, rather than the Minister of State just throwing his eyes to heaven in the face of the people and the families across this country who are struggling to put food on the table for their children.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "notes that" and substitute the following:

":

— the conflict in the Middle East has, once again, exposed the vulnerability of the Irish economy, and Irish society more generally, to imported fossil fuels;

— these strategic dependencies have major macroeconomic implications, and the risks to macroeconomic and fiscal stability cannot be ignored;

— at a minimum, the large upward shift in energy prices is likely to impart stagflationary impulses to the global economy, with a combination of lower levels of economic activity alongside higher inflation;

— by reducing Excise Duty payable on both petrol and diesel, the Government has dampened the pass-through from higher wholesale price to retail prices, but they have not gone far enough;

— this burden-sharing has been complemented by other support mechanisms, including an extension of the fuel allowance season and targeted measures for the most exposed sectors;

— the total budgetary cost of these measures is of the order of €750 million this year, one of the largest interventions of any country in the European Union (EU), and these measures reduce the annual rate of inflation in April, May, June and July by about 0.6 percentage points;

— the Government has also extended the 9 per cent Value-Added Tax (VAT) on gas and electricity bills until 31st December, 2030, one of the lowest rates in the EU, which will have cost over €1 billion from the time it was introduced in May 2022, until the end of this year;

— Budget 2026 left workers worse off, and handed tax breaks to those at the top;

— the 9 per cent VAT rate for hospitality and hairdressing will take effect from 1st July, 2026, to support businesses in services sectors, supporting over 150,000 jobs across the country;

— Budget 2026 delivered weekly welfare rate increases, benefitting approximately 1.5 million people, including pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and lone parents;

— for low-income families, Budget 2026 increased the weekly rate of the Child Support Payment; and

— the Government has increased the rates for the Fuel Allowance, extended it to the recipients of the Working Family Payment, and recently extended the season by four weeks, to protect those at risk of fuel poverty;

recognises that:

— a package worth €750 million of supports has been introduced by the Government, that has left many people still struggling to make ends meet;

- rates of Excise Duty (Mineral Oil Tax) applying to petrol, auto diesel and marked gas oil (MGO) have been temporarily reduced;
- the National Oil Reserve Agency levy has been reduced by 2 cent per litre of fuel, to 31st July, 2026;
- the total reductions, will reduce the cost of:
 - petrol, by 27 cent per litre;
 - diesel, by 32 cent per litre; and
 - MGO/green diesel, by 7.4 cent per litre;
- the Government deferred the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled for 1st May, until October, to provide additional support for consumers of green diesel and other affected fuels;
- to protect those at risk of fuel poverty, the Government extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks, which will result in additional payments to over a quarter of households;
- in Budget 2026, Government announced that VAT on electricity and gas will remain at the lowest possible level of 9 per cent to the end of 2030, to mitigate costs and address energy poverty;
- the Government increased the maximum repayment allowable under the Diesel Rebate Scheme from 7.5 cent up to 12 cent per litre of diesel, which will apply until 30th June, 2026;
- these interventions have been designed to provide timely and proportionate relief, indeed, the Government's approach is underpinned by the need to balance short-term supports with longer-term objectives, including:
 - maintaining fiscal discipline and building fiscal buffers;
 - supporting continued employment growth and economic stability;
 - strategic capital investment and infrastructure delivery;
 - advancing Ireland's climate commitments and energy transition; and
 - strengthening energy security and resilience;
- the Fuel Support Scheme for farmers is now open for applications, and a scheme for hauliers will open in the coming weeks;
- the bank levy has raised €1.8 billion since 2014, with a further €200 million due in 2026;
- the National Development Plan, includes the once-off receipts arising from the Court of Justice of the European Union ruling of 2024, to advance key capital projects;
- the Irish economy is facing its second fossil fuel shock in less than half a decade;
- fossil fuel dependence, especially imported fossil fuels, is a major economic vulnerability;

— analytical work will be undertaken by the Department of Finance, to set out the key macroeconomic principles that should guide the medium-term transition towards energy independence; and

— the Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce, to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses, while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

further recognises that:

— Budget 2026 left workers worse off and handed tax breaks to those at the top;

— according to analysis by the Economic and Social Research Institute of Budget 2026 measures, households lost disposable income, with low-income households hit hardest;

— despite clear evidence of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the Government withdrew cost of living supports, including energy credits;

— people with disabilities have been hard hit by the Government's callous decision to withdraw cost of living support, with many people with disabilities left up to €1,400 worse off;

— since energy credits were withdrawn, we have seen record numbers of household unable to pay their electricity bills, and many more people struggling to keep up;

— the Government measures on Excise Duty on fuel do not go far enough, with petrol, diesel, and green diesel all remaining too expensive at the pumps;

— the Government has refused to cut Excise Duty on home heating oil, despite over 700,000 homes relying on this fuel source for heating;

— struggling households cannot wait until next years' Budget for Government intervention; and

— the State is forecast to run a surplus of €9.2 billion, €4.1 billion higher than previously projected; and

calls on the Government to immediately introduce a Cost of Living Emergency Budget that will:

— cut the Universal Social Charge, to put €500 back in the pockets of workers;

— cut Excise Duty on fuels, such as petrol, diesel, green diesel and home heating oil;

— introduce energy credits of €400 per household; and

— make targeted cost of living support payments of €500 for people with disabilities, €400 for social welfare recipients, such as pensioners and people on the Working Family Payment, and a double child benefit payment."

As I have said before, we here get an opportunity to come in and repeat our single transferable speech. Unfortunately, however, that is what is necessary because this Government will not listen. I do not know how long we have been talking about the housing

crisis, and I imagine everybody who is talking about engaging with people on doors or in their constituency offices or clinics cannot but see the number of people coming to them with notices to quit. They have no notion how they will afford the unaffordable rents, which were unaffordable long before the Government decided it was okay to introduce its Bill which actually hiked those rents.

The Minister of State says the Government is honest. I suppose he will accept that Ireland has the most expensive electricity in Europe and around 320,000 households that cannot pay their electricity bill. How many people is that? We are probably talking about a million. One in four people cannot pay their gas bills. These are the realities that everyone else bar the Government realises are happening.

There was support for those who were out on the fuel protests. Why? It was because people are annoyed and browned off - I think that is the nicest way I can put it - about a Government that is not listening and does not see their problems. Their problems at this point are many. Anybody who has tried to shop in the past while knows that they cannot rely on the prices from the week before as an indication of what they will have to pay. Inflation has nearly doubled. We are talking about a 3.6% increase, while the Government had projected 1.8%.

I get that some of these circumstances are outside of the Government's control. We all accept there is a madness in the world at the moment, that Donald Trump, led by Israel, is doing what he is doing and that the Minister of State and the Government cannot control that. They can call him out, and the international community could play a stronger role in that regard, but first and foremost the Government could look after its own people.

We have calls for energy credits, and not because energy credits are a solution but because they can be done here and now. Energy credits were only ever meant to be a stop-gap measure that would provide the time and place for the Government to deal with the necessary reforms, for the powers to be given to the CRU and for us to ensure we are not wedded to through-the-roof gas prices. Everyone here talks about wind power and how we would love this country to become, as we used to say, the Saudi Arabia of wind power. However, we have not seen sufficient movement over years and years in an industry in which at one time we were ahead of the game.

I have to ask not about what the Government has done but about what it was forced to do by the fuel protesters. That is the reality. They had support on the street because every man, woman and child is fed up with the pressure they are under and they need support now, not into the future. That is why we are saying we need to put €500 back in workers' pockets, that is, abolish the USC on the first €32,500. That is straightforward. That is just putting money into people's pockets. We know we need to get €400 or thereabouts in electricity energy credits.

The people who have always been forgotten about are those with disabilities. The Government accepts there is a need for a cost-of-disability payment. It intends to do some work on delivering it next year but it was not delivered last year. What about the people who sometimes cannot afford to eat or heat or who cannot afford to charge their electric wheelchair? We have all heard directly from people. This is not made-up anger; it is the reality of the world we are in. It is an emergency budget now that is necessary. We need to see the Government listen, watch what is happening out there and take real action.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Deputies for bringing forward the motion and using their Private Members' time to give us an opportunity to debate this important issue. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, will know well that Sinn Féin has been calling for emergency measures to support workers and families experiencing an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. Sinn Féin supports the call for an emergency budget. We have been calling for this for some time, and it is welcome to see other parties coming to the table to echo the call and the need for emergency measures. The Minister of State knows that we have set out what we believe needs to be done. The Government needs to cut the USC, put €500 back into workers' pockets, cut excise on fuels, introduce a €500 cost-of-disability emergency payment and a €400 social welfare payment, to include pensioners, and extend the fuel allowance by a further eight weeks.

Inflation is now double what it was when the Government wrote its budget last year. Some 320,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills. One in four cannot pay their gas. I was out canvassing last week with Janice Boylan and she spoke to a young woman in her flat. The young woman has a blow heater that she turns on occasionally because she is in a constant battle with the mould. She does not turn on her gas because she cannot afford it, though that would probably heat her home and help her in the battle with the mould. She cannot afford that so she has a small but expensive-to-run blow heater and she feels that is more manageable. The end result is that she and her kids can be cold in their home in the evening. The sun might shine during the day, but in the evening she is cold in her home with her children. She needs to turn on the heater to try to air out the house because the mould is so bad. Can the Minister of State imagine for a moment how that woman felt, while she was engaged in a battle with the mould in her Dublin City Council flat, when she read that the Lord Mayor and Deputy Buttimer's colleague, the Government representative for the local electoral area, flew first-class to California, just after he had voted to jack up her rent?

The plea, certainly from us, is that if the Government cannot do something effective, something that will actually intervene in the lives of working people, if it cannot lift the burden, it should not, for the love and honour of Jesus, make it worse. I urge the Labour Party to reflect on its own vote to jack up the rent for Dublin City Council tenants in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis while they are dealing with some of the worst conditions people have to live in in this State. The Lord Mayor turned to the left when he got on the plane; unfortunately, he does not turn to the left any other time. There is a lesson in that for the Labour Party and the others that supported the call to jack up rents in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. I am not asking for any ambition because Jesus knows we are sick asking for that and there is none. The very least the Government could do is simply not make things worse.

5 o'clock

The previous junior Minister read out the greatest hits of who the Government tries to blame. It is blaming global politics. It has blamed the Opposition plenty of times. It is at that craic again. It has blamed the weather. Will the Government wake up and take a look at what is going on? There is nothing amusing about this.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am amused at your carry-on. You have broken every rule in the book and every rule of the House so far.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): Excuse me, Minister of State.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is nothing amusing-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You have broken every rule of the House so far.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is nothing amusing about-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You have broken every rule of the House so far.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: -----the poverty that people are living in at the moment.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You should respect the rules.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am on my feet.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I know you are.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): The Deputy is on her feet.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Dún do bhéal, le do thoil, and perhaps listen.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Táim ag éisteacht leat. Táim ag éisteacht.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): Can the clock be stopped because this is unfair on the Deputy?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Perhaps you would open your ears.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Tá Gaeilge fhlúirseach agam.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): Minister of State-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Perhaps you would listen. If you listen, you can hear. I am speaking-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Táim ag cloisint.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: -----on behalf of people who are getting crushed by a cost-of-living crisis. When they look to the Government, they see a Government that is out of touch and out of ideas. We have presented what we believe needs to be done. Others have done the same. The Government has chosen to turn a deaf ear to that. The message is being received loud and clear. This Government is telling people who are in dire straits today that they have to wait until next October, January or God knows when to get some help and support. They need that

help and support now. That is why people say there is a cost-of-living crisis. The Government may not choose to recognise or acknowledge that. It can stick its fingers in its ears and refuse to hear it, but there is a cost-of-living crisis.

