



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 12 Bealtaine 2026

Tuesday, 12 May 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today, front-line emergency workers are on strike. Paramedics, advanced paramedics, specialist paramedics, emergency medical technicians, EMTs, and supervisors are all on strike. People who save lives are on the picket line. They stand there as a result of the Government's refusal to resolve long-standing issues relating to pay and conditions and staffing. Ambulance workers do not want to be on strike; they want to be at work helping people and saving lives. The Government, however, forces them to fight for respect, recognition and fair pay. It is to their credit that they will continue to respond to life-threatening situations during this stoppage.

This strike could have been avoided, but the Government has let the situation fester for six years. Back in 2020, an independent report recommended the modernisation of ambulance services. This was to be driven by the upskilling of front-line staff and the delivery of pay that recognised their enhanced roles. Ambulance workers kept their side of the deal. They have taken on advanced training, education and additional responsibilities. They have transformed this service from a transport service to full pre-hospital emergency care.

The Government broke its side of the deal, however. For years now, it has refused to deliver the fair pay ambulance workers deserve. It has left the ambulance system stretched to breaking point. Six years ago, the Government was told that more than 2,500 additional ambulance workers would be needed by this year. Only 500 have been recruited since. Overworked paramedics are under extreme pressure as a result and are struggling to plug the gap caused by acute staff shortages, and patients pay the price. People are left waiting far too long for ambulances. The situation is particularly bad in rural areas, where it can be hundreds of miles to the nearest hospital. People have died after delays in an ambulance getting to them. The Taoiseach is aware of this. I previously raised with him the harrowing death of Stephen Lavelle in Mayo, and there have been others.

I spoke to one paramedic yesterday who told me that the workers have children to feed, bills to pay, rent, mortgages and kids in college in respect of whom they have to pay big fees. She

said that a strike was the last thing they wanted but that they had no other option. She also said that the matter could be sorted out at the stroke of a pen if the Minister just looked at the work they do and ensured they are paid fairly. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, refuses to intervene, however. Yesterday, at a meeting in Clare, she shocked people when she referred to paramedics and EMTs as ambulance drivers.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Excuse me?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is the problem in a nutshell. The Government is blind to the expertise and skill of those who save lives every day. It asks ambulance workers to upskill and then refuses to pay for the upskilling properly.

Is iad Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael atá freagrach do staid na seirbhíse otharchairr inniu. Is teip ghlan é nár chuir siad pá cóir ar fáil d'oibrithe. D'fhág siad iad gan aon rogha. Ní féidir leanúint mar sin. Caithfidh an Rialtas idirghabháil a dhéanamh chun teacht ar réiteach láithreach.

The Government's inaction and refusal to listen has effectively left people without an ambulance service today. What is the Taoiseach going to do about it? So far, he has stood back and acted as a commentator but he is not a commentator; he is the Taoiseach. The striking ambulance workers are right to demand fair pay, proper conditions and safe staffing. When will the Government deliver?

The Taoiseach: I must say that is a very dishonest portrayal and presentation of the situation. In her heart of hearts, Deputy McDonald must know that. It is very dishonest and a distortion of what has actually happened. Surely she realises that the HSE has been engaged with the trade unions on this issue for quite some time. By the way, for well over two decades now, the State has invested very significantly in the modernisation and transformation of our National Ambulance Service, pre-emergency hospital care and the first responder area. That has been a continuing reality for well over two decades. To be fair to all involved, including those working on the front line, they have participated in that transformation. They sought it. In the early part of the 2000s, I was involved in establishing the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council.

With regard to this current dispute, the State has always accepted that pay structures need to be modernised. Previous engagements at the WRC actually concluded in very significant outcomes. In particular, the State offered pay increases of between 3% and 14%, depending on the grade and so on, linked to reform. That was on top of the 9.25% increase under the current public service pay agreement. Union leadership recommended this proposal to their members. How then can the Deputy say that we refused to resolve the issue, forced them to fight and let this fester for six years?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Because you have.

The Taoiseach: Negotiations happened-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sorry a Cheann Comhairle but the question was put to me.

The Taoiseach: Negotiations happened and there was an agreed outcome. The two unions recommended the agreement to their members. The members were entitled to vote against it. I accept that point but the Deputy's portrayal of this is clearly dishonest when set against the facts. This is not something we should play politics with. People need the services of first responders. The HSE, the Government and I are all saying that the only way to resolve this is through dialogue and exhausting the well-established industrial relations machinery of the State, whether the WRC or the Labour Court. It is very clear that the HSE remains available to meet and engage with the unions. There will have to be discussions on this.

The investment has been significant. Overall funding has increased 41%, to €285 million, between 2022 and 2025. A 41% increase is significant. Staffing is up 28%, bringing total numbers to 2,655. About €126 million has been invested in the ambulance fleet. A further investment of €20 million is planned for 2026, with additional recruitment expected to bring the total workforce up by a further 263. There are also plans to deliver 21 extra crewed ambulances operating at peak demand, four additional intermediate care vehicles and the continued development of clinical hubs and alternative care pathways.

With regard to reforms, strengthening workforce availability and supporting new models of care, including the expanded use of special paramedics in community and urgent care settings, formed part of what was negotiated. Workforce availability measures related to night-time and weekend services and so on. Critical care retrieval and air ambulance services were also to be expanded. This is all part of what was negotiated with the unions, as was wider geographic and 24-7 coverage. Modern clinical roles were also to be recognised and grading and pay structures were to be updated to reflect the evolution of paramedic and specialist paramedic roles into autonomous, degree-qualified and professionally regulated positions. That was all negotiated by Government in good faith.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If everything is so hunky-dory, why are they on strike? Is the Taoiseach trying to suggest that the ambulance workers are wrong? Is he trying to suggest they are imagining the circumstances they are in? Here is the core dishonesty in the Taoiseach's reply. This situation has dragged on for six years and the Government has demonstrated an absence of good faith and respect.

It asked the paramedics to step up. It asked them to upskill, to retrain and to take on greater responsibilities. They have done all of that. They were happy to do it, because they want to provide the most excellent service they can. For its part, the Government promised recognition, staffing and fair pay and it has not fulfilled that. The Government has left them understaffed, overworked and underpaid. That is why they are on the picket line today. The Minister said the quiet bit out loud. Ambulance drivers is how she described skilled professionals and paramedics.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has on three occasions taken a confrontational approach to workers----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----namely with the SNAs, the agricultural contractors and farmers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, your time is up. You are out of order.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is now taking the same approach with the ambulance workers. When will it act in good faith with these people?

An Ceann Comhairle: Prepare in time, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy again ignored the core reality that the HSE negotiated this with the unions. The unions recommended what was negotiated to the membership.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: And the workers rejected it.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has ignored that reality.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And what?

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the answer.

The Taoiseach: That is not festering. That is not delaying. That is not letting things drift. There was substantive agreement which would modernise it even further and draw in a lot more resources and investment, and there is an increase of between 3% and 14% on top of the 9.5% increase. That is substantial by any yardstick in terms of public service pay and increases. However, the Deputy ignores all of that. As far as she is concerned-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Never mind me, what about the workers?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should agree with me in saying that they should get back into talks. It is the only way to do this. There have to be discussions and dialogue.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: With no preconditions.

The Taoiseach: It is the only way we can resolve any disputes-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Who is going to negotiate if you are going to break promises?

The Taoiseach: -----in the public service or in the private sector for that matter. We have good industrial relations machinery, and it should be used properly.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not working.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is evidence that it is broken.

The Taoiseach: I believe it can be-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Bacik.

The Tánaiste: -----and it can pave a pathway to resolve this dispute.

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up, Taoiseach.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We are increasingly seeing the consequences of this Government's failure to support working people. Today, National Ambulance Service workers are on picket lines across the country. Our ambulance drivers and paramedics, who do such heroic front-line work, have been driven to strike over pay and conditions. Like so many, they are struggling to make ends meet on their current pay rates. As a result, the ambulance service cannot recruit or retain the staff it needs. Crews are being asked to provide increasingly complex care, under relentless pressure. This is unfair and, above all, unsafe.

Those involved have my solidarity and that of the Labour Party colleagues today. It is not just ambulance staff. Across communities, people are grappling to get by, instead of being able to get on because of the Government's policies. Just like in the eighties, a generation of young people is again facing a choice between adulthood in their childhood bedrooms or a new life overseas. Unlike the eighties, there is no shortage of jobs here. Instead, runaway costs and a poverty of Government ambition on housing and public services are driving them away. Tá siad ag dul thar lear ag lorg oibre. Tá siad ag dul ar imirce. Níl rogha acu ach imeacht thar saíle. That is having devastating effects. Last week in Glasnevin, I met a woman in tears who told me, in her words, that she was about to lose her second child to emigration. Her children, like so many others, are leaving Ireland because they see no future for themselves here and have no prospect of owning or having a home of their own. A former constituent who is now living in Perth told me that from his graduating medicine class of 350, 100 have joined him in Australia. That is an extraordinary figure. More extraordinarily, 60 of his classmates are working in the same hospital with him. He said the move has been made easier, although it is far away, because there are so many Irish people his own age there with him. He said that life is just so much easier there.