In the few seconds remaining to me, I will speak about people with disabilities, who have seen a €1,400 cut in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. They are faced with making choices between heating, eating and charging mobility devices. These are not my words but the words of the disabled community. The Minister of State should listen to them instead of turning a deaf ear or sniggering, which helps absolutely nobody.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this Private Member's motion. The vast majority of people recognise that we need the Government to take action to deal with the ever-growing cost-of-living crisis. The previous budget, which was introduced here last October, did absolutely nothing for ordinary people and workers. It was an example of Government spending great deals of money to deliver very little. That has been the experience of hundreds of thousands of people across the State. I listened with interest to the Minister of State's predecessor speaking about delivery and the measures that have been put in place. These measures came as a reaction to the crisis that brought people onto the streets and brought huge turmoil to the country for almost a week. Only then did Government wake up and say that it needed to do something. Even then, it only took half measures. I particularly think of the farmers and contractors. I know many people from my community who went out onto the streets to demand that something be done because the cost of living, especially the cost of energy, was putting so much pressure on so many people.

While Government talks about targeted measures for the agricultural sector, claimants have to look at the amount of green diesel they used last year, put together all of the invoices and receipts for all of that, and put that in. Five months of documentation is needed. It is a complicated and convoluted way of doing it. Government should simply do what a sensible Government would do and look at bringing down the price at the pumps for everybody. Everybody uses fuel, including people going to work and families bringing children to school or who are dealing with a person with a disability and who have to take them to appointments. All of those people use fuel and nothing was done for them.

Neither was anything done for people who depend on home heating oil. I know many people in my community who use home heating oil, even at this time of year. Older people and people whose houses are very cold need to use home heating oil, but Government did nothing for them. It is simply sitting back and saying that, since the sun is shining, everything is fine. It is not fine, however. People are recognising that the Government is quite prepared to leave them behind.

As I have mentioned, there are also people with disabilities who are in difficult circumstances. That is who poverty kicks most, people who have extra payments to make and who face extra costs as a result of a child, elderly person or other family member having a disability. We have seen people talking about adult children with severe and profound disabilities and asking what is going to happen after their deaths. They are all looking at a future where they are going to go over a cliff edge. Government has no answers for them.

The only answer Government had in the budget was to bring in tax breaks for the very wealthy and for certain sectors that were able to get the ear of Government. It goes back to the

idea that if you are well connected in this country, you have made it, but if you do not, you are on your own. If we are to truly prosper and develop as a State and have a future for our children and our children's children, we need to put the resources in now. We need to invest in that future. That investment is clearly not happening.

In the here and now, people are under serious pressure to pay the high costs of energy. That is why the Government needs to do something real and substantial. We need to look at the USC, which was introduced by Government as an emergency measure during the crash but which is still there and has not been taken away. We need to remove the USC for the vast majority of workers and put €500 back into their pockets. We need to look at the electricity credits that were there before. We need to reintroduce those energy credits. The Government says that would be given to millionaires and that universal payments are a bad idea. The taxation system should deal with that. Government refuses to look at that. Universal payments would benefit everyone in society but it is an easy way to get money into people's hands. However, a proper, effective and balanced taxation system could then deal with those on the wealthier end. The Government fails in this area every time.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: In the statement from the Minister of State, the Government claps itself on the back for doing something over the last couple of weeks even though it had to be dragged kicking and screaming into doing so. Even then, it could not get it right. Unsustainably high energy and fuel prices in this State further compound a pre-existing cost-of-living crisis that has been going on for the last number of years. We keep saying this but, cynically, when the election was over, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael introduced a budget that left people worse off. Most cruelly, people with disabilities were left €1,400 worse off. The Government dropped supports for ordinary workers and families and left people high and dry with growing food bills and rocketing electricity and gas bills. A record number of people are now unable to pay their electricity bills. Almost 320,000 households are in arrears. People are getting hit with unaffordable rents caused by really bad decisions on rental policy. We see higher mortgage payments, childcare fees, college fees and insurance prices. Inflation is higher than the Government projected on budget day.

Last week, waste management companies put an energy surcharge on top of the 9% increase they introduced in January. We are being screwed by greedy companies when we pay for our heavily packaged food and now we are being screwed by those who take away that packaging. I remember the slogan from many Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors when I was on Fingal County Council. They would say that you would only pay for what you throw away. That was another lie and another trap as they commodified and privatised waste management. We would be paying through the nose for water charges if Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had got their way. We can be thankful the people stood up to them and their privatisation agenda.

Supporting people is the right decision for the economy. Without intervention, we risk having the legs kicked out from under local economies as people cut back spending just to get by. People are wise to the Government and they are seeing through its nonsense and misinformation. On the one hand, the Government says we are the best little country in Europe and have surpluses every year, including surpluses of €9 billion this year and €12 billion last year. On the other hand, it is crying that money does not grow on trees and asking where the money is to be found for an emergency budget. The Government cannot have it both ways. It

is speaking out of both sides of its mouth. The Government has plenty of money for bike sheds, however. We saw another grandiose bike shed come to light today.

The Government needs to bring in an emergency budget. As has already been said, money must be given back to the workers. In 2016, Fine Gael promised to get rid of the universal social charge, the temporary tax that was brought in to pay the bankers and the bondholders.

They got their money; they all got paid off and why? Because the Government screwed the people, the workers, in 2009 and 2010 and right the way through the austerity years. What was temporary became permanent. I know Leo is gone at the moment but that was certainly one of his promises back in the day in 2016. The universal social charge needs to be addressed.

Does the Minister of State remember the electricity credits the Government was giving in the past couple of budgets, right up to just before the election and then stopped straight after the election? There is that too. I am asking on behalf of people with disabilities in particular. That was really cruel. The people who need it most are those who have disabilities, and they are €1,400 worse off.

Let us talk about people getting to work. What about the ordinary person stuck on the M50, N3 or N4 trying to get into work? They are burning up fuel they are paying much more for at the pumps.

Just this week we learned that Ireland has the highest energy rates in Europe. I think it is around 40% higher than most of Europe. Europe Day is coming on Saturday. We had statements on it earlier. Why do we not do what the rest of Europe is doing? Why can we not have the same price for electricity if we are all in this together? We do not because we are not all in it together. We are being screwed. Workers and families in this country are being screwed. It is time to act and act now. We cannot wait until October for the Government to deal with the crisis. People need it now.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The next slot is the Social Democrats. The Deputies have two minutes each.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: First I want to mention the Northside Home Care workers. This is a group of low-paid workers, earning just above the minimum wage, who do incredibly important care work. As the Government has failed to intervene and make sure they get paid the going rate the same as HSE care workers and failed to ensure there is a sectoral pay agreement for care workers, they are a group that is particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged during this cost-of-living crisis. I urge the Minister of State and his colleagues to back them and sort them out and ensure that every care worker gets paid the same, fair going HSE rate.

What sort of Government cuts the income of disabled people by €1,400? That is what the Government did in this year's budget. To put that in context, this country, the Government, has €39 billion sitting in cash yet it decided to take €1,400 off disabled people, putting people further into poverty. It means that, for example, people who were in receipt of some of those supports who were getting dialysis at home can no longer afford the electricity bills for their dialysis and are having to go back to hospital to get dialysis every day, causing massive disruption and having a huge impact on their health and well-being. What sort of Government does that? How can its members justify that to themselves? How can they make those

decisions? How, when it has the resources available to invest in targeted energy credits to lift people out of fuel poverty and invest in solar energy, does it continue to sit on its hands and not act or use the resources at its disposal to really help the people who need help the most?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: People all over this country are being absolutely crushed by incredibly high electricity prices that are just going up and up. We have 317,000 households in arrears. These are people who work hard and do all the right things but just cannot manage to keep their heads above water. It really does not have to be this way. The Social Democrats have put forward a proposal for solar for all, a doubling of the grants, a battery grant for households, to include the warmer homes scheme in the solar panels scheme and to also increase supports for businesses. Solar is the solution to cut people's energy bills. It is quick, easy and relatively inexpensive if you get sufficient grants to do so. We ask the Government to support our amendment in this regard.

One area this Government has continued to ignore for some reason is the benefit and potential of plug-in solar. Plug-in solar is used by 1.5 million households in Germany and is being rolled out in the UK yet in Ireland, for some reason, we are still caught up in years of red tape when it comes to this Government trying to figure out how to legalise plug-in solar. It is a very simple technology. It is a solar panel, micro inverter and a plug. You do not need an electrician. All you need is a bit of sunlight and a socket. You can buy them in your local shops, plug them in and immediately start reducing the cost of your electricity bills. They are suitable for people in apartments and for renters. You can stick them on a shed roof or put them in your garden. They are such a fantastic technology and the fact the Government is continuing to ignore it is beyond belief considering the incredible costs people are incurring. I ask that the Government consider this proposal seriously and support the Social Democrats amendment to the motion.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Two years ago I canvassed in the local elections. One day in Harold's Cross I knocked on the door of a man about my age. He came to the door. There were toys in the hallway and he was making dinner for his kids. I asked him what were the kinds of political issues that were on his mind and he said, "The cost of living". That was May 2024. Two years later I think about that man, with everything that has happened since then – energy costs accelerating to the highest in Europe, punishing rental or interest rates, inaccessible childcare miles away that costs a second mortgage and the cost of goods and food, groceries and other everyday items surpassing the rate of wage growth.

The core truth of the cost-of-living crisis is that for many people there was a crisis two years ago. There was a crisis when this Government and the Minister of State was elected. There was a crisis at the time when it was announcing the last budget and last January when I asked that it give disabled people a modest emergency payment after it gutted their incomes in the budget. There has been a cost-of-living crisis ongoing for months and years before the illegal war on Iran and the energy crisis it has brought about but the Government spent months and years not reacting, making poverty rates climb, according to the Parliamentary Budget Office and the CSO, allowing price-gouging to go unchecked and incentivising rents and mortgage interest rates to rise all while the richest in this country have never had it better. The Government's actions over its time in office have failed to recognise the depth of the crisis and resulted in a dereliction of duty to those struggling. When will it recognise its obligations and

take meaningful, costed, targeted and responsible measures from the Opposition such as the one in this motion to intervene in people's lives? When will it lead? Will it take a by-election to wake it up or will it stay asleep at the wheel while the financial lives of our citizenry are left to burn?

Deputy Jen Cummins: Education is supposed to be free in this country but unfortunately this year we have seen exactly how it is not free. Books are free, which is great, but there is an ever-increasing reliance on tablets which are not free. In fact, not only are they not free, they cost between €700 and €800 each. Exam fees are being reintroduced for the leaving certificate and junior cycle exams. There was no warning about that. There was six weeks for them to be paid in. They have not been paid since before Covid by any family. In a cost-of-living crisis that was a massive surprise for those families.

There is also what seems to be a now annual threat around third level fees and the failure to reduce them. We seem to have this conversation every year as young people are studying for their state exams.

There are people working in our education system who are not earning a living wage. Recently the joint committee on education heard from local training initiative, LTI, workers who told us their wages were so incredibly low that they wanted to have what the community training centre, CTC, workers have even though the CTC workers are saying they cannot live on those wages and they want to get what the Youthreach workers are getting. We have a system where parents cannot afford to pay for their free education and the workers who are working in education cannot afford to live.

If the Government does not recognise there is a cost-of-living crisis maybe it should take a walk down Grafton Street and turn off it. They could wait and see the people I saw last night as I was on the way home who were waiting for the soup run. One woman was lying on her side up against the wall – utterly sad and utterly cold and lonely. I thought, “Is this what we have in 2026?” This is a really rich country and people are reliant on soup runs. I pay special tribute to the Muslim Sisters of Éire who go out every single week and support people in this city. They are absolutely amazing and I really want to praise them.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister of State spins a story that the Government has acted on the cost of living, but the truth is that the Government has stubbornly refused to do things within its power that could reduce the cost-of-living crisis for ordinary people. On the other hand, the Government gives away billions of euro in tax breaks to wealthy investor funds and those on the highest incomes. The Government refuses to freeze rents. Instead, it actually removed the paltry rent controls that were in place and is allowing the big landlords to increase rents even further. It promised to cap childcare fees at €200 a month and has taken no action on that. The Government refuses to implement our proposal for public affordable childcare. We have the highest electricity costs in Europe. Where is the action to tackle the price-gouging? The Government refuses to implement our proposal for targeted energy credits that could help 800,000 households.

On the basic cost of food and groceries, it looks the other way while supermarkets profit and price-gouge. On the basic cost of health, ten years ago, Fine Gael promised to extend free GP care for all children under 18, yet, today, when a child turns eight, the family has to pay full GP costs. If the Government extended free GP care to children, as we proposed, to children just up to 12, it would help 200,000 children and their families and cost just €30 million a year, but it refuses to. Instead, it gives twice that amount, €60 million, in tax breaks each year to high-earning executives relocating here, earning up to €1 million.

Tá daoine in Éirinn ag streachailt go mór leis an ngéarchéim costais maireachtála. Tá ardú ar phraghsanna fuinnimh agus tá cíós ró-ard. Tá a lán brú ar theaghlaigh. Tá sé an-deacair orthu a gcuid bunriachtanas a chlúdach.

There is so much the Government could, and should, do to help ordinary people with the cost-of-living crisis. The question is why the Government is not doing it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the proposals to reduce the cost of living for people. We have had a cost-of-living crisis since the end of Covid. That has escalated and it is now at crisis point. It is a serious situation and Government needs to understand that. Middle- and low-income households were never under so much pressure. Fuel, petrol, diesel, solid fuel, gas and costs are high and, as we learned today, electricity costs are the most expensive in the European Union. Rents, mortgages, house prices and waste charges are high. Health insurance does not just go up once a year anymore. It goes up two or three times, in double digits, and people are forced to pay it. Grocery prices, student fees and much more are all escalating. The combined total of all this is bringing huge pressure on ordinary, hard-working people, who cannot keep. People are in arrears with mortgages. I say all this sincerely. Rents are escalating. People just cannot pay their electricity bills. As of March, we have 320,000 people in arrears on their electricity bills. It is fair to say that that could be 400,000 now. Some 180,000 were in arrears on gas as well in March. It is safe to say that figure has escalated since.

The top 10% of people in Ireland never had it so good. We must not forget that when people are paying higher prices, the money does not just disappear because the profit margins of many companies are up. The wealth of the big supermarket chains, the big hotel chains, and McDonalds continues to increase. We are looking at the transfer of wealth. Budget 2026 did not just leave behind ordinary PAYE workers and the self-employed; it actually left them worse off because of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's failure to increase tax thresholds and move the tax bands. PAYE workers and self-employed are now paying much more tax. The number of people in arrears on electricity has reached crisis point. People in rented accommodation are really struggling because rents are out of control. We know why that is. That must be addressed.

We had one of the cheapest electricity systems in western Europe when it was all in public ownership, but the cost has increased since the State started to privatise it. Other reasons have been given and I accept there are other factors, but one is that because it is privatised, profit-making actions are taken by the companies generating electricity. We need to get into our heads that this has happened. Mortgages are at an all-time high because house prices are at an all-time high.

I am not asking the Government to throw money around the place but we should have targeted measures. I do not agree with untargeted measures. Targeted measures need to be the

name of the game. We need to look at those households that have an income under €75,000 a year. The Government should bring in a windfall tax on the large energy companies. There are good examples across Europe of where that is happening. We need to reverse the VAT cuts for the big hotel chains and the big food distribution companies such as McDonalds. We need targeted energy credits for households with income under €75,000. We urgently need a cost-of-living payment for people who are disabled because they are €1,400 worse off this year than last year as a result of the way the budget measures were done. We need to restore back-to-school funding. We need to halt the planned increase in student fees. The Government needs to adjust the tax bands. Ordinary workers, particularly workers on less than €75,000, whether self-employed or on PAYE, were left behind. We need to increase the relief on rent paid and on mortgage interest charges.

I ask the Government to examine the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to see what it is about. In my time here, it has shown itself to be totally useless, and I do not say that lightly. One of the other proposals relates to solar grants. Solar energy is a quick win and easy to fit. I know it cannot be done in a day or a week but, in the medium term, we should move fairly quickly to try to do that and scale up the grants for solar, to get panels onto houses and speed up the warmer homes scheme. The waiting list is 23 to 24 months. I ask that those practical measures be taken.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Labour Party for the motion and for suggesting that we should have a mini-budget to address the cost-of-living crisis. We agree with quite a number of the measures and some were in our alternative budget. It is a fact that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. While a cost-of-living crisis is going on for working people in this country, where half a million people either are either in gas or electricity arrears and are crushed by the USC, carbon taxes, energy price hikes and food price hikes, the rich are getting richer. The year before last, there were nine billionaires in Ireland. Now there are 11. The wealth of those billionaires went up by €13 billion last year. Just 11 people's wealth went up by €13 billion. Some 1,400 people in Ireland have more than €47 million each while 20,000 people in this country have more than €4.7 million each. If we adopted a wealth tax, as Oxfam has proposed, on just that group of 20,000 people, it would raise €9 billion. Let us imagine what we could do with €9 billion for the cost-of-living breaks that working people need.

There is a similar picture on profits. Profits are up 300% in the past ten years. In 2014, total profits before tax amounted to €95 billion. In 2023, they reached €318 billion. Here is the real kicker. The total earnings of every one of the 3.3 million workers in this country comes to €130 billion. That is all the wages together. How much tax do those 3.3 million workers pay on that income? Some €32 billion. What are the total profits of the 170,000 businesses in this country? Some €318 billion. It is more than twice than what all the workers earn between them. How much tax do they pay? Some €23 billion. The rich earn far more and pay far less in tax. Workers earn less and pay more between USC, excessive electricity and energy costs, carbon taxes, you name it.

Profits go up for the super rich, they pay less tax and we get more billionaires, while workers are screwed to the wall with the cost of living. How do these things happen? I will give an example - rezonings. The Government is rezoning land all over the place. The value of the rezoned land is going up, from about €160,000 per hectare when it is zoned for agricultural use

to €1.6 million when per hectare after it is rezoned. Actually, when the land is sold on the market we are probably talking about more like €16 million. So, overnight, somebody who owns that land and has done absolutely nothing is made a multimillionaire by the rezonings that are happening all over Dublin at the moment, courtesy of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Is that a victimless crime? No. That extra money that has gone into their pockets - millions of euro because of the votes of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, in some cases, Green Party councillors and others - goes onto the prices of houses. That is why the prices of houses and rents are so high. That is where they get their money from. It does not come out of the sky. It comes out of the price or the rent you pay. That is how people get rich overnight. It is not magic. It is a transfer of wealth from working people who cannot afford a house or cannot afford the rents into the pockets of rich people who have done nothing except own a piece of land that has been rezoned.

This week, I heard of the case of a clerical officer working in the Civil Service, who is earning €32,000 and has four children. He should be below the social housing income threshold limit but he gets family income supplement as his income is so low. If he gets this year's increment, due this summer, he will be thrown off the housing list and will not even be eligible for HAP. He is on €32,000 and has four kids. The workers get screwed; the rich get richer. That is what is happening in this country.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí mé ag éisteacht le gach duine. Aontaím le go leor rudaí ach an rud nach dtuigim ná two weeks ago the Opposition was asking to collapse the Government where no financial measures could be passed and now it is asking for a mini-budget. We are in very unpredictable times and need to have a stable Government. How could any financial measures have been passed if the Government had collapsed as the Opposition wanted?

Deputy Martin Kenny: Through a new Government-----

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am asking how could the Opposition, after a general election---

Deputy Martin Kenny: -----that the Deputy did not prop up.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I did not interrupt you, Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We were hoping for a-----

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I did not interrupt you either, Deputy Sheehan. A general election would take four weeks.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I ask all Deputies to address their remarks through the Chair.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. If there was a general election in three or four weeks, due to the count and the formation of Government, there would be a long period when nothing could be passed. Is this performative? I want to show solutions.

The Government has provided €775 million but it could introduce more supports. In respect of the 2024 plug-in solar report, in a response to a parliamentary question I submitted, six key stakeholders took a negative view of plug-in solar. I have requested the consultation responses and I want to see why those stakeholders would be against a system that could be bought in a supermarket such as IKEA, Lidl or Aldi and installed at home in conjunction with an inverter battery. This would benefit people. While I welcome the SEAI grants, the return on cost and instant relief plug-in solar would deliver, particularly for people in social and affordable housing, are much bigger. I understand there are long-term returns from rooftop solar and that it is a more durable system. However, in my constituency, apartment dwellers would like to see an immediate reduction in their energy bills. If the Government invested in a giant scheme in which these systems were bought in bulk at a reduced rate, there would be energy savings. If it also gave grants to people to buy these systems, we would see an immediate reduction in bills.

I will continue to work with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I welcome the Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and Buttiner, who complimented me on my work on this and are working with me constructively on it. I commend all of the Department staff who have been engaging with me because we need to move fast on this. The UK, Germany and the US are doing it and other EU countries have done it. We need to act on it. That is one of the solutions.

The clearing house in the Taoiseach's Department for offshore renewable energy is welcome. However, having spoken to developers of wind energy and long duration energy storage, the people who will help us to decentralise our grid, these stakeholders need to see action.

In regard to the private wires Bill, I have my own Bill which is separate from the Government's Bill. It was a huge priority for me that my Bill be considered ahead of the Government Bill because key aspects of it need to be taken into consideration for members of the public. A private wire that is installed must be proven to not have a negative effect on the domestic cost per kilowatt hour for Irish citizens. There should be a community benefit fund that is directly linked to the proportion of savings made from a private company installing the wire to the local community. There should be clear systems in place to give private households that want to install a private wire a timeline for when it can be done. This will save people money. It will bring in foreign direct investment and create jobs in Ireland. If we had a set timeline for FDI, it would be a boost for electricians, labourers, engineers and administrative staff. I understand there are people who will be critical of my Bill, on which I look forward to constructively working when it comes to the House.