The fighting talk from the Minister, Deputy Chambers, this week is an admission that the Government is not spending wisely. We know, and Labour has said, that before the election, money was no object. The Government was rolling out gimmicks to buy people's votes with their own money. Now, however, when communities need supports, it has deserted them while continuing to favour the burger barons and the big builders. When the Government's hare-brained VAT cut comes in on 1 July, working families will still be worse off. Who will not be worse off? McDonald's franchisees across the country stand to be €20 million better off. Supermac's, with revenues of nearly €300 million, will save €12 million due to the VAT cut. There is no evidence that this will be passed on to consumers.

The message the Government is sending to ordinary people is that they are on their own and the Government has made its choice. However, there is another choice. Last week, Labour

put forward a mini-budget that would offer a substantial package for PAYE workers and struggling families. We are asking the Taoiseach if, tomorrow night when it comes to the vote on our mini-budget, he will support it. Will he support the targeted measures that will actually help households in this cost-of-living crisis?

The Taoiseach: Regarding the National Ambulance Service and the dispute, I already outlined how the Government entered into good faith negotiations and agreed a very comprehensive outcome. The unions recommended that outcome to their members. It was defeated by the members. No one can charge the Government with acting in bad faith in respect of this. We acted in good faith and will continue to act in good faith, and the HSE is as well. There is a way to resolve it, which has to be through the industrial relations machinery of the State. I would urge all involved to engage in dialogue to resolve this.

Deputy Bacik referred to the 1980s. For God's sake, there was 17.5% unemployment in the 1980s. It was shocking. Do not compare the 1980s to now. It does not-----

Deputy Ged Nash: There are jobs now.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I made-----

The Taoiseach: I lived through it. There is no comparison. It was depression after depression-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach did not just live through it. He-----

The Taoiseach: -----because of decisions that were made at the time. There is no comparison to the current day. We need to have a sense of perspective in how we debate things. Yet, young people do leave the country for different reasons. The housing issue is similar all over the world. It is far more difficult to buy a house in Canada or Australia, for example, than in Ireland.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: It is. I have talked to young people who have been to Australia and Canada. In 2025, about 31,000 Irish came back into the country and 35,000 went out. Our population has grown exponentially over the last two to three decades. The Deputy must know that. Employment went up by 8.5% between 2020 and 2025. It went up 52% between 1995 and 2025. Therein lies the challenge to public expenditure and services. I would acknowledge that. The overall size of the economy is growing significantly. Our GDP, GNI*, whichever way you want to measure it, has grown substantially over the last decade. The population has grown with it and, therefore, the challenge to meet public services is also growing with that in terms of education, health, policing, and so on. That brings its own challenges. We then add onto that four to five major global seismic shocks, from Brexit to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, tariffs from America and the war in the Middle East. Yet, the Irish economy is staying resilient. Employment is staying very resilient in terms of the number of people who are employed in our economy - over 2.8 million, which is a record in the history of the State.

I accept that there are challenges and many issues, the most important one being housing in terms of enabling young people to buy houses that they can afford and rent, and that we can provide social housing for those who cannot do that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I always acknowledge the global shocks and global context in which the Government has to make responses. I acknowledged that it was a different context to the 1980s, but the similarity is that we are losing many of our young people, who have come through medical school here and see a better life and future for themselves in Australia, for example. Here at home, it is the Government's response that has caused and exacerbated the cost-of-living crisis. Notwithstanding the global shocks, there are choices that the Government made and could still make. That is why we put forward the mini-budget last week, namely, to put forward to the Government an alternative set of choices and a set of targeted supports, not VAT cuts that benefited large businesses, but targeted supports for working families and PAYE workers who felt left behind. The Taoiseach is out canvassing, as I am, across Galway West and Dublin Central. He is hearing it, too. People are feeling this in their pockets and their families and young people are leaving the country.

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Tá an Rialtas ag déanamh gach aon dícheall cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine agus do theaghlaigh atá faoi bhrú. Níl aon amhras faoi sin. Bhí pacáiste mór againn le déanaí de luach €750 milliún. Sin a bhí i gceist againn chun an brú sin a ísliú. We have not exacerbated the global situation.

This is a ridiculous assertion. How is allocating €750 million to the haulage industry, to farmers, to contractors, and-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: To PAYE workers?

The Taoiseach: -----to PAYE workers, yes, in terms of the reduction in diesel and petrol, which is universal across the board, exacerbating a global crisis? There are challenges and pressures on families and certainly the global situation is overwhelmingly responsible for that. Everybody knows that. There is a war in the Middle East that is resulting in a 20% contraction-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I acknowledged that.

The Taoiseach: -----of vital supplies and that is a big problem.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Today workers in the ambulance service are on strike. This is a last resort which has been taken by front-line workers who have been left with no other option. We all know how hard paramedics and emergency medical technicians work and we all know the immense responsibility that comes with that role.

I spoke to paramedics today who came off a 12-hour shift and are now on picket lines ready to work another shift in a few hours. These are workers who go above and beyond, who do the most important work and who even volunteer after they finish work to provide that crucial emergency care. They spoke about how much they had to upskill over the years so they can

provide better and faster treatment to patients and how the evolving nature of their role has not been recognised by this or any previous Government. Instead, these workers have been ignored for years.

Not only are these essential workers badly paid but they are not adequately resourced. The service is so understaffed that personnel numbers need to be doubled by hiring 1,800 workers. Is it any wonder the service is so stretched on the ground or that this is having very serious consequences for patients?

In my constituency of Cork South-West, I have been contacted by people who had to wait four hours for an ambulance. Imagine seeing a loved one in serious medical distress and waiting for hours for an ambulance to arrive. It is horrific and is the result of years of underfunding, and it is something that people in rural Ireland have unfortunately come to expect.

This is not the fault of ambulance workers who do their very best. The blame lies squarely with a Government that expects an ambulance service to run on fumes and workers' goodwill.

It is outrageous that this Government has allowed things to deteriorate to where we are today. Ambulance workers on strike, with the service running at 46% capacity. What does the Government have to say to those people who have been fighting to resolve these issues for years? The bottom line is that staff in the ambulance service must be fairly paid and recognised for the essential and skilled work that they do.

An independent report published six years ago has set out how that can be done but instead of just implementing the report as recommended by the Labour Court, attempts have been made to introduce preconditions which would see the number of trained paramedics in a crew go from two to one and in some instances actually reduce people's pay. You could not make it up.

This is not something that workers can or should agree to. This is now beyond a crisis, and this dispute must be brought to an end. Will the Government commit to dropping those preconditions and adopting the McHugh and Crabtree report?

The Taoiseach: Again, it was successive Governments that invested and took the policy decisions to change the whole nature of the first responder sector. The Deputy just made a comment that no previous Government ever did anything about this. It is such an outrageous comment to make and there is no reality attached to it at all. However, the Deputy thinks that she come in and just say it and that is grand. How does the Deputy think it happened? How does she think the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council was established? How was the first responder system and the professionalisation of the whole area developed?

Yes, all involved were fantastic in going with it and having the ambition to do it but let us not make throwaway statements that no one cared a damn about it until now when the Deputy got up to speak. That is ridiculous. The bottom line is this: genuine negotiations went on between the HSE and the unions. The unions agreed to put the proposals and recommended the proposals, which all of the Opposition Members ignore. They seem to be saying that no matter what is sought, just agree it please. There are always negotiations in situations like this.

We want to modernise. We accept it even further. We want to invest more. There is more funding on the table for investment. There has been very significant investment. Now, there are pressures on workers in that sector. Of that there is no doubt.

Reforms are important in public expenditure as well. We can always do things better and more efficiently and effectively, but the Deputy seems to be saying for us to forget all about reform. I do not think that is a sustainable position. Neither did the unions, for that matter, and correctly so.

Fantastic work is being done on the front line. We affirm it. We want to get this resolved. There is only way to resolve it, and that is through mediation and dialogue. I am confident that it can be resolved, the issues can be netted out and we can get to a conclusion. There have been tremendous strides made, despite what the Deputy has said, in this area in my lifetime, and certainly over the past two decades, because of decisions to change policy and professionalise emergency medical technicians and the entire service. That has been very effective because it complements and supports the acute hospital service. In other words, the first responder is the key person to anyone whose life is in danger or who has been in an accident. We have professionalised the service, and that all of those involved undertook the additional academic work, qualifications and so on is to their credit. No one is disputing that. The State has accepted from day 1 that pay structures need to be modernised. That was the subject matter of a previous engagement at the WRC, which concluded with very significant outcomes. I outlined those earlier. They were significant outcomes, but they fell at the ballot. We need to get this sorted.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I said that neither this nor any previous Government had acknowledged in terms of pay and conditions how much workers in the National Ambulance Service had upskilled.