For cost-of-living reasons, we need to be less dependent on global fuel markets. This is where we have an opportunity to lead. As I have said before, the price of LNG rose by 23% in 24 hours. If we are looking for energy security, we need to look at what is already on our island and we can benefit from. We will not see the sun go any time because of a war in the Middle East that was not even started by our country. It was started by one of the most destructive regimes we have seen. If we rely on sources of energy that are here and will benefit the Irish people, that will make us independent. When, during the Second World War, Churchill tried

to force de Valera's hand, we were energy dependent. If we were energy independent, we would become the creators and guiders of our country. We are generating renewable energy and then turning it off. We are delaying projects due to grid constraints. Why are we importing electricity when we can produce it ourselves? That is not just inefficient; it is costing the Irish people money. We need to accelerate renewable deployment and storage. The climate and energy committee, which some of the Deputies present are members of, is working constructively on that but we need action.

We need to upgrade and modernise our grid. I welcome the Government announcement of funding for grid developments. However, in conjunction with that, the private wires Bill would work in parallel and create a better system. By using smarter solutions like long duration, battery energy storage systems, BESS, and demand products, we would help the cost of living, directly. We need to support local and direct energy infrastructure so that energy can be used where it is generated, thereby reducing pressure on systems and lowering costs.

We need to electrify because we are a petro-state and we need to become an electro-state. Transport, heating and industry are how we should reduce our dependence on imported fuels. It is not just in Ireland; there are so many countries in the EU we can follow and this being Europe Day, we should be doing so. This is about getting electric buses, which can be put in more easily with private wires, on the roads. It is about powering homes with cheaper energy, supporting workers, creating jobs and making Ireland more competitive.

We all heard the recent pronouncements on nuclear power. We need to have open discussions about technologies and I will discuss and debate nuclear power but I would love a cost-benefit analysis of nuclear and a timeframe for when it could be implemented compared to using the renewables that are here right now. Hinkley Point in the UK is showing the costs have doubled, timelines have gone over and delivery is complex.

Currently, universities in Ireland are not teaching enough courses for nuclear physicists. They are not teaching enough courses for the technicians or labourers who would be working on these systems. If we do not have the workforce, we have to bring them in. While I agree with the key aspects of the development of small modular reactors, SMRs, we need to focus on what we can deliver right now. We currently have renewable projects waiting for grid connection. The Critical Infrastructure Bill and the private wires Bill in conjunction will speed up the gridlock and reduce costs. The slowing down of electrification is putting pressure on our households.

While we hold the EU Presidency, we need to push for those things that we always stood for, including smarter energy systems and a shift towards cheaper electricity. I look forward to working constructively with the Minister of State. I hope this war ends soon and there will not be a need to bring in more financial measures. If we do have to, however, when we are knocking on doors in my constituency, please God may members of the Opposition be able to say how financial measures were brought in without a functioning government.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Déanaim comhghairdeas le gach Ball as a gcuid óráidí ar an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. I thank the Labour Party and Deputy Nash for bringing the motion before the House today. It is important, in the context of the debate we are having, to make three points. I know the Opposition has to play a certain role and I appreciate that. I

have been a Member of the Houses of the Oireachtas for 19 years, have dealt with many of the Members here and I appreciate that. There is a commonality here because all of us are on the side of the people and the gnáthdhuine. We must accept that. Second, while I know it is a great line - the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach used it very well when she spoke to this motion - to say we are out of touch, aloof or immune or whatever, we are not. We have our life experiences and that of our families, friends, neighbours and the people we meet at our clinics and offices every day. We know full well that people are faoi bhrú, under pressure, with the cost of living. That is why this debate is important.

We may disagree about the rubrics of the scaffolding by which we all move forward but let us not lose the tenet that what we are doing on this side of the House – I am speaking as a Member of these Houses for 19 years – is representing our people. There is merit in many of the suggestions we have heard today and it is our job to forensically go through them in the context of the debate we are having. That is why this debate is important.

I am a former teacher. Deputy Cummins discussed education. Under the Minister, Deputy Naughton, initiatives are now under way to address educational disadvantage to help children and young people realise their potential through education. I spent most of my life teaching the leaving certificate applied programme as an adult education director. This is about the power of being able to see the investment in education, upskilling, training and reskilling in order for people to meet life's needs. That is why there is a €48 million investment in the new DEIS strategy and DEIS plus scheme. Are we seriously saying in this House that we should not have that? Of course we are not. These measures represent a significant investment by the Government in a ten-year plan to tackle educational disadvantage and promote equality across our education system. Equally, we have seen the DEIS plus scheme advanced where we now have 181 schools in our education system being able to be supported under this scheme. This morning, I spoke with students participating in the think big programme in Stillorgan. These are wonderful young people coming together with ideas and creativity.

Understandably, people are frustrated, angry and upset at the rising costs. However, if we were to have an objective analysis, which does not always suit the narrative some want to portray, it would tell us that we must be clear and responsible in our administration of public moneys. All of us are acutely aware of the energy price shock. It did not take a protest or a blockade to tell us that. That is why the Government acted. I am serious; we did not need to hear that. We knew it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Little was done until then.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Perhaps we did not communicate it properly or engage quicker. I accept that. I am not living in an ivory tower, as I said. I accept that point. We acted to insulate households and businesses from the worst impacts of rising costs. That is why we have two packages with a cumulative cost of €750 million. It is the second highest or highest package in Europe. That budget surplus was not conjured up out of magic money. This package supports the most vulnerable through lower costs at the pump and supporting key sectors of our economy.

It is great to go off and tax and spend, but what happens next October or November if we are still where we are? That is why I agree with Deputy Heneghan. Let us hope this war is

over because it has only got one outcome, that is, it is negative for everybody. That is why the Government has been clear around de-escalation. Some of the propositions from the Opposition are to spend it all now, which would leave us with no buffer for the winter or anything to last us into the next couple of months. Where would we be then? Members of the Opposition would come into the Chamber and say that we were irresponsible, imprudent and did not manage the economy carefully. In that scenario, hey presto, we would have no resources on hand to budget for unforeseen shocks. As the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, said, if we were to respond to every demand asked of us, we would have no surplus and be in a far more exposed position. We would be back to the budgetary position we were in at the time of the crash between 2007 and 2010 and beyond. That is why this is important.

I have great faith in people like Deputy Nash. I admire him greatly, having served with him in both Houses. He has that ability to look at the national economic dialogue and engage constructively. He was in government. He knows what it is like when there is nothing in the cupboard and when you are hiding under the cupboard to try to find a few bob. He never shirked his responsibility, nor did the Labour Party to be fair when it was in government. I will always have admiration for people in the Labour Party because when the country needed it in the tough times, the party was there. We should never forget that. My view is very clear in that regard.

The budgetary economic process has begun, as we know. The priorities for the next budget are beginning to be unfurled. That is why I welcome this conversation around tax and taxation. The Tánaiste has initiated that conversation. As policymakers, there is an obligation on us, as Deputy Heneghan mentioned, to strike that balance between the competing priorities that we all rightly commend and speak for. We all represent different interest groups and people. At the end of the day, those interest groups are representing people, and we should never lose sight of that. We must strike that balance so that we can responsibly manage our public finances and invest in childcare, disability, education and infrastructure.

I understand the political game. It is back and forth and sometimes, we have to try to appease, win and excite people. However, do not for one second think that those of us on this side of the House do not recognise the difficulties people face. We understand them fully. That is why we intervened. Many of us in our parliamentary parties engage with our Ministers and leaders about them.

The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach referred earlier to the greatest hits of the Government. This was not about the greatest hits; it was about interventions to address the impact of costs on people whom we all represent and understand. I will not list the measures introduced but people are seeing a benefit now. Are they totally immune? No. The Taoiseach said here many times that we cannot provide that blanket for everyone. What we are doing, however, is putting in place packages that reduce the rate of inflation and costs on people. Let us be clear: there are choices to be made, and those choices have consequences. The Government has been careful in its deliberation and calibration of the response. This is not a letter to Santa. We cannot write, "Dear Santa" and the wish list will be got. As we all know, someone pays the bill for Santa at the end of the day.

The measures we have taken are targeted. They provide support to the most vulnerable and assist the people and sectors of our economy where there is a need for jobs, job security and growth. They are proportionate measures.

I know it is not sexy or glitzy to speak about the sound management of the economy. When I think about the Ministers for Finance we had in modern times, people like Ruairí Quinn, Brian Lenihan jnr, Paschal Donohoe, Michael Noonan, Jack Chambers and now Simon Harris, and Joan Burton when she was in social protection, I often wonder how they would have reacted and what would they have done. It is about providing benefit to householders and businesses so that we can keep jobs going, we can sustain that sustainable position on our economy, and we can use our funds wisely. If we are genuinely sincere in the way in which we continue to budget and continue to manage our economy, we must have sustainability and we must be wise and prudent. I certainly do not want to go back to 2007 or 2010 when we were in this House and the Upper House. This is why the national development plan has a clear roadmap for investment.

Proper budgetary planning must be done in a measured way to represent people, taking into account the pressures of today but also the longer-term perspective. I thank the Labour Party for bringing the motion before the House tonight. I believe the Government is getting the balance right. As I said in the past, it is a sensible approach to the medium and long-term budgetary position. I thank Deputy Nash for bringing the motion forward.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is not just that the Minister of State does not get it or that individuals do not get it; I genuinely think that the Government as an entity does not get it. Consider the counter-motion the Minister of State has put forward. It is a rehash and a restatement of what the Government said it would do in budget 2026. If we want to talk about budget 2026, we can talk about the fact that it leaves families 2% worse off. That is a fact. It is not me pointing that out; it is the ESRI. We could talk about the blunt measure of the poorly targeted VAT cut with 60% of the benefit going to fast-food chains and not to struggling local cafés. That is not me pointing that out; it is the Department of Finance. For the Government to come in here with a counter-motion and to literally reprint and rehash that statement is completely laughable. It is not even funny because what the Government does not get is that the Government has lost the dressing room. Look at the anger that was out there on the streets. A Government backbencher cannot put a post up on social media at the moment about getting a hole in the road filled without an abundance of stuff underneath it because people are furious. In many cases what the Government has done with that fury is come to a house fire with a can of petrol. Let us go back to the week of the fuel protests. Monsignor Micheál Martin came out to lecture the nation followed by Colonel O'Callaghan saying that he was going to send in the tanks. It was absolutely ridiculous. I wonder if the people who come into my clinic, the people I represent, have to get their Toyota Corollas and line them up outside O'Connell Street down by the GPO in order for the Government to actually listen to them?

What we have put forward is very clear. It is targeted and we have said how we will pay for it. The Government's entire budgetary policy is based on the idea of people getting a fiver at budget time but six months later they get a €500 bill. The families the workers I represent in Limerick do not need a restatement of budget 2026 from this Government. They need action on the cost-of-living crisis. Their groceries have gone up, their energy bills have gone up, their rent has gone up, and their mortgage interest rates in many cases are going up. They are working full time and yet they have sweet feck all left at the end of the week.