The Taoiseach: That is nonsense.

Deputy Holly Cairns: In the past 15 years, they have gone from essentially being a patient transfer service to providing nearly accident and emergency-style services in any given situation.

The Taoiseach: We know.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It has not been acknowledged-----

The Taoiseach: It has.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----that their pay should be representative of that. That is the truth. They are on picket lines because of that. I say to the Taoiseach and the Minister, who is tutting over at me, that paramedics have the same responsibility and amount of training as other medical professionals but are paid significantly less. That is fundamentally unfair. The Taoiseach and Minister must at least recognise that. The paramedics are going into a pay dispute and being told that, in order to get a pay rise, they have to accept a reduction in the

number of trained paramedics in a crew and that, due to conditions around overtime, some of their pay might be decreased. It is ridiculous. Will the Government drop the precondition around pay?

The Taoiseach: First of all, Deputy, we are not going to negotiate an industrial relations agreement paragraph by paragraph in the Chamber. It is not feasible and we are not going to do it, but what I have said from day 1 is that there should be dialogue. The HSE remains available for engagement-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: These workers have been waiting for six years.

The Taoiseach: -----with the trade unions on this matter. That is the sensible way to resolve this. Anyone involved in industrial relations over the years realises and knows that. By the way, we are long gone from the day of ministerial interventions in every single dispute that could potentially arise. That day is gone. We have a very sophisticated way of resolving disputes that involves experienced people. There must be a will on both sides to resolve it. There is a will on the Government's side to resolve it, and I am sure there is, too, on the union side, but people should enter into discussions and get into dialogue.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We are now over a month since the fuel protests and not a single cent of the Government's fuel subsidy has been paid out to farmers and contractors. This scheme was announced to great fanfare to quell the protests, but the application process only opened in recent days. Farmers and contractors still do not know how much they will qualify for because the scheme is capped. The window for applications closes on 27 May, which is during one of the busiest times for farmers, contractors and accountants when they are buried with paperwork, basic income support for sustainability scheme, BISS, applications, VAT returns, etc.

The scheme itself is deeply unfair. Applicants must produce receipts for the entire 12 months of the year. They are then paid a subsidy based on five fifths of their returns from the previous year.

Farmers do not use fuel evenly across the year. It is heavily concentrated in the spring and in the summer, at a time when silage needs to be cut, fields need to be ploughed and tilled and crops are harvested. Calculating the payment on a monthly average from the previous year is deeply wrong. It is systematically flawed and unfair on farmers.

I want to turn to the figures around the carbon tax. The statistics released to Aontú in replies to parliamentary questions tell a very different story to the narrative that the Taoiseach's Government is selling. The Government is on track to collect an additional €200 million more this year than last year. We also know that half a billion euro was collected in carbon taxes from 2020 to 2023 that was never spent on climate action measures. Essentially, half a billion euro is left over and not needed. The NORA levy is another tax that has generated half a billion euro since 2020. That account sits in surplus in the region of a quarter of a billion euro. This is a surplus of €278 million at a time when farmers are desperately crying out for help, at a time when margins in the agri-sector have never been as tight, at a time when inputs are going sky high and revenue is falling.

Is the Government misleading the House in relation to carbon taxes and the necessity that the Taoiseach outlines? If it is all so necessary, why is so much money sitting in surplus? Why is so much carbon tax remaining unspent?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Paul Lawless: My question to the Taoiseach-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's question time is up.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Does the Taoiseach accept that the fuel subsidy package is totally inadequate for farmers and contractors?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. You should prepare in time.

The Taoiseach: First of all, ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Pacáiste cuimsitheach atá ann i dtaobh na feirmeoirí agus na daoine atá ag obair san fheirmeoireacht. Suas le €100 milliúin atá i gceist le haghaidh na míonna sonracha. I do not accept the Deputy's proposition that the fuel subsidy scheme for farmers and agricultural contractors is inadequate. It is a comprehensive scheme that was worked out in discussions with representative organisations. There has to be some methodology attached to it. The Deputy has not come up with any alternative but there has to be a clear methodology designed. The Minister for agriculture has worked with the agricultural organisations and the representative organisations in respect of that and every effort will be made to support farmers and contractors in that regard. The Minister for Transport on the other hand is dealing with the haulage industry, which is also critical. It is endeavouring to base it on previous usage, which I think is reasonable, because that would give us some indication of the needs and the additionality in terms of the costs that have undoubtedly been incurred because of the war in Iran and the increase in fuel prices globally as a result of that.

The revenues from the carbon tax are used to support lower-income households, farmers, and indeed the retrofitting programme itself. Since 2020, €4.2 billion has been allocated from carbon tax revenues for all of those purposes. The ESRI analysis shows that lower-income households are net beneficiaries due to accompanying social protection measures. For example, in 2025 there was some €558 million for residential and community upgrades, including solar PV. That was a significant increase on the previous year. There was about €350 million for welfare measures this year - working family payment, child support payment, and the extension of fuel allowance eligibility - all coming from the revenue from the carbon tax. The Deputy has been a big advocate for the fuel allowance and has been saying we should increase it even more. This substantial revenue comes from the carbon tax revenue.

In agriculture, €173 million has been allocated to farmers through agri-environmental schemes, including funding for ACRES under the CAP strategic plan. Between 2020 and mid-2025 about €366 million was allocated to agri-climate supports - to farmers, basically - through a variety of schemes.

That is income to farmers. The ACRES scheme alone is about €1.6 billion and the bulk of that is from the Exchequer.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The very clear methodology we outlined over the fuel protest was to scrap carbon tax because that would have provided an immediate relief to farmers and contractors who desperately needed it. Instead we are now a month on from the fuel protest at a time when the cost of fuel is still very high. Green diesel is still extraordinarily high in terms of last year's figures and there has been no relief and many farmers have no idea when they will receive that relief. That is what the Government should have done. It should have removed the carbon tax. The Taoiseach's has made the point on many occasions that the carbon tax is necessary. The actual data says otherwise. Some €500 million is unspent in relation to carbon charges. Is it the Government's intention to increase carbon tax year after year, irrespective of the price of fuel? Is it the Government's intention to increase carbon tax again this October?

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy wants to scrap it entirely, just like that, it would be huge money. Has he costed that?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: €1.1 billion.

An Ceann Comhairle: That was a rhetorical question.

The Taoiseach: Where is the Deputy going to find it? I am asking the rhetorical question. He will ask for another billion somewhere else, and another billion somewhere else, and another billion over here. That has been Aontú's performance all year.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are not special. Do not start.

The Taoiseach: Aontú expects us to magic up money for farmers, magic up money for those on social protection and magic up money for tax cuts for working people. We have to magic all that up as well. We have to magic up money for education, magic up money for social protection and keep abolishing any tax that exists. That is Aontú's approach. It is fantasy land.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not the approach.

The Taoiseach: You are not living in the real world. We will spend all of the carbon tax revenue-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is one third of the children's hospital overrun.

The Taoiseach: -----on vital areas to do with climate, energy efficiency and retrofitting. That is the thing to do, and farmers as well, by the way.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: And BAM.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the Chief Whip, I welcome on behalf of Deputy John Clendennen the ACCS all-Ireland debating champions from Gallen Community School in Ferbane, County Offaly. I am sure you are learning a lot here. I would also like to welcome Scoil Mhuire Buncrana, who are guests of Deputy Padraig Mac Lochlainn.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Statements on International Nurses Day *(not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)*

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on the National Safety Camera Strategy *(not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)* (Dept of Transport)

- Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) *(to be taken no earlier than 4.30 p.m. and to conclude within 2 hrs)*

- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 *(to conclude within 1 hour and any division claimed to be taken immediately)*

- Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) *(to conclude within 1 hour)*

- Motion *re* Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2026 [Vote 26] *(without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)*

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Reproductive Rights (Amendment) Bill 2026, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Industrial Development (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) *(if not previously concluded, to adjourn at the end of the first speaking round)*

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders: .

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

(b) private members business shall be taken on conclusion of the Statements on International Nurses Day, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the Statements on International Nurses Day shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

3. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) in the event that the Statements on the National Safety Camera Strategy conclude before 4.30 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 4.30 p.m., when the order of business shall resume with the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025;

(b) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026; and

(c) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate, and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time;

2. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Reproductive Rights (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours;

3. the Statements on the National Safety Camera Strategy shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time;

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

4. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be taken no earlier than 4.30 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration;

5. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

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

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

— speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

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

(b) members may share time; and

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

6. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation; and

7. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2026 [Vote 26] shall be taken without debate, and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Industrial Development (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Not agreed.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We have had three Leaders' Questions in relation to the National Ambulance Service strike. Given the gravity of this industrial relations dispute, we need to have a debate in the Dáil on this matter.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Half a billion euro has been left unspent when it comes to climate action measures. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, in the middle of incredible energy shocks, where people cannot afford to pay their electricity bills. We need to have a debate on how the Government is going to spend that money. The Social Democrats

have proposed a solar-for-all scheme and a targeted energy scheme. We need to see some movement on this. Can we have a debate on the matter?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I agree with my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, that we need to have a focused debate on the National Ambulance Service. The fact that ambulance workers across this country are on strike today says it all. They do not feel valued and we need to deal with that in these Houses.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need to hear from the employers of workers in the National Ambulance Service, because that is what the Government is. We need to hear from the Minister for Health to explain why ambulance workers feel they have no choice but to go on strike because of the failure of the Government to recognise they are vital healthcare professionals.

Deputy Michael Collins: I was going to mention the short-term lets and the legislation and the looming date of 20 May, but the advanced paramedics are out on strike today. I refer to the disrespect that is being shown to them. It is a long-standing pay dispute, going on since 2020. We need an urgent debate on it today in the House.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputies for all of their comments. They have been noted. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are not agreed.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The question has been agreed. We move to-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Vótáil.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Vótáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: I had said already-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Vótáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: I had said the question was agreed.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I said "Vótáil".

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We said "Vótáil".

An Ceann Comhairle: The bells will ring for ten minutes.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Butler, Mary.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Graves, Ann.	
Clendennen, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Connolly, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Cooney, Joe.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lawless, James.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	

Martin, Micheál.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Smith, Duncan.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: For decades, the residents of Oliver Bond House have lived in some of the most appalling conditions in our city. Decades of neglect have left these families living in damp, overcrowded, rat-infested homes. In April, the Department of housing wrote to Dublin City Council refusing a funding request to deep retrofit and amalgamate 74 homes in the flat complex. The rationale was that the council's proposal would see a reduction in the

number of flats. The Department set out an alternative approach and requested that the council submit a new proposal. Today, it is revealed that the Department's proposal would result in an even greater reduction in the number of people living in these blocks, with a bed space reduction of 41% compared with the council's proposal of just 26%. In light of this significant development, will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for housing to revisit his decision? Dublin City Council's plan is the best proposal to bring these homes up to modern standards while retaining the right number, size and mix of homes for singles, couples and families.

The Taoiseach: At the outset, I welcome and congratulate three students from Mullaghbuoy National School and the green committee there. Donal McMorland, Jason Woods and Jack O'Neill were the regional winners of the award for global citizenship today in Tullamore. They are very welcome to Dáil Éireann.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, did not make that decision, but there was a communication from Department officials to Dublin City Council in respect of the matter. The Minister will engage. He is of the view that this matter can be resolved satisfactorily. Funding has not been refused. Funding has not been withdrawn. It remains in place. There has not been a refusal of regeneration for Oliver Bond House. Engagement is going to be key here. Hopefully, we can get this resolved very quickly.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: This week is national bike week. As conveners of the all-party Oireachtas cycling group, Deputy Ciarán Ahern and I were delighted to host a cross-party cycle around Leinster House today, and thanks to all the colleagues who took part. We need to see the Government step up and provide proper investment for cycling infrastructure. I ask that colleagues commit not to buy into an anti-cycling narrative. There has been a lot of talk recently about the cost of bike sheds, but we need to put that in perspective. The cost of building a single basement car parking space, for example, is between €50,000 and €70,000, and €1.2 million is being spent every year by the OPW on leasing car parking spaces for civil servants. In a climate crisis, while we of course need value for money in all our projects, investment in cycling is not a frivolous extravagance. In a climate crisis, we need to support people to make the transition to cycling in order to help reduce emissions from fossil fuels and reduce dependence on private cars. I ask the Taoiseach and those on all sides of the House to commit to supporting cycling.

The Taoiseach: I support investment in cycling. The greenways, cycleways and active travel programme have represented a transformation over the past decade in particular. It has been fantastic. People are voting with their feet in places where safe cycleways can be provided. Obviously, we need more sensible arrangements in terms of bike sheds, if I am honest. People did seek that here in Leinster House and we saw what happened afterwards. More generally, investment in cycling is a good thing. It is healthy, and it has implications for less congestion and so on, but we need to provide very safe routes. A lot of that has happened over the past number of years. We will continue our investment in active travel, cycling, pedestrian walkways and so forth.

3 o'clock

Deputy Jen Cummins: Parent across the country are desperately trying to secure appropriate school places for their children. There is still huge uncertainty around the level and scale of unmet need. Transparency is really important. The Department of Education and Youth, working with the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, should be able to give us that data. I am suggesting that it publish that on a monthly basis, like the Department of housing publishes the homeless figures. That is to show transparency. We want to work constructively with the Government and the NCSE to quell the amount of panic that is going on. If the NCSE and the Department were able to publish on a monthly basis the number of students who were yet to get an appropriate school place, we would be very clear on what that would be. The data is there. It is just not being published. It happens in the Department of housing with the homeless figures. This is a way of showing that transparency and quelling that panic that is going on.

The Taoiseach: I think what we need is all of our officials in the Department working flat out to make sure that every child gets an appropriate place next September. That is where we need staff deployed. We do not need new units to start producing data. There is a balance to be struck in terms of the deployment of public servants. We are increasing the number of public servants on an annual basis. The increase has been significant over the last number of years. To be fair to the Minister, Hildegard Naughton, and the Minister of State, Michael Moynihan, their focus has been very much on securing additional resources and working with the National Council for Special Education to get the places. They opened the portal early in October. That has resulted in far more significant numbers. I think about 6,000 children in existing mainstream classes have now been identified as needing additionality in terms of supports. That is happening. The Department is flat out on that with the NCSE.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have just come from the picket line on Davitt Road, where National Ambulance Service workers are on strike for 24 hours because the HSE has failed for six years to implement a 5% pay rise that they are due under benchmarking. It is not just the HSE, though. The Government is their employer. They are public sector workers and they are calling for the Taoiseach's intervention. The HSE has accepted upskilling and increased responsibilities for ambulance workers, so why is it a conscious policy to not reward essential workers, whom we absolutely need for front-line services? The stress, the burnout and the tragedy that these workers see and deal with daily is horrific. Why has the HSE not been engaging with them? Will the Taoiseach call for that? Will the Taoiseach directly intervene? These workers do not want to be on strike. The last thing that they want to be doing is not providing an essential service. The last time they-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy. The Taoiseach will respond.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----refused a pay rise it was because it was a deterioration in the service.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is absolutely no point in you and I talking over each other.

The Taoiseach: I have already spoken on this earlier in the House. I accept the workers do not want to be on strike. It is wrong to say that the HSE or the Government does not want to reward front-line workers. There were good faith negotiations entered into. The unions recommended the outcome of those negotiations that came out of the WRC to the workers. The ballot was negative. The HSE is saying it is available for discussion and engagement with the unions. I think that is what should happen.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ambulance response times are getting longer in this country. Handover times for ambulances in hospitals are getting longer. Six months ago, 12 ambulances were stuck at Drogheda hospital for hours. At the same time, no ambulance was available in Cavan, Monaghan, Meath and Louth at all. In 2016, there were 657 deaths before ambulances arrived. In 2023, that increased to 1,108 deaths. This February, I asked the National Ambulance Service the same question. It refused to answer the question. It is an accountability-free zone, refusing to answer TDs' questions on the number of people who have died waiting for an ambulance to come. We know that there is an intense strain on ambulance services at the moment and that it is leading to death and injury. Will the Taoiseach resource these services properly? Will he make sure that the workers have their pay rise implemented? Will he sit down with the workers to negotiate the implementation of that pay rise?

The Taoiseach: First of all, we have put significant increased resources into the ambulance service and have incrementally increased it on an ongoing basis. They have been very significant increases, which I outlined earlier to the House. I think it was a 41% increase since 2022. I can check that figure again.

Deputy Tóibín needs to be careful with figures, as he knows. He tends to manipulate figures from time to time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No, I do not.

The Taoiseach: I have noticed that in different areas. Some people's cases may have had nothing to do with the ambulance service getting there. The Deputy must acknowledge that, too.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have not said there was no progress.

The Taoiseach: I know, but the Deputy implies it. That is the problem.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I said there was a difference. The figure increased.

The Taoiseach: We need dialogue. We need negotiations in the WRC to get this resolved.

Deputy Albert Dolan: In the past two weeks, we had some fantastic news for Galway. In our only model 4 hospital, the design team was appointed for a 300-bed block at University Hospital Galway. This is really welcome. However, as the Taoiseach knows, design teams get appointed, we go through the planning process and it can take an incredibly long time before

we see a shovel in the ground. Would it be possible for the only model 4 hospital in the west to have the 300-bed block that it is seeking designated as a critical infrastructure project, cutting through the red tape and getting the project moving? This is part of a larger phased development that will transform the model 4 hospital in the west. I am conscious that the Taoiseach does not want to start producing lists of projects that are critical infrastructure but for our hospitals, for these beds and for the people of Galway, I ask that this get priority.