The fact of the matter is that we know from what the ESRI has said, and from what the Department has said, that the Government's budgetary measures are not prudent. They leave

families worse off on average and they hit the lowest-income earning families the hardest. Yet, the Government's counter-motion today does not acknowledge any of this. This is about political choice. We have made our choice. We back workers, we back families and we back people who are struggling. We do not partake in leprechaun economics. We have set out very clearly how we would pay for this. The people that all of us represent deserve much more from this Government than being told to just wait until October and that help is coming not now but in six months.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Within my office in the last few weeks we have been discussing the emails that have been coming in. These are from ordinary working people who are living with fear, desperation and pressure because of the cost-of-living crisis. We wonder whether the Government gets the same emails we do and whether it can be dealing with the same issues we are. If it was, the Minister of State would not be standing across from the Opposition benches pretending that everything is fine and pretending that there is nothing to see. The Minister of State would be acting on at least some of the measures that have been brought forward here today. I wonder if the Minister of State has ever lain awake wondering how he is going to get to the next pay cheque.

I will tell the story of one of my constituents in Dublin Fingal West. She received a notice to quit but she was lucky, and I mean she was really lucky, to get a rental property a week before she was to go into emergency accommodation with her children and dog. She told me that she can afford to rent or she can afford to eat, so she will go without food because that means her children do not have to suffer the trauma of going into emergency accommodation, and she did not want to lose their dog. Think about that for a moment. In one of the richest countries in Europe a mother is prepared to go without food to keep a roof over her head. She felt embarrassed by this but it is not her who should feel embarrassed. The Government should feel embarrassed that in a rich country, renting a home or having a hot shower is becoming a luxury. The Government should be embarrassed that parents stand at checkout queues having to figure out what they are going to send back because they simply cannot afford it. Working people are one break away from financial disaster. Perhaps a car needs repairs, dental work needs to be done or a washing machine breaks down. Any one of those events can completely clear a family's savings. There is no safety net; just constant pressure and worry of what is going to come next. Urgent action is needed because carers, disabled people, lone parents and working people across the country are at breaking point. Where are the €200 a month fees that were promised for childcare? That was to be part of the cost-of-living package also.

Deputy Ged Nash: In my concluding remarks I will counter one or two of the points the Minister of State made, the first being his claim that nobody likes talking about fiscal responsibility and that it is not sexy. Well, it is the kind of thing that keeps me awake at night, and the Minister of State touched on one of the reasons. In an economy that is not managed responsibly, we know there is no future for working people and there is no future for small businesses. This is why it is very difficult to sit here, take lectures and be sermonised about fiscal responsibility by the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and by Fianna Fáil. We all know the impacts of the irresponsibility they showed 20 years ago, and the impacts this had on working families in this country. We all know the impact that their destructive policies are still having on our dysfunctional housing system today, which goes to the root of the economic and social problems we have. We in the Labour Party will not be taking lectures from the Minister

of State, Deputy Troy, or anybody else in his party about fiscal responsibility. By the way, fiscal responsibility does not mean austerity, cutbacks or anything of the sort. Fiscal responsibility means good economic management allied with imaginative economic management and social initiatives that allow Governments to address the real problems society is encountering.

In the last budget we saw the Government make choices that we fundamentally disagree with, and the Minister of State accepted that in his remarks. We can, thankfully, respectfully disagree. I have the height of respect for the Minister of State and the way in which he practises his politics and the way in which he represents his constituents and the country. We can, however, respectfully disagree.

6 o'clock

We fundamentally disagree with the choices that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made in the last election. There was no argument, for example, for a tax cut for the hospitality sector, which was adding jobs by the week. There was an even smaller argument, if one existed at all, for tax cuts for the development sector to supplement the bottom line of builders who were building apartments already. There was no argument whatsoever. That was done at the expense of tax indexation for PAYE workers. That is acknowledged by representatives on the Government side and is something we are seeking to address in a motion that is put forward in good faith to try to address the real concerns of working people in this country, who simply have had enough. They can no longer manage and they cannot, as colleagues have said, wait until a signal is sent in October that things might improve come 1 January when the Finance Bill is enacted.

I ask the Minister of State and his colleagues to reflect on the decision to introduce an amendment to the Labour Party motion. I ask the Government to send a signal to working people in this country that it is on their side. In particular, PAYE workers rightly feel abandoned by this Government. What we are arguing for is the definition of fiscal responsibility, namely, a properly framed mini-budget rather than a drip feed of interventions worth hundreds of millions of euro based on who shouts the loudest. That is no way to manage an economy. That is not fiscal responsibility or prudence. I would ask Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents to reflect on the position they have adopted here today.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1 put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 13 May 2026.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Education and Training Provision

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am delighted that the Minister of State is here. We often meet on Thursdays when we are chatting. I am disappointed that the Minister for education is not here

because it falls within her remit. I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to come and discuss the issue of the Cork Life Centre. I am sure he is aware of it. It is in his neck of the woods, not quite in his constituency but closer to him than it is to me. I visited there in February when I was in Cork for the Social Democrats' conference. I had spent a long time hoping that I would some day get to visit the Cork Life Centre, because it is a place that many people hold in high esteem. When I went in, it was exactly how I thought it would be. It was a place of care and love and excellence in education. I was shown around by a young person who had written to me and invited me to the centre. He was a graduate of the Cork Life Centre and he could not have demonstrated better why it was a place that should be valued and held in the highest esteem in our education system.

Why the centre works so well is because our education system is built around systems. It is built around a curriculum and bigger things that move in large movements as opposed to the person whom it should focus on and move around, that is, the child or the learner. The Cork Life Centre has figured out exactly how to put the student at the core of the curriculum and everything it does. This means that when a young person arrives to the Cork Life Centre, they are greeted with open arms. There is an expectation that they will achieve the best that they can in the time that it takes and that the centre will be with them all the way along that journey. Students can be interested in whatever takes their fancy. I saw a beautiful woodwork room, and art room and rooms where they could read, learn or play. An exercise area was being built. The gardening area was fantastic. When they arrive, they are welcomed with a cup of tea and a biscuit, just like I was, and the warmth in that building is spectacular.

There is a slight problem, in that because it is not a recognised centre, it does not quite fit. It does not have a roll number like a primary school, a secondary school or a special school. It is not a community training centre and it is not Youthreach. It does not fit neatly into what we want it to fit into. The review of out-of-school provision was published in 2022 and a number of recommendations have come from that. I know that there is an implementation forum that is working through those but it was published four years ago now and that should move on.

The challenge for the centre of not being recognised as one of the settings I mentioned earlier is that it does not get appropriate funding. It does not get the allocation of teachers or the supports that other learning centres get. On that basis, the centre struggles with funding and with getting teachers. There are teachers and support personnel there who work on a voluntary basis. We are talking about a very vulnerable cohort of young people who have left mainstream education for whatever reason and they are being accepted into the Cork Life Centre to be given a second chance. However, the centre cannot exist on fresh air and hope only. What can be done to support the Cork Life Centre correctly?

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this very important matter. At the forefront of our thoughts this afternoon is Don O'Leary and the great work he did. This is a very important Cork educational establishment. The Deputy is right that it is held in high esteem across Cork and beyond. The care and love it shows is a wonderful example of how education can be. As a former director of adult education and a teacher of the leaving certificate applied, I understand fully that the Cork Life Centre is committed to supporting children and young people who attend the centre so that they can realise their full potential and the benefits the centre will bring to their lives.

I apologise that I do not have the scripted reply for the Deputy, but I will get it forwarded to her. For some reason, it has not been made available. I also apologise for the Minister not being here. I am taking this matter on her behalf.

Since the 1970s, a small number of alternative education settings that operate outside of the traditional mainstream education system have evolved on an *ad hoc* basis across the State. What is clear is that these settings support the needs of children and young people who have disengaged from, as it were, or are not engaged in mainstream education. They have blossomed and flourished, in this case in the Cork Life Centre in Sunday's Well. The Acting Chair is familiar with it as well.

This educational setting, and I use the word “setting” not in a cold way but, as the Deputy quite rightly articulated, in a way that provides access to education for approximately 55 children and young adults between the ages of 13 and 18 who would not be in mainstream education and who would be lost to the education system were it not for the centre. As I said, it is junior cycle and leaving certificate applied exams. It is supported by an incredible group of staff, teachers, volunteers and people who are under the trusteeship of the Christian Brothers European Province.

The centre is one of a small number of alternative education providers that are supported by the Department of Education and Youth. The Department has provided funding and teacher co-operation hours to the centre for several years going back to 2018, which has been increased significantly since then. This year, the Department provided funding of €177,500 along with 6,200 co-operation hours in conjunction with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. As the Deputy knows, centre referrals come from the education and welfare service, school principals, social workers or child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. The centre is seeking sustainability for the future from the Department. Over the past number years, Department officials have visited the centre and met with management on a number of occasions in relation to the issues discussed by the Deputy. Department officials wrote to the centre two years ago with a proposal from the Department that will see the centre recognised under the Education Act 1998. It will then be designated as a special school for primary, with a school roll number. The communication from the Department sets out the requirements in relation to equipment provision, teaching of the curriculum and the length of the school day and school year in order to be recognised by the Department as a primary school under the Education Act. The letter also outlines the level of staffing resources and other supports that would be allocated by the Department to the centre to be recognised as a school. I believe that officials are continuing to engage with the centre in respect of this funding and arrangements.

I assure Deputy Cummins that the Department of education recognises the many benefits of the centre. All of us present in the Chamber recognise the impact it is having on young people, and we are totally in awe at the quality of education and the outcomes. I am constantly asking the Department about this as well. The Department is committed to working with all of us to ensure that the centre in the coming period is sustainable because Cork Life Centre has been of huge benefit in our city and county. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I will bring her points back to the Department and the Minister.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Minister of State. As he said, it really is a wonderful centre. The thing is, however, it is not a special school. When it is designated as a special school, that means a primary school, which it is not. These are young people. In fact, some of them are 16. They can decide their own medical issues. They can apply for a driving licence at 17. It is not a special school. I know the Department wants to designate it as a special school, but it is not one. Therefore, a category has to be made for this type of school.

The iScoil is designated as a primary school as well. There is a review of the blended learning centres for iScoil that has not been published yet. I imagine it will say that it is absolutely excellent. I say that as somebody who ran an iScoil in a blended learning centre. The challenge is that if we are trying to fit education provision centres into something they are not, that is where we will reach difficulties. A primary school does not do the leaving certificate and junior certificate, so how do we do that? These young people will be doing Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, levels 3, 4 and 5. They will be doing the leaving certificate applied. Therefore, it is not a special school. A different category has to be created.

What is quite difficult for me to understand, though, is that if the Department has been engaging - I believe it has, I am not questioning that part - why it has taken three years to discuss this when it has been going since the 1970s. That special category to recognise centres like the Cork Life Centre has to be put into the Education Act. It is just taking too long for the Department to come up with the answer for that. In the meantime, we have staff who are so absolutely dedicated but kind of flabbergasted as to why it is taking so long and why they have to prove so much that the work they are doing is saving people's lives. It is bringing people back into education when the education system has failed them. The young people did not disengage from the education system. The mainstream education system neglected them and labelled them as "others" and they were let down by that system. The young people were failed. It is not that the young people disengaged or failed. It is that the system failed them. The Cork Life Centre is there, however. It will be able to bring them back to a way of learning that appreciates them for who they are and builds back their self-esteem and their love of learning, which, ultimately, is a thing that we want to see for every young person.

I am way over time so I better stop talking.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It is important to recognise that the Department has been engaging. There was a piece going back to 2024 relating to primary school designation. Ultimately, what we all want to see is that the life centre in Sunday's Well is supported and that we keep students who would not be in mainstream education in education. The inspectorate carried out a bespoke evaluation model last year. As the Deputy can imagine, the evaluation was positive. Some of the findings include that staff were observed as being considerably kind, supportive and caring towards all young people. Young people themselves reported that the education in Cork Life Centre was a positive experience for them, and parents reported that the centre and staff made a very positive contribution to children's lives and the lives of their families.

The key point for all of us here, and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach is very familiar with this, is that the recent evaluation reported that the lessons in the life centre were meaningful and engaging and that a good questioning approach was used that enabled young people to be able to, if you like, use subject-specific terminology and express their understanding. As we know, that is very important in the education process. What is very important from the evaluation

and for those of us who go in there and have met with the staff and students is that they are very effective and proactive in supporting young people to recognise the positive contribution education can make and have on their future development.

We will continue to engage with Cork Life Centre. I reassure the Deputy that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, recognises the many benefits Cork Life Centre is having on children and young people who attend it. The Department is keen to work with Cork Life Centre in the coming period to examine its future sustainability. For a variety of reasons, we must recognise that students do not stay in mainstream education. It is not leaving cert plus, as the Deputy knows; it is a combination of everything. The approach being taken here is one that has worked. I certainly hope we can collaboratively work together to ensure its continuing success.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): I thank the Minister of State. Cork Life Centre will be having its annual awards on Thursday, 21 May. We are all looking forward to that as well.

Social Welfare Payments

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This matter relates to the telephone support allowance. It is one of those things that is an essential part of the income for a lot of people. The organisation ALONE has highlighted not just the value of this allowance but also the fact that it has not been keeping pace anywhere close to inflation. It was not increased in the most recent budget. I understand that the primary objective is to allow the most vulnerable people at risk of isolation, including the elderly and those with disabilities, access to personal alarms or phones for security and, absolutely, that is essential. However, there is more and more of an emphasis now on availability and access to data and mobile phones. It strikes me that the allowance is deficient in two ways. One is that it is not enough; it was not increased. We have just spent a couple of hours in here and nobody would dispute the fact that the cost of everything is going up, but also the fact that it is not modern or fit for purpose.

I am, therefore, echoing the calls that have been made by ALONE about the clear necessity to expand the payment. It said this in its pre-budget submissions. It looked for an increase of €7.50, which is a fairly modest and balanced ask, to be fair. This is mostly for vulnerable groups, specifically, but the largest cohort who use it are older people. The Minister of State will know that when people cannot pay their bills, they cannot do a side hustle, as the Americans call it. They are on a fixed income and that is it. Their pension from the State, small as it is, has to stretch to meet all their outgoings. More and more, we see that communication of all forms is shifting online. I was struggling when I was coming in to think of people I know who still have a landline. They are moving rapidly towards obsolescence. I do not lay the blame for that at the Minister of State's door.

People are voting with their feet. They are not getting landlines anymore. It is quite unusual outside of an office environment to even get a landline number.

In a reply to a parliamentary question, the Minister for Social Protection stated that he "will continue, as part of the budget planning process, to consider if improvements can be made to ensure that this benefit continues to target vulnerable cohorts. Any future decisions will, of

course, have to take account of the availability of financial resources." Shortly after he gave that answer, it turned out that there were slightly more resources available than perhaps had been obvious. The cost of the increase to €7.50 is €67 million. It is a modest amount. It is a small and simple ask. Broadband is expensive. Mobile data plans are expensive and connectivity has never been more important. There was the report on loneliness, particularly in rural Ireland. Often it is a lack of connectivity that people will tell you they are experiencing.

I seek an update on whether improvements can be made. I think they can. I outlined improvements that could be made. I also ask the Minister of State to give an indication of what the Government's thinking is on this allowance because it is rapidly becoming obsolete. As he will be aware, it is only €2.50 per week.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. He is correct that it is an important matter because more and more people are depending on connectivity by mobile phone. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Calleary, who sends his apologies.

The telephone support allowance is €2.50 a week for people who are getting both the living alone increase and the fuel allowance, and one of a number of payments that I will not go through because the Deputy knows all the payments associated with it.

The primary objective of the telephone support allowance is to allow the most vulnerable people at risk of isolation, including the elderly and those with disabilities, access to personal alarms or phones for security. As the Deputy will be aware, we are moving with the personal alarms as well. I am due to meet ALONE in a couple of weeks in that regard. The allowance is a cash payment automatically paid with a person's main weekly social welfare payment and it can, of course, be used towards broadband or mobile data charges. Cumulatively, the allowance is paid to over 164,000 customers weekly, at a cost of €21.6 million.

The Deputy stated that it would cost €67 million-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: To increase it to €7.50.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: -----to increase it to €7.50. I will certainly feed that back to the Minister as part of the Government's deliberations on next year's budget.

The Government is committed to supporting older persons and persons with disability. Given the many competing demands for the limited funding available in the Department of Social Protection, there was no increase in the telephone support allowance in budget 2026. Other supports provided by the Department, however, were increased in that budget, including the €10 increase in the weekly rate in social welfare payments and the €5 increase in the fuel allowance. It is important also to recognise that in that fuel allowance piece, we are providing an additional €140 during the annual fuel allowance season. This will provide support of €1,064 to a household during a 28-week fuel season. In response to the increase in energy prices due to the war in the Middle East, the fuel allowance season was extended by a further four weeks to the end of April, which provided an additional €152 to recipients.

To receive the telephone support allowance, a customer must be in receipt of a qualifying payment and also in receipt of both the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance. This means that those in receipt of the allowance already receive considerable support from the

Department. However, there is, to be fair to the Deputy, merit in the consideration of this because I believe that more and more people are looking to us in terms of mobile phone connectivity.

The household benefits package is available to those in receipt of the telephone support allowance. This comprises of an electricity or gas allowance and a free television licence, which is worth approximately €580 a year. Furthermore, the Department of Social Protection provides for a means-tested additional needs payment as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which helps people meet essential expenses that they cannot pay from their weekly income. These payments are available through community welfare officers.

Increasing the rate of household-based schemes, such as the living alone increase and the fuel allowance, provides targeted support to households that are at a higher risk of poverty. Any proposal to increase the rate payable for the telephone support allowance could only be considered in the budgetary context. Telephone companies and operators have an obligation and duty as well to look at that, in terms of some of our older people, in their packages. They can tailor some of their packages to suit older people.

I will bring the Deputy's remarks back to the Minister. In fairness, we are hearing on a day-to-day basis of people needing their phones more and using them more, even to stay in touch. It is that element of fear. As I said, we are working with ALONE about changing the senior citizens alert scheme. We will have more information on that at a later date.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I do not mean this disrespectfully but when I have asked a question about the telephone allowance, it is probably not helpful for anyone listening in who might be conscious of the issue of the telephone allowance that the Minister of State listed other payments. We understand that there were modest increases in the budget. They did not keep pace with inflation. He will know, as I do, that inflation was running at 1.8% when the Government wrote its budget and it is now at 3.6%. That has doubled and that has pushed people who are dependent on social welfare even further into poverty.

The Minister of State referred to "over 164,000 customers" in his reply. It is only 164,000 customers and we are not talking about large numbers. Increasingly, private care companies are shifting online to a more visual check-in with clients. That is not something that I necessarily support. In fact, I campaigned against it when I was a trade union organiser representing home helps. Much as I do not think it is good for either workers or older people, that is the direction of travel. Increasingly, older people are finding themselves in a situation where access to mobile data is not optional; it is essential for them to live their lives. The existence of the telephone support allowance is to ensure that people remain connected, can participate and are not further isolated, but if it is not updated, it will leave a significant cohort of people out.

I welcome the fact that consideration will be given to it as part of the budgetary process and I thank the Minister of State for bringing my remarks back to the senior Minister.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: A sum of €21.6 million or 164,000 customers are not small numbers.

I thank the Deputy again for raising the matter. I agree with her that in a world that is changing hugely, we cannot let older people be left behind and left out. They are feeling isolated and vulnerable in a digital world that is changing, and we cannot ignore that. The Government will not be found wanting in that regard.

The Department provides targeted payments to help people with their household costs. I listed the fuel allowance, the living alone increase, the household benefits package and additional needs payment because it is a comprehensive suite of measures and investment by Government.

While these supports can, of course, help older people with their cost-of-living services, providing access to these services is also a priority for Government. In this regard, it is providing very significant funding through the national broadband plan. That plan, which is the largest ever telecommunications project undertaken by the State, will radically transform our broadband landscape through the delivery of quality, affordable high-speed broadband to all parts of Ireland where such services will be delivered and available to people. There is a commitment in the programme for Government that 1.1 million people, including people living in rural and urban areas, farms and non-farms, and businesses will be connected by 2026.

I reassure the Deputy that the Department will continue to support recipients of the telephone support allowance, especially where they are vulnerable and at risk of isolation. The existing supports available in the Department along with the recent budget increases will continue to support this important group of people, but I will take the remarks the Deputy has made back to the Minister because, in a changing world, it is important that we do not leave older people behind. The world that they inhabit now is a digitally changed world and we have a duty of care to them as well.

European Union

Deputy Barry Ward: Baineann mo cheist le fostaíocht san Aontas Eorpach. Tá gá orainn níos mó a dhéanamh chun eolas a thabhairt do dhaoine, go háirithe anseo in Éirinn, faoi na poist atá ar fáil agus an bealach ar féidir iarratas a dhéanamh orthu le go n-éireoidh leo lena gcuid iarratas agus na poist sin a thógáil. Tá sé sin thar a bheith tábhachtach, go háirithe an tseachtain seo nuair atá Lá na hEorpa á cheiliúradh againn Dé hAoine. Caithfidh muid a bheith in ann a rá i rith Uachtaránacht an Aontais Eorpaigh go bhfuil muid ag déanamh iarracht Éireannaigh a chur sna poist sin ar fud na hEorpa.

The question I have this evening is about employment in European Union institutions. As this week we celebrate Europe Day commemorating the Schuman Declaration, it is an important week to think about this as we approach the Presidency coming up on 1 July as well. This week a delegation from the European affairs committee, which I chair, visited Luxembourg where there are a number of European institutions there and a number of Irish people working within those institutions. It was my pleasure to meet many of them and talk to them about the work they are doing. They range from people who are on *stages* there, people who are trainees within places like the Court of Auditors, to Tony Murphy who is currently the lead person, the president of the Court of Auditors. There are Irish people throughout those institutions contributing at the very highest level. Thank God they are there because the reality is that at the moment our influence within those institutions is waning and we need to do something about that.

One of the things I learned this week is that Ireland is not even in the top ten in terms of European countries applying for such jobs. I am talking about *per capita* rather than in sheer numbers. It contrasts sharply with countries like Italy, for example, which specifically targets jobs within European institutions by putting in place a whole college, a whole institution, whose job it is to prepare Italians to apply for jobs, to position them, to inform them, to help them make those applications and to help them be competitive when going through the process.

Although we have had some notable Irish people at the top of the European civil service like Catherine Day, who was, of course, the head civil servant within the European Commission, many of those people have retired. The people who occupy high positions will retire in the coming years. For example, six Irish people in the Court of Auditors will come to retirement in the coming years. If they retire and leave that service, we do not have the people coming behind them to fill the positions and to ensure we still have that presence within the institutions.