The Taoiseach: I am very conscious of the situation there. I have visited that hospital on a number of occasions. As a model 4 hospital, it is in urgent need of significant modernisation in terms of infrastructure and it needs that 300-bed block. It is critical to it. There has been a lot of work done already to get to this stage. One could argue that it has taken an inordinate length of time to get to where we are now. I will certainly talk to the Minister for public expenditure once that legislation is passed, given the critical nature of it to the health service across the entire north west and west. I think there is a very strong case there.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I want to raise the issue of rural planning. It is an issue I have raised here previously with the Taoiseach. I am pleased that the guidelines are to be amended and I ask the Taoiseach to support any proposed changes that will help genuine applicants. This is an important component in dealing with the housing challenge. I have worked through four county development plans in Wicklow over 20 years and made many changes but was often restricted due to national guidelines.

There are many aspects that are making it difficult. I will list three of the many proposals I have made. First, social or economic need must trump views and prospects in planning decisions. Second, we need to allow people to downsize from one rural area to another. This is especially important for elderly people who live in unsuitable accommodation. Third, the national definition of "under urban pressure" should be removed. This is far too restrictive and stops many genuine applicants. I have seen applicants appealing to An Coimisiún Pleanála and being refused on that basis.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Timmins very much for his constructive proposals. I will certainly talk to the Minister for housing in regard to his suggestions around amendments to the national guidelines and developing a very pragmatic approach, given the severity of the housing crisis we are facing.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There is a shortage of Gaelscoil places for September 2026 in Dunshaughlin, County Meath. There are anywhere between 15 and 30 children, some with offers from other schools but who want an Irish-medium education and want a Gaelscoil place. The demand is there. The willingness is there on behalf of the Gaelscoil, the board of management, the bishop and patron body. The Taoiseach's ministerial colleagues, Helen McEntee and Thomas Byrne, are very familiar with this issue. However, the block is with the Department, the Minister and the wider Government. They will not sanction an extra class and an extra teacher. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene and ensure that an extra class and teacher are put on for these children for September.

The Taoiseach: I cannot get involved in every single application. I am not clear about what Deputy O'Rourke is saying. Is it an application for an extra classroom?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Teachers come automatically if the numbers increase. There is a pupil-teacher ratio that applies automatically if numbers increase in any given school. I doubt it is a question of the sanctioning of a teacher. Maybe because so many people want to get into the school it does not have the capacity right now, but that is another issue and maybe it needs to be resolved with the Department. I will raise it with the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Rourke can write further. I call Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Duncan Smith: A couple of weeks ago, I raised with the Taoiseach the need to repair the swimming pool at Portmarnock Sports and Leisure Club, PSLC. The PSLC is a vital piece of local infrastructure across Fingal and 90% of its users are not-for-profit community pool or non-members of the leisure centre.

Fingal County Council has stepped up to the tune of €500,000 towards the overall cost of repair, which is approximately €1 million. The Government has not yet committed funding. There is talk of about €100,000 coming from central government, but we need more. Either way, we need a commitment to ensure that this repair project can begin and end as soon as possible. This is not the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, or the sports capital programme. It would be through the Minister, Dara Calleary's community fund.

The Taoiseach: It is a community matter.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I do not have the specifics of this. Is it Portmarnock community centre?

Deputy Duncan Smith: Portmarnock Sports and Leisure Club. We have spoken about it before. It is the pool there.

The Taoiseach: That could be a sports matter. I will talk to both Ministers and we will see what we can do.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: This week in Spain, they have called for the creation of a European army. They argue that Europe must develop a permanent common military capacity. Many Irish people are increasingly concerned that the long-standing Irish policy of military neutrality is being eroded step by step through deeper EU defence integration without a direct democratic mandate from the Irish people. Will the Taoiseach give us a clear commitment in this House today and to the Irish people that we will not participate in, support or move towards any

European army, common EU military structure or mutual defence agreement without first seeking explicit approval from the Irish people by way of referendum?

The Taoiseach: First of all, what Spain proposes or does is Spain's business. Many people hold up Spain as representing different stances internationally and so on. I am not familiar with the comments. Is the Deputy saying that the Prime Minister made them?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The defence minister.

The Taoiseach: The defence minister said there should be a European army. Well, the specific characteristics of Irish foreign policy are well known across the European Union and are cited in all documents pertaining to defence, as are those of Malta, Austria and Cyprus. Our military neutrality was decided by Government policy back in the Second World War, essentially, and has evolved since then. We are not joining NATO and we have no intention of joining a military alliance.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I call on the Government to urgently address the anomaly that exists with the current taxation system in respect of capital acquisitions tax when applied to partners in comparison to married couples. Current legislation means that a partner, even a lifetime partner, is regarded as a stranger for capital acquisitions tax purposes. Therefore, the current threshold limit of €20,000 applies and anything over that amount is taxed at 33% whereas married couples are tax exempt. Partners are now entitled to a survivor's pension if they have been living together for at least five years, or two years if they have children. This arose from a court case where it was found that to deny the survivor's pension would be unconstitutional. In another recent case, a civil servant passed away and his partner was refused the widow's portion of his civil servant pension, as they were not married. This was also unconstitutional. Contrast this with the current taxation system whereby partners are treated as strangers for capital acquisitions tax purposes. This is wide open to constitutional challenge to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will respond, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Cahill: -----the current legislation and needs to be addressed by the Minister for Finance.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much. He has made a very compelling case in his citing of constitutional decisions in respect of survivors' entitlements to pensions and so forth. I will raise the matter with the Minister for Finance in the context of the forthcoming budget in October to see if he will examine it because the threshold looks rather low.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ar an gcéad dul síos, I welcome the students and teachers from Coláiste Dún Iascaigh in Cahir, including Ms McGrath and Ms Hickey, to the Public Gallery.

In 2021, I asked the Taoiseach a question here about a new business charge that had been put in called the integrated single electricity market, I-SEM. He told me that he did not know what it was. At that time, I saw a bill from an excellent businessman, whom I have spoken to again today. There was a huge increase in his bill. Has the Taoiseach found out what this is?

It is supposed to be looking after the integrated market, North and South, but charges and prices have only gone up since the introduction of this new body or whatever it is. Is it a body? Does it have offices? Does it have staff? Who or what is it? This is another charge that businesspeople cannot afford. At that time, the Government had the small cost-of-business grant at €250 million. That is now gone. Prices are going up incrementally every day and have been even before the war in Iran. This is another quango as far as I can see. The Taoiseach did not know then what it was. I hope he does now. He was Tánaiste then; he is Taoiseach now. I hope he has checked out what or who I-SEM is rather than robbing people, including businesspeople.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will now respond.

The Taoiseach: I accept fully that there are cost-of-living pressures on families and individuals arising significantly now from the war in Iran, which has-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Three wars.

The Taoiseach: -----resulted in a 20% contraction in oil supplies and a dramatic escalation in oil prices. That is very worrying in terms of its potential impact on the world economy for the rest of the year. Hopefully, that war can end as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we have announced, as the Deputy knows, a €750 million package-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Freagair an cheist. Who are I-SEM?

An Ceann Comhairle: Ná bí ag caint, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: -----trying to alleviate the pressures on families. I will have to get a look at the bill the Deputy referred to because I did not quite catch the name-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have it here. I-SEM.

The Taoiseach: -----of the company he was talking about, but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Johnny Mythen.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach told me that a few years ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Johnny Mythen.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I would like to raise with the Taoiseach the issue of increased funding for family resource centres around the country, but in particular those operating within my county of Wexford. The newest family resource centre is within Templeshannon Community and Childcare Centre, Enniscorthy, and is a most welcome addition to the east side of the town. Family resource centres are at the heart of our communities, from providing

counselling and therapeutic supports to community inclusion and well-being, to essential front-line prevention and early intervention. However, they are under severe financial pressure. There is a steady growth in demand for their services, including a 51% increase in respect of mental health needs alone. I ask the Taoiseach to consider increasing the core funding of €180,000 per family resource unit to a minimum of €255,000 in the October budget. This would be a targeted but urgent investment in strengthening communities, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Minister, Norma Foley, was, to be fair to her, effective in the Estimates process in getting additional funding to establish ten new family resource centres across the country, a significant milestone in terms of what had been happening prior to that. I will talk to the Minister about core funding requirements. Again, we are anxious to give additional capacity to family resource centres. We value the role that they are playing and the challenges they are under.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: While we welcome the fact that the Minister for Health has been quite proactive in following up the accident and emergency difficulties in the mid-west following the HIQA report, I nevertheless want to draw attention to the report and the statement from the medical board of University Hospital Limerick, UHL, yesterday, which pointed out that patient safety was still a huge concern. As a matter of fact, it concluded that the problems surrounding patient safety had not improved at all since the HIQA report, which is now eight months old. The board made certain recommendations as to what could be done in the interim, on a short-term basis, until the situation regarding patient safety was stabilised. One of the recommendations is that the recruitment processes in the mid-west HSE area be changed. Does the Minister for Health intend to respond positively to those recommendations?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I think the Minister is actively engaging with the mid-west university hospital and has continued to engage. I will alert the Minister to what the Deputy has said. He is speaking of HIQA's review. As he knows, the Minister did respond to that review, I think.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am referring to the report yesterday from the medical board.