It can be said that these are institutions for the whole of the European Union and not for Ireland, and of course that is true, but we should be represented in them. One of the ways we can do that is by focusing our resources to educate people throughout the country on what is available. It is not just that, but we need to encourage them to apply for jobs, to inform them about what the pay and conditions are. It is not just about the pay, there are also favourable tax incentives for them, childcare facilities, healthcare facilities and relocation grants. Lots of things go with these jobs. More importantly, these are immensely fulfilling jobs. They do important work that influences the decisions that are made across our Continent. The opportunity for people in this jurisdiction to contribute at that level is huge.

In addition to giving them all that information, we also need to advise them how to apply and how to be successful in their applications so that when they put in applications, they are competitive in that. We are not even competitive yet in terms of the numbers of applications being made. If we do not have enough people applying, we will not have enough people who will be awarded those positions.

There are institutions not just in Luxembourg but across the EU, including Eurofound here in Ireland. This is the time we need to have a concerted effort to inform people in this country about the opportunities there, encourage them to apply and help them make successful applications.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an ábhar seo a chur os ár gcomhair. I agree with him that it is an opportunity present, showcase, promulgate, inform and educate people as to what is available. We should be represented in the European institutions and I fully concur with him. I apologise that the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, is not here to take this and I am taking it for him.

I welcome this opportunity to address what is genuinely a success story, one that reflects years of sustained, strategic effort by the Government to ensure that Irish citizens are well represented in the EU institutions. In May 2021, the Government launched the A Career for EU strategy to improve Irish representation in the EU. Implementation is led by the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne. The strategy has three key areas of focus: promotion of careers in the EU institutions in Ireland, in particular within the education system, to encourage more Irish applicants for EU posts; greater support and training for Irish people interested in careers in

the EU; and promoting the reform of the EU's recruitment process to ensure more Irish people get posts in the institutions.

Since its launch, outreach and awareness-raising have expanded significantly. This includes social media, with a particular focus on the careers networking platform LinkedIn, and informational webinars with professional bodies and universities. There is also attendance at second and third level careers events, reaching thousands of people in 2025. Additionally, in 2025, hundreds of Irish candidates received targeted training supports across multiple competitions, including EU-specific practice materials and interview preparation. The strategy and these efforts are starting to bear results. For example, Ireland had 43 permanent officials at the key entry grades in the European Commission in December 2025, an increase of seven on 2024 and up from 30 in 2022.

I also wish to highlight the large number of Irish applicants for the recent graduate AD5 competition, the first large-scale recruitment competition that the EU has held since 2019. Over 1,700 Irish citizens submitted applications, placing Ireland tenth out of 27 member states on a *per capita* basis. The result also shows that Ireland had the third largest increase in candidates compared with our figures in 2019. In addition, in January 2026, Dr. Lorraine Nolan took up office as executive director of the European Union Drugs Agency, the third Irish national currently heading an EU agency.

Traineeships are a proven pathway towards a rewarding career in the European Union, and recent promotional efforts have also focused on highlighting ones such as the Blue Book with the Commission. In 2025, 34 Irish people undertook the Schuman traineeship with the European Parliament, representing 3.76% of total trainees. This is almost double our expected percentage of 1.94%.

The Government has made notable progress on the placement of seconded national experts, SNEs, from the public or Civil Service in strategically important positions across the institutions. Funding for the centrally funded scheme for SNEs has risen from €2 million in 2021 to €4.2 million this year, supporting an increase from 24 SNEs to 53 over the course of 2025 and helping to give Ireland the highest number of SNEs *per capita* in the European Commission among all member states. With Ireland assuming the Presidency of the European Union from 1 July 2026, having experienced Irish officials in place across the institutions has never been more important.

In summary, the progress we have made under the A Career for EU strategy is real, measurable and the result of a consistent, whole-of-government commitment to ensuring that Irish voices, Irish values and Irish expertise are present at the heart of the European Union. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Deputy Barry Ward: I agree with the Minister of State on the effort being made. I acknowledge the work done by the Department of foreign affairs and European Movement Ireland. I also acknowledge that Noelle O'Connell has left as the head of European Movement and has been replaced by David Geary. We wish him the best of luck there. They do a particularly good job in terms of advertising jobs and making people aware. While I acknowledge that there has been success there, many of our highly qualified capable graduates are not aware of the opportunities that arise. It is not just the Commission and the Parliament. There are many institutions across the European Union where there are good quality jobs that

give people an opportunity to contribute at the highest level but also give us an opportunity as a country to put our values and our views at the top table. We need to be encouraging those people, and however good it might be now, we need to redouble our efforts.

There is an opportunity coming with the Presidency. I know from speaking to colleagues around Europe that there is a very high expectation for how Ireland will do during that Presidency. We all have faith that our officials will continue to deliver at the highest level, as they have done in the past and as they will do again in the second half of this year. However, there is an opportunity now for us to target graduates from university, people within the jobs market. I am not talking about it happening passively but we need to be doing it actively. There should be a dedicated unit within the Department of foreign affairs that has, as its remit, education, information and assistance to help people get into those positions, and doing so in a targeted way with measurables so they can show the increases in numbers of applications and the successes that might come from those applications. If we do not do this, we will allow our numbers to reduce in real terms and our influence within the Union to reduce.

It is to be hoped during our Presidency that we will pursue an enlargement agenda which will make the European Union larger. I know that Montenegro might be at the top of the list, but there are countries very close behind it as well. In the coming years, we will see enlargement. A lot of their citizens will have to fill positions. We cannot allow Ireland to fall behind into a position where our guys are not getting a seat at the table the way they should.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I again thank the Deputy. There is huge merit in what he is suggesting. The point he made on education, information and assistance is critical. He is right that we must continue to raise awareness.

We must continue to ensure that there are Irish people in good quality jobs in the European Union. The Deputy is 100% right that our influence in Europe has never been more needed in a global world where there is uncertainty. We are building new friendships and new alliances. I commend the Deputy on his role as chair of the European grouping in the Oireachtas. I wish David Geary every success in his new position and thank Noelle O'Connell for what she has done as European Movement Ireland is a critically important organisation.

The Deputy is correct that our officials are doing extraordinary work. That is why one of the three key pillars of the careers in Europe strategy is about promoting the reform of the European Union's recruitment process to ensure we have more Irish graduates and others getting posts in the institutions. We firmly believe that the structural issues require permanent solutions. We continue to lobby, alongside like-minded member states, for the adoption of selection competitions based on nationality for underrepresented countries. The Deputy's points are well made.

As a country, we have welcomed the decision by the European Parliament to hold nationally based competitions to address the chronic underrepresentation of three member states, namely, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Austria, among the staff. As the Deputy knows, the legality of this decision is being challenged in the Parliament by Spain and Italy, and it is before the Court of Justice. Ireland has intervened in the case in support of the Parliament, and the case is ongoing. A positive outcome to this legal case would set a precedent for the use of nationality-based competitions by the Commission and other institutions.

The Deputy is right about the need to continue raising awareness so that we can have good quality jobs for Irish people in the EU institutions. I commend him on bringing the matter before the House.

Prison Service

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, for coming to the House. It is rare that we get a senior Minister taking a Topical Issue, so I appreciate him coming in.

I want to address the ongoing and worsening overcrowding in Cork Prison and the very real impact it is having on prison officers and staff, who are being asked to manage conditions that are no longer sustainable. Cork Prison has an operational capacity of 296 but the daily average number of people in custody in 2024 was 335, which rose further to an average of 354 in early 2025. That means Cork Prison has been operating at 120% to 130% capacity, with between 50 and 80 people sleeping on mattresses on the floor on any given night. This level of overcrowding is not just an inconvenience. It is a serious occupational health and safety issue for all the staff who work in the prison. Overcrowded landings, people sleeping on floors, limited sightlines and cramped shared spaces significantly increase the risk of violence, assault and disorder, while also making routine duties more dangerous and stressful for staff. Prison officers in Cork are being asked to maintain order, safety and discipline in conditions that fall well short of what would be regarded as acceptable in any other public service workplace. Staff cannot be expected to carry this burden indefinitely.

While I acknowledge national plans to add capacity around the country, Cork has for many years been under sustained pressure but without a permanent solution. Short-term measures and marginal increases in bed numbers do not address the fundamental problem, which is that the physical size and layout of the prison is no longer fit for purpose given current committal levels. That is why I call on the Minister to commit to a substantial extension of Cork Prison, delivering additional modern accommodation that reduces pressures, improves staff safety and allows the prison to operate within safe limits on a consistent basis.

I refer to it as an extension because many of our opponents in the Opposition would contend that we are trying to land a second prison on top of people. As usual, they are trying to play politics with this issue. An extension is warranted and that is what it is; an extension.

Any extension to the prison needs to bring a clear community dividend or community benefit. I ask the Minister to speak to whatever public consultation can be done, whether by the Minister, the Department of justice, the Prison Service or the OPW, to consult with the public as to what community dividend we can have for the local community. Whether that public consultation would yield an amenity space, a community building or otherwise, it would be important to factor it in.

This is not just about being hard on crime. It is about running a prison safely, professionally and efficiently while respecting the people who work there and protecting the wider public by ensuring the system is stable and controlled. Cork Prison cannot continue to operate over capacity year after year. That is why I am asking that Cork be prioritised for a major capital extension with a clear timeline, clear staffing protections and a commitment that any development delivers tangible benefits both for prison officers and the wider Cork community.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for putting down this very important issue. I accept that overcrowding is having an impact on the provision of services within the prison estate, and is having an impact on both prisoners and staff.

A lot of outstanding work is ongoing within our prisons that probably does not get enough recognition. This morning, I spent two hours at Mountjoy and Dóchas. Three weeks ago, I visited Castlerea Prison for a full afternoon. In fact, I have visited every prison in the country with the exception of the Midlands Prison and Arbour Hill Prison, and I will be visiting them shortly. I take this opportunity to commend the Irish Prison Service and the staff on the outstanding work they do daily. This morning, I had an opportunity to look at the education services provided within Mountjoy and Dóchas. It really is an excellent service, notwithstanding the pressures that overcrowding creates.

I am pursuing a dual approach to address the issue of prison overcrowding by increasing prison capacity and pursuing further measures to support the increased use of non-custodial sanctions. I have secured a record capital investment of €528 million for the Irish Prison Service over the next five years, of which €495 million will be invested to deliver one of the most significant capital programmes in the justice sector, with an overall target of delivering over 1,500 spaces by 2031.

The building programme, which is committed to 2031, will, as the Deputy has requested, include a large extension to the existing Cork Prison on the site of the old, decommissioned prison. It is important to state that this is not a new prison; it will be an extension to the current Cork Prison. I had the opportunity, with Deputy O'Sullivan, to visit Cork Prison last year. I was very impressed with the commitment and professionalism of the Prison Service and the prison staff there. I am conscious that we need this extension.

There will also be a new block in Wheatfield and an additional block extension at Midlands Prison. This is in addition to spaces at Castlerea, Mountjoy and the Dóchas Centre, where an extension to Rowan House is expected to accommodate 50 women prisoners. I visited Dóchas today and saw another extension that had been put in by using office space. It is a fantastic extension and shows the work that has been done in the past year.