The Taoiseach: The next thing is that I will raise with the Minister the outcome of that report. In fact, the Minister discussed the emergency care situation in Limerick this morning with the Cabinet. Also, in recent weeks, there has been a 10% increase in activity levels at the emergency department in Limerick, so there is no doubt that the hospital remains under significant pressure, notwithstanding the fact that 278 new beds have opened in acute hospitals across the mid-west region. I will ask the Minister to communicate with the Deputy in respect of the matter.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Two weeks ago, I raised with the Taoiseach here a tragedy involving a young man who died in east Cork last year in the context of a prolonged wait for an ambulance to reach him and what the HSE has referred to as "omissions" in the administration of care at the scene. I followed up our exchange by emailing the Taoiseach's office with a clear outline

of the efforts made by the family to secure a meeting with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, beginning on 29 January, four and half months ago. That first request from me was acknowledged immediately by the Minister's office. Since then, three follow-up emails from me, as well as direct contact from the family, have elicited no further response. I have also not heard back from the Taoiseach's office yet. The Taoiseach and I both know that if this family were to choose to relive their harrowing experience in the national media, a meeting would likely happen very quickly. This is a devastated family seeking basic assurances that the serious issues arising from the tragedy are being acted on.

Will the Taoiseach intervene with the Minister again on this issue?

The Taoiseach: I will engage with the Minister. The HSE and the hospital should be engaging with the family in the first instance. There are proper mechanisms for accountability in respect of situations like this. However, I will talk to the Minister.

Visit of Barbadian Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask colleagues to join me in extending a warm céad míle fáilte to Senator The Honourable Christopher Sinckler, Senior Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Barbados, who joins us in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery today alongside the ambassador of Barbados to Ireland, H.E. Cleviston Haynes. They are most welcome.

Members applauded.

National Minimum Wage (Equal Pay for Apprentices and Young Workers) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 to provide for apprentices and young workers to be paid at least the National Minimum Wage.

I will share time with Deputy Boyd Barrett. I am glad to be introducing this Bill. It is a Bill to end the super-exploitation of young workers and apprentices. We introduced a similar Bill in the last Dáil to abolish sub-minimum wage rates for workers aged under 20. At the time, the Government claimed to be looking into abolishing these super-low rates of pay. A young worker can be paid as little as €9.91 an hour, which is €4.24 less than the national minimum wage. Of course, in reality, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have done nothing of the sort. They have ignored the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission and the vote of this Dáil to do away with these sub-minimum wage rates. They are doubling down on shafting young people on pay just like they are shafting them on housing and the cost of living.

Research by the ESRI has shown that the percentage of workers on these super-low and super-exploitative rates of pay has doubled since 2020. The national minimum wage has gone up, although it is still entirely inadequate. The result is that greedy employers are using sub-minimum wage rates for young people as a loophole to get out of paying even that inadequate

minimum wage. We have gone from 20% of young workers being paid sub-minimum rates in 2020 to 30% now, a massive jump of about 30,000 young people.

The justifications used by bosses for this are outrageous. I had to listen to some of them in the committee that deals with this area. ISME, the Irish SME Association, has claimed that exploiting young people in this way "is of greater long-run benefit and importance for poorer social classes where education is their way out of lower-skilled employments." It also claimed that paying young workers the national minimum wage might cause them to "favour gratification". This is the type of attitude towards young people we are dealing with. It is like something out of the Dark Ages.

What is also out of the Dark Ages are the levels of pay being paid to apprentices. First-year craft apprentices are being paid €7.67 an hour, which is €6.48 less than the national minimum wage. That is disgraceful. Their union, Connect, says that apprentices now usually start in their 20s rather than their teens. It says the average apprentice will have at least one child to support and that 60% are renting. They have rent and mortgages to pay. They also have to pay for their own tools, which can cost €1,000 or more in some cases. They often have to relocate around the country and pay course fees as well. How are they meant to survive on less than €8 an hour? It is an absolute joke. It is also proof that the Government is not serious about fixing the housing crisis. It should be doing everything in its power to attract young workers to take up apprenticeships rather than legalising this super-exploitation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: To follow on from Deputy Murphy's point, one of the biggest obstacles to solving the housing crisis and the chronic deficits in infrastructure in this country is the lack of skilled tradespeople. We are making it difficult for young people to qualify in these areas by allowing these abysmally low rates for apprentices, particularly in the first and second years of their apprenticeships. These rates are just over €7 and just over €11 respectively, both of which are below the minimum wage. This means that apprentices are dropping out, often to work in fast food chains. They are not doing this because they want to but because the pay levels are so low.

It also sends the message to our young people, which many of them are unfortunately acting on, that we do not really value their work at all. They are leaving. Huge numbers of people who want to work in the area of construction and to take on these trades are just leaving the country, even if they do qualify, because they do not feel valued. It is absolutely inexplicable that we expect apprentices to accept this. The average age of an apprentice is 23. Many of them have to pay rent and have children, relationships and lives but, in their first year, they are expected to live on about half of a living wage and less than the minimum wage. It is inexplicable. There are also lower rates of social protection for younger people. We are sending the message that we do not care and that we do not value our young people. It is no wonder that many of them are leaving the country. This is a minimal step that says young people, including those doing apprenticeships, should not be paid less than the minimum wage. The minimum wage should be a legal right and entitlement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask one of the Deputies to propose that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Comptroller and Auditor General (Due Diligence Complicity Audit) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce Bill entitled an Act to amend the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993 to require the Comptroller and Auditor General to conduct a due diligence review of the State's relations with Israel in line with the legal analysis and recommendations of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel on implementation of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

I will share time with Deputies Ó Laoghaire, Ní Raghallaigh and Brady. "We are not asking for your solidarity. We want you to stop doing us active harm." This is the message of Omar Barghouti, founder of the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which I hosted here in Leinster House in my role as convenor of the Ireland-Palestine parliamentary friendship group. Our State's complicity is doing Palestinians active harm. Complicity in genocide, apartheid and occupation is incredibly serious and requires immediate actions, including sanctions against the State of Israel, an arms embargo, and the enactment of the occupied territories Bill and the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill. These are all actions we can and should take but that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refuse to.

This week, we approach Nakba Day, 15 May. This is a day when the catastrophe perpetrated against the Palestinian people since 1948 is marked around the world. Horrors beyond our worst fears continue to unfold before our very eyes. Yesterday, *The New York Times* published an article by Nicholas Kristof entitled "The Silence That Meets the Rape of Palestinians". This reported on the brutal sexual abuse of male and female Palestinians at the hands of Israeli prison guards, soldiers, settlers and interrogators. The United Nations has reported that sexual violence has become standard operating procedure.

We in Ireland cannot be complicit in facilitating such a brutal regime. That is why this Bill, sponsored by Deputies Brady, Ó Laoghaire and Ní Raghallaigh and me, is before the House today. It proposes one thing that we are entitled to do without awaiting agreement at EU level or clutching at the excuse that international law is complex. We propose an audit of our State's

complicity. A due diligence audit is not just something we can do but something we are required to do under international law. That is the legal advice of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel on the implementation of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel. It states:

Each State is obliged to undertake a thorough due diligence review of its aid and assistance to Israel and determine whether it is being used by Israel to support and maintain the unlawful occupation.

This is stated in light of the fact that "all States are under an obligation not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the unlawful occupation." This is also the advice of the leading human rights lawyer Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, who recently made a similar call before the Oireachtas foreign affairs committee.

The Hague Group of 12 nations agreed last July to commence an urgent review of all public contracts to prevent public institutions and their funds from supporting Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory and entrenching its unlawful presence. Ireland is falling behind.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Tacaím leis an mBille agus tréaslaím leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as a chuid oibre air seo ar feadh tamall fada. I commend Deputy Ó Snodaigh on his work on this over a considerable period of time. We have had many debates in this Chamber and, unfortunately, some attention has slipped away from Palestine and from the appalling atrocities that continue there despite so-called ceasefire. People are being killed daily but more fundamentally in a long term way the ground for a Palestinian state is being eroded constantly by the actions of Israel. Often there are debates about what we can do since we are a small country but there are actions we can undertake. Clearly, the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice makes it clear that states have an obligation to ensure they audit their processes, relations and trade to ensure states are not complicit. We can and should do this. There is nothing constraining us from doing it. This is the minimum we can do in the context of a situation that daily erodes the rights of the Palestinian people.

Deputy John Brady: I concur with my colleagues. This is an important piece of legislation given the Government's systemic failure to take meaningful action against the genocide and apartheid regime of Israel against the Palestinians. A number of pieces of legislation were brought forward previously, including my illegal Israeli settlement divestment Bill. The Government has made us stakeholders in the illegal practice of apartheid in the West Bank by having shares-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Deputy John Brady: -----in the illegal occupation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy John Brady: This is an important piece of legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move: "The Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Flood Insurance Bill 2021: Order for Committee Stage [Private Members]

Deputy John Brady: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 187.

Question put and agreed to.

Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Bill 2021: Order for Committee Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Agriculture and Food pursuant to Standing Orders 187.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [9931/26]

2. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [9932/26]

3. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [9933/26]

4. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [9934/26]

5. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [29769/26]

6. **Deputy Liam Quaid** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [29771/26]

7. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [29775/26]

8. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [29777/26]

9. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [30022/26]

10. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [28756/26]

11. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [30497/26]

12. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [30661/26]

13. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [31985/26]

14. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [31989/26]

15. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32447/26]

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32454/26]

17. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32457/26]

18. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32616/26]

19. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32619/26]

20. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [32858/26]

21. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness will next meet. [34358/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 21, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness last met on 2 March and is scheduled to meet on 25 May. Membership of the committee comprises the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, and the Ministers for public expenditure, foreign affairs, climate, enterprise, culture and further and higher education and research. Other Ministers or Ministers of State are invited to participate as required.

The committee oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments relating to sustainable economic and employment growth, trade competitiveness and productivity, innovation, the national digital strategy and pensions. As with all policy areas, issues relating to the economy are regularly discussed at full Cabinet meetings, where all formal decisions are made. Ireland continues to demonstrate its economic resilience and its ability to adapt to changing global circumstances. The economy is performing well, despite times of enormous economic uncertainty, with record numbers of people in work, low unemployment and real wage growth. We will continue to advance an economic model founded on a pro-enterprise policy framework, a stable and sustainable regulatory and tax environment with sound management of the public finances and investment in the infrastructure, energy and skills required to ensure our future competitiveness and productivity.

The updated national development plan represents one of the largest and most significant capital injections in our economy in the history of the State. It sets out total public capital investment of €275 billion to 2035. Investment in this critical infrastructure will enable 300,000 additional houses by 2030 and expansion of our onshore and offshore electricity transmission and distribution network infrastructure through a €3.5 billion equity investment in EirGrid and the ESB. This will future-proof Ireland's electricity system and ensure it can meet the growing demands of our economy, our homes and our climate targets. The upgrading of our water and wastewater infrastructure will enable social inclusion, environmental sustainability and housing delivery. This funding of €12.2 billion to 2030 represents the largest ever capital investment plan in the history of water services and water quality.

Enhanced road and public transport infrastructure will connect our island and reduce travel times. Transport funding of €24.3 billion for the next five years will deliver a diverse range of transport options including public transport, active travel, roads, maritime and aviation. Approximately €10 billion of this will be used for public transport projects with a further €2

billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund specifically to start construction on MetroLink.

There will be greater opportunities to attract foreign direct investment and support our international competitiveness. There will be delivery of more childcare facilities and school places, investment in children's disability services and better healthcare for all.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

We will continue to invest in the future of Ireland while preserving the jobs, stability and prosperity of today. We will also continue to put resources into reserve funds, conscious of the risks of using windfall corporation tax revenues for ongoing current expenditure commitments.

However, the situation in the Middle East remains volatile and highly uncertain. The economic fallout will depend on the depth and duration of the conflict. The Department of Finance has assessed the economic impact of three scenarios, and this was published as part of the annual progress report on 21 April. The first relatively benign scenario is based on the futures market in mid-March, where energy prices were assumed to moderate over the second half of this year.

The second scenario assumes a sustained but contained disruption to energy markets, with oil prices remaining at approximately \$100 per barrel over the coming months. The third scenario is based on a more pronounced and persistent disruption to energy supply with oil prices reaching \$150 per barrel and staying elevated for an extended time. Under all scenarios, there is a shock to inflation, squeezing purchasing power and lowering the growth rate. While the near-term outlook is clouded in considerable uncertainty, what is clear is that economic fallout is likely to persist given the lasting damage to energy infrastructure in the gulf.

The Government is taking action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy. We are conscious of the increased financial pressure on households and businesses as a result. To date, over €750 million has been committed to measures to support households and business with increased fuel costs. This response has been possible because we have adopted a prudent approach in recent budgets. We will navigate this period of volatility, but we must remain flexible in our response. We cannot mitigate every increase in costs, and we must retain resources to ensure we can deal with any further deterioration in the global economy. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and respond as appropriate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are many questions, so it will be 30 seconds each.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Ireland is uniquely positioned to become a global leader in helping multinational companies achieve their carbon neutral targets. Nowhere is that opportunity greater than in County Offaly with Bord na Móna's landbank and the renewable energy capacity and scale to become one of the most strategically important locations in the country for sustainable industrial and enterprise growth. The Taoiseach recently described Offaly as a powerhouse in renewable energy and I believe that presents a major opportunity for the county and the wider midlands. International companies are actively seeking secure renewable and cost-effective energy to support them in the long term.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I speak regularly to sole traders, farmers, tradespeople and small business owners who are under immense pressure from rising costs, irregular income patterns and administrative burden. Many also remain concerned about the level of protection available to them if illness strikes or if business slows. Will the Taoiseach look seriously at strengthening supports for the self-employed, including areas such as simplified tax compliance, improved income protections and measures that recognise the reality of the risks they are taking to provide employment across the country?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Across rural Ireland family-run pubs are under severe pressure from rising energy bills, insurance costs, staffing shortages and reduced footfall. In many villages and small towns, the local pub is more than a business, it is a social hub, a meeting place and an important part of community life. The Vintners' Federation of Ireland is calling for the Government to introduce a new targeted tax credit, which would be linked to draught products and capped at €20,000 per premises. I strongly support this request, and I ask the Taoiseach to outline what specific measures the Government is considering supporting small rural pubs, including action on energy costs-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Will the Government support the VFI proposal to-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Eurostat has again confirmed that Ireland has the highest electricity prices in Europe, meaning that on average, consumers are paying in the region of 40% more than their European counterparts. What measures is the Taoiseach taking to reduce the cost of electricity to households and businesses, and to address the root causes of the high cost of electricity here?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The recent report by the ISME noted that there was a decline in SME credit balances from €62 billion in 2011 to €17.8 billion in 2023, despite headline economic growth in Ireland during that period. That is a stunning drop of 70% in capital to indigenous companies since the Taoiseach was last in government. He says he is a pro-enterprise Taoiseach but the evidence points to the contrary. What will he do to improve the conditions for indigenous enterprises in Ireland?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is 18 years since CIÉ pensioners received an increase in their pensions. There was agreement between CIÉ and the unions in May of last year. A year later the Government has still not signed off on this increase. When I asked the Taoiseach about this in February, he said that the sign-off was imminent. We are now in May, and it has still not been signed off. When will the CIÉ pensioners get the increase for which they have been waiting for 18 years?

It is absolutely necessary that we look at the fact that Irish people are paying 40% more for electricity. We need to find the solution to this. It is not okay.

Recently, a number of us met the House of Commons business and trade committee. A particular issue that I brought up, which I raised with the Taoiseach previously, is cross-Border

taxation, particularly for those who are remote working or who cannot remote work, or companies which cannot facilitate cross-Border remote working. It requires a bilateral agreement with the British Government. It should be on the agenda of Government. I also said we should actually deal with the biggest issue, which is the Border, but the Taoiseach has a bit of work to do on that himself.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The prospect of 720 job losses at Covalen has caused enormous anxiety for workers and their families and our existing legislation on statutory redundancy is no longer adequate. After losing their jobs, Covalen workers are worried about whether they will have meaningful access to retraining and reskilling pathways and alternative employment. They are concerned about cooling-off periods and non-compete arrangements preventing redundant workers from potentially taking up employment with rivals. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to meet the Communications Workers Union and ensure that the consultation process delivers meaningful change and fair outcomes for Covalen workers?

Deputy John Connolly: The Taoiseach recently alluded to the historic success of the social partnership model in the country and the impact and role it had in maintaining living standards, social cohesion and limiting industrial action. In alluding to that, I was hoping that we might be in a position to say that we are to commence a new period of social partnership between the employers, employees, and the Government as well. I ask the Taoiseach to update the House on whether such efforts can be made real.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the recent discussion about nuclear power but, economically, would it not be more viable for us to decentralise our grid with the private wires Bill and bring in long-duration energy storage and alternative energy storage abilities, be it gravity, green hydrogen or any of the newest things that are coming to the market? We saw how much the UK project went over its budget and I would love to see the cost-benefit analysis of nuclear compared with renewables.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is economically illiterate for this country to sit on €500 million that has been set aside for climate action and not spend it while at the same time looking at funding renewable energy projects in other countries to make up for the fact that we have not done enough on climate in this country. It is crazy. Will the Taoiseach please explain his rationale on that?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is an absolute disgrace that Jack Chambers and this Government are threatening essentially a return to austerity and cutbacks across Departments and trying to imply that because extra money had to be found for special needs, this has to be done. That is a cynical divide-and-conquer tactic when there are alternatives. The Government had underfunded special needs and was forced to acknowledge that. It could find extra money rather than cutting other Departments by taxing wealth and profits in this country. That is the elephant in the room that is never discussed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We need retrofitting as quickly and as much as possible. It is part of the answer to the cost-of-living crisis and the climate crisis. The problem is that the way the Government has gone about it with its privatised model is now beginning to result in significant problems. I will give a few examples from my constituency. Philomena Doran, a 92-year-old widow in Oldbawn, got a 100% grant to get wraparound external wall insulation, but the external wall insulation was put on during Storm Chandra, when the building advice states clearly that it cannot be put on when it is raining. She went to the SEAI and got nowhere.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McGuinness.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Another woman, Clare Hayes, got in touch, where the provider did not provide the necessary declaration for her to get the grant.