The proposed project for the extension to the existing Cork Prison is still at an early planning stage but preparation works will start early next year. The extension on the old, decommissioned Cork Prison site will be a large extension of the function of the existing prison and will provide prison spaces for approximately 100 women and 230 men. This will improve efficiency. As the Deputy will be aware, the former Cork Prison ceased to operate as an operational prison in February 2016 but the site provides an opportunity for the Prison Service to extend.

As the project progresses, there will, of course, be community engagement as part of the planning process. I hope that consideration will also be given to community benefit as part of the project as matters progress. With regard to Cork Prison, I should also mention the excellent educational work that is provided by the Dillon's Cross Project, which celebrates its 30th anniversary. The project provides vital educational and social support to the partners and families of prisoners. That is an example of the excellent work that is done for community benefit arising from the prison.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We are all aware that this prison extension is going to happen but I welcome the confirmation from the Minister. It is unfortunate that the plan for it to be delivered extends to 2031, which is the best part of five years away. While I understand that these things take time, I hope that if everybody puts their shoulder to the wheel, that could be shortened.

I welcome the fact the proposal is to go forward for planning. When it comes to the design level, we will do what we can to work with the communities that live nearby in terms of designing a prison that can fit in well with the community that is already there.

My real motivation for raising this is to hammer home the community benefit side of things. It is imperative that fair consideration is given. I know the Minister is not an architect or an engineer, that he will not be designing the prison, and that it will be done by professionals in the Prison Service or hired by the Prison Service but I need to hammer home that the community needs to see a dividend out of that. I would hope the Minister's words here will be passed on to the people who will be designing the scheme when it is put forward. It is about something substantial for the community. On the northside of the city, there is a clear lack of community buildings, amenities and so on. I am hoping that due consideration will be given. I hope that will be passed on to the governor of the prison and the people who will be tasked with designing the prison.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am hoping, and it is intended, that we will start preparation works early next year in respect of the extension to Cork Prison. I am hoping and expecting that it will be completed in advance of 2031 and that it will be finished in the latter part of this decade. It is also important to point out that we have a good record in the Irish Prison Service in delivering extensions or new blocks on prison property very quickly. As I said to the Deputy, I was in Castlerea three weeks ago. Works started on a project there - the Grove - on 1 May 2025 and it is finished now. I turned the sod there three weeks ago for a further extension. The Prison Service is renowned within the sector as being very efficient at getting works completed very promptly. A further example of that is the works I saw this morning in the Dóchas Centre. I also have to point out, however, that I did manage to secure an exemption from the Minister for public expenditure for six projects totalling 960 prison spaces and to move them straight to approval gate 2 pre-tender approval of the infrastructure guidelines, a measure which is expected to speed up delivery of these projects by 12 to 18 months. It also frees up capacity within the Irish Prison Service to progress projects.

The proposed extension on Cork Prison is to deliver new prison spaces for men and women. We will try to get that expedited as quickly as possible. I hear what the Deputy has said in terms of a community gain. Obviously there are restrictions in terms of a prison. It is not as though it is a housing estate where you can just put a unit in there but I will think creatively, and I am sure the Irish Prison Service will too, in terms of what can be done for the community. The educational services provided by the Prison Service for families outside of prison is one example of that.

Animal Welfare

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank and acknowledge the Minister for being here today. I have often spoken in this House about animal welfare, particularly puppy farms and the regulation of dog breeding. One of the things that we can agree on in this House is that Ireland is a nation of dog lovers. If the Minister goes down any street, he will find someone out walking their much-loved dog. They form a huge part of our homes and our families. Unfortunately, there are far too many people in this country who are not dog lovers, and, in fact, see dogs and puppies as a commercial opportunity. They will breed as many puppies as they possibly can to try to make unbelievable amounts of money in some instances. I was just looking on one of the websites that showed the most gorgeous pups. Some of them are going for approximately €2,500. Unfortunately, there are some people who will take whatever opportunity they can to make as much money out of pups and puppy farming. Therefore, that is where the Government comes in to regulate these operations. Unfortunately, the current legislation is not sufficient to regulate them properly or to put enough safeguards in place. What we have are instances where hundreds of breeding females could be on site with no statutory limits on the number of staff required to look after them. The conditions they are in are often absolutely horrific. That is a side of puppies that people do not see when they buy them. They do not see where that puppy came from and started its life and the awful conditions that the puppy may have potentially been born into.

I also tend to spend a lot of time looking on rescue Facebook and Instagram pages. These organisations do incredible work in filling in those gaps and ensuring that, where they can, they absolutely assist any puppies or any families looking for dogs who cannot be homed through normal means, or, when they are homed cannot live in a family home and have to be rehomed because the family cannot look after them. One of the things that I found very interesting when I was researching my Bill on this previously was when I spoke to behaviouralists and vets. When a dog with behavioural issues comes in to them, they can identify exactly which puppy farm that animal has come from because it is either genetic issues or issues with the environment. The environment that they were born into actually causes behavioural issues that stay with that pup, sometimes for their lifetime.

I brought this Bill forward in December 2025. I agreed and was very happy to agree to work with the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, on it. We have a timed amendment on it. A commitment was made that we would work closely on the Bill to see if we could actually come up with something through consultation and engagement, something that will help protect and regulate puppy farms in order that we have much greater confidence in them. I want to see a cap on the number of dogs that can be on site and the conditions in which they are held. Could the Minister give me an update on any progress on that? I have had one meeting with the Minister of State but unfortunately there was no progress at that point. Could he provide me with an update with the progress that has been made, perhaps in relation to the stakeholder group, the public consultation and where he sees this legislation going forward?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this important matter. I thank her for facilitating it being moved to today so that I could take it myself, which I wanted to do. I also thank the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, for having taken the Bill in my absence the last time it was discussed. Animal welfare in general comes under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but, as the Deputy will be aware, it was a key commitment in the programme for Government to have a joined-up

approach to dog control issues, something I fought for and advocated for during the negotiations on the programme for Government. This was to ensure that we would have that joined-up approach to dog control issues, legislative and policy responsibility for the Control of Dogs Act and the Dog Breeding Establishments Act and have that transferred from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to my Department. That happened on 1 June 2025 and 1 August 2025, respectively.

Regarding dog welfare, the dog control stakeholder group was established in 2024 with a remit to consider policy and legislative matters, specifically the dog control Acts and the Dog Breeding Establishments Act and consider any need for legislative change. Three sub-groups of a stakeholder group were established to focus on specific areas relating to dog control and welfare. I expect a report to be submitted to me from that group very shortly. In the interim, I have been working on reviewing all of the legislative enforcement and engagement issues relating to the control of dogs. I intend to bring forward specific legislation in relation to dog breeding establishments very shortly, which will then go through the full rigours of the legislative process here, as committed to.

The Dog Breeding Establishments Act, as it exists, provides a robust regulatory framework for the licensing, monitoring and inspection of dog breeding establishments by local authorities, where a serious and immediate threat exists to public health or animal health and welfare for the closure of such establishments. Dog breeding establishments guidelines were establishment under section 15(4) of the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 following a public consultation process in 2018. It came into effect on 1 January 2019. These guidelines aim to provide for welfare of dogs and pups, provide clarity on socialisation of pups, and accurate record-keeping. It stipulates staff to animal ratios and allows for unannounced inspections by local veterinary services and beyond. The guidelines are published and are available on my Department's website. It is important to note that dog breeding establishments must comply with the relevant health and safety legislation. Dog breeding establishments must also comply with relevant animal welfare legislation such as the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013.

7 o'clock

Under the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 local authorities are required to maintain and publish lists of dog breeding establishments and my Department collates this information to form a national dog breeding establishment register.

However, as the Deputy outlined today and previously, the practices that are happening at present in this space are unsatisfactory. I share the Deputy's determination to bring about a change here. It was why in the negotiations for the programme for Government I wanted whoever was Minister in this position now to have the ability to bring those together and I am delighted I have the opportunity to do that and to work with colleagues in the House, including Deputy Whitmore.

I was a member of the joint Oireachtas committee on agriculture from 2011 to 2016 when the then Minister, Simon Coveney, brought in a consolidated animal welfare Act. However, we always have to strive to do better and keep a very close eye on what the practices of the day are. Deputy Whitmore has outlined some really concerning practices that are of grave concern to me.

The stakeholder group has done a huge body of work. I hope we can get its report very soon because I do not want to act in advance of that but I am really keen to move here. I agreed to the timed amendment to Deputy Whitmore's Bill on the basis that there were a few elements of it I wanted to work through on my side but I believe we are both trying to achieve the same thing. There are some constraints I would be happy to discuss with the Deputy in the House and on Committee Stage as well as we work through what is possible legislatively and legally and what is not. I have a clear determination in this space. I hope to bring forward legislation very soon this year and to be able to work through that legislative process on reform.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister. I appreciate his answer and clearly this is something he wants to drive strongly forward, so I look forward to working with him on it. It is a really important piece of work and I have always wondered why there was never any previous moves to strengthen it. It is good to hear the Minister is taking that seriously and I look forward to hopefully seeing the results and report from the stakeholder group because it is important it is taken into account in the legislation. We will wait for that process to follow.

I want to use my last minute to raise another animal welfare issue that I am finding quite disturbing at the moment. That is the number of instances of sulky racing and the impact on the horses involved in that activity. I have been sent and have seen some absolutely horrific videos of horses. One was on the N7 recently where there were five or six cars directly behind two horses that were being forced to race and the cars were flashing their lights and sounding their horns. Those horses must have been absolutely terrified to be chased in that manner on a motorway.

For the life of me, I cannot understand it. This is not the first instance; it quite frequent. There was the instance of that poor pregnant horse, Anne, that died recently following a sulky race. I just do not understand why there has not been a tightening up on these races. They have been prohibited since 1993 but we see them so often. There are certain animal welfare issues we have to stop completely. We cannot have instances where horses are being treated so inhumanely on our streets in broad daylight. There does not seem to be any stopping it. Can the Minister give me some update on what his Department is doing and what consultation he has had with An Garda Síochána on this issue?

Deputy Martin Heydon: In trying to prepare for this debate, I was not sure which element of horse welfare and dog welfare the Deputy would raise. I will amend what I will say on the basis of the targeted nature of her question. We have done a lot in the area of equine control and supporting equine charities and animal welfare charities in general in terms of the work I do in my Department as well as on supporting the different elements. We have a number of urban horse projects and so on and they are really positive. From 2015 to date, we have spent about €2.1 million on urban horse projects, and €170,000 was allocated for these projects in 2026. My Department would welcome submissions from local authorities on other projects.

The Deputy specifically mentioned sulky racing, which I have huge concern about. It is important to say that responsibility for animal welfare rests with the owner of the animal and the person whose care the animal is in. Sulky racing on roads comes under the Department of Transport and, as the Deputy said, the Garda Síochána as well. My Department does work in the area of enforcement. We have the legislation around harness racing on roads. We have to be able to identify the organiser and that is difficult to do in many instances. It is the organiser

who is liable in that regard. I am having engagement with my colleague, the Minister for Transport, while also looking at it from the justice side as well because I am deeply uncomfortable with the images we have seen on our motorways, which are completely unacceptable. It is lawlessness. It is not appropriate behaviour. From an animal welfare perspective, it is absolutely terrible. It is also a road safety issue on many fronts. It is something that is not acceptable to me and something I hope, through working with colleagues in government, we can have further action on.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.06 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 12 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.06 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 12 May 2026.