An Ceann Comhairle: Everybody is being treated the same. I call Deputy McGuinness.

Deputy Paul Murphy: She did not get anywhere with the SEAI. Where are people meant to go?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The scenes in Tycor in Waterford over the weekend have been devastating for residents, businesses and workers. I commend the firefighters, emergency services and front-line workers who responded. On Sunday morning, my colleague, Deputy David Cullinane, and I visited the area to meet those residents, the workers and the businesses affected. While the immediate danger has passed in many respects, enormous concerns remain around livelihoods, the clean-up operation, asbestos, air quality and long-term safety. I welcome the response under way by Waterford City and County Council and the local enterprise office, but once the national attention moves on, Government support cannot move on too. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring sustained Government support for affected residents?

Deputy Ged Nash: The current public sector pay deal is due to expire over the next few weeks. Trade unions looked at the Government response to the fuel protests in recent weeks and understood that the package that was developed for those who were protesting did nothing whatsoever for PAYE workers, despite the Taoiseach's protestations to the contrary. He is opening the Fórsa conference this week. What will he say to the public sector workers represented by Fórsa and other trade unions, both in regard to their expectations about a new public sector pay deal and what he plans to do for PAYE workers in October's budget?

Deputy Rory Hearne: We are losing nurses, teachers and tradespeople because they cannot afford housing in this city and across the country. Our businesses and public services cannot get workers because of the rents. We are seeing the main supply is vulture fund apartments at €3,500 a month. Who can afford that? Not one affordable house for sale was built by the State in Dublin city last year. What is the Taoiseach doing to ensure workers can afford to live in our city and can afford the rents and house prices? It is a crisis that is threatening our economy and destroying our society.

The Taoiseach: I agree entirely with Deputy McCormack about the potential for the midlands for renewable energy. There have been some very good developments and announcements there over the last year, with various Ministers attending. I attended one recently with the Deputy. The Bord na Móna land resource has very significant potential for both energy renewables and industry to go along with that. We will do everything we possibly can to capitalise on that for the benefit of the midlands. A transition and transformation is happening there, which is very positive.

Regarding sole traders, small farmers and the self-employed more generally, Deputy Dolan is looking for a more streamlined Government approach and simplified tax compliance mechanisms. A cost of business forum has been established which has worked with the small business sector with a view to endeavouring to identify cost pressures on SMEs in particular. That is one strategy that has been deployed. A capacity is being developed within the Department of enterprise around simplification of regulation nationally. Across the European Union, significant work is also under way relating to the simplification of regulation for small businesses in particular. One of the initiatives coming on is a 28th regime, whereby SMEs can establish online and, within a number of days, would be European SMEs, without having to negotiate all the various national borders and so on. That is a focus of Government and of the European Commission.

Regarding Clare family-owned pubs, we will examine what the VFI has put forward. There is no question that family-owned pubs, particularly in rural Ireland, provide a social network and enhance socialisation, which is an important dimension of human health and the development of community ethos and spirit. I am not sure about the specific proposal. I will have to examine that, but we can see what can be done.

On the issue of our electricity prices being the highest in Europe, we are also the fifth highest in terms of purchasing power parity, but, nonetheless, they are too high. One of the key issues is grid dispersal. We are a peripheral island nation and we rely too much on imported fossil fuels. Those are the fundamental drivers of the high cost of fuel, as well as the volatility that arises when war starts. When there is conflict like in the Middle East and in Ukraine, and going back over the past number of decades, wars and conflict in oil-producing areas have created the greatest degree of volatility, so we have to move to renewables. That is the medium-term strategy. About 50% of electricity generation last February was through renewables. We achieved a lot in onshore renewable wind and solar is moving fast. The key challenge for us over the next number of years is offshore renewables, and then to work with the European Union on whether there are ways to deal with the regulatory framework governing the setting of energy prices. The link to gas is a particular factor in how energy prices and electricity prices are determined.

Regarding capital, the support for enterprise is very strong. From Enterprise Ireland, for example, it is growing and continues to do so in respect of most indigenous enterprises for export.

The Deputy did not distinguish whether it was indigenous enterprise for export or domestic service companies, but in terms of indigenous enterprise for export, the feedback has been very positive regarding Government supports, not just financial supports but also soft supports, market access supports, market intelligence, R and D grants and so on. Through the budget,

we reduced VAT on hospitality. That measure, which was attacked by the Deputy and his party, is supporting SMEs.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: They cannot get access to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: We have provided various mechanisms for access-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: -----to credit as well.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is not working.

The Taoiseach: Very often, the take-up is not huge in terms of the various loan schemes going back to Covid-19 right through. They had not been taken up to the same extent, but the Deputy attacked it. The VAT reduction was a very simple, straightforward way to try to help the hospitality industry, likewise on the construction side to try to reduce costs but the Opposition attacked it. They cannot have it both ways, but we will continue to work on the financing of enterprise and improving the venture capital area as well.

Regarding the CIE pensioners, again I will talk to both Ministers. My understanding was that it was coming to a conclusion and hopefully it will be resolved very quickly.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, cross-Border taxation is on the agendas of the Department of Finance, the UK Treasury and the Northern Ireland Executive. In terms of resolving the issue, it is easier said than done, but there is no question that it is one that the Minister and Tánaiste is focused on. We discussed it at North-South meetings, ministerial meetings and also in the context of the cross-Border bodies whose workers are directly impacted by the taxation situation *vis-à-vis* North and South.

In terms of the job losses at Covalen, retraining and reskilling supports will be provided. We do have the National Training Fund, so the agencies should engage with the workers there in terms of whatever supports they need in perhaps finding alternative employment or helping some establish their own businesses if that is what some might want to do.

In response to Deputy Connolly, social partnership is important. The most recent manifestation of it this year has been the Labour Employer Economic Forum that the Irish Congress of Trade Union, the chambers and IBEC attend. I have asked the Secretary General of my Department to draw up a paper and I have consulted with the unions and IBEC, as well as the chambers and others, to see how we can solidify or develop a pathway to a stronger social dialogue and engagement. It will take all involved to participate but people would generally be supportive of some enhanced social dialogue. Whether the various parties want to go back to full-blown social partnership as we knew it is another question.

In response to Deputy Heneghan, I agree with him in the sense that all of what he outlined in terms of private wires - and the Minister is driving that forward - will be pursued and, as I

said last week, the cost benefit analysis is part of what we need to examine. Examining a proposal means doing the cost benefit and the leg work to sort of identify what it would entail on the nuclear question. However, all of the others do not fall by the wayside as we develop that.

In terms of the half a billion euro, I have spoken to the Minister and that will be spent. We have spent up to €4 billion from carbon tax revenues on a whole range of measures, including farming, in terms of agri-environmental schemes, fuel poverty and the retrofitting scheme. Since the Minister brought in reforms, the applications have doubled in the first month or two since he announced them.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, someone has to keep an eye on public expenditure and if the Minister for public expenditure is not doing it, then there is something really wrong. The Minister has to alert all Government Departments to stay within their budgetary frameworks.

I did not quite get the import of what Deputy Paul Murphy was saying, in terms of one person not being able to get the grant because it was wrongly-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: That was one of them.

The Taoiseach: And the other person did-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to engage further.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The work was during the storm and they-----

The Taoiseach: It should not have been but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry.

The Taoiseach: -----that is a specific case. They should get it back and the one-stop shop should be approached-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach and Deputy can engage further.

The Taoiseach: -----to engage with the company involved.

In response to Deputy McGuinness's question regarding that fire in Waterford, the Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Cummins, have been there and met with the key people. The Minister, Deputy Browne, visited yesterday. The Minister, Deputy Burke, visited today and also received Cabinet approval today for a humanitarian scheme for those impacted. We are working to see if we can relocate the social enterprises and in particular the facilities for adults with disabilities which have been wiped out as a result of the fire. We are also working to make sure that full public health protocols are applied in terms of the asbestos. Teams are already down there trying to protect public health.

In response to Deputy Nash's question on the public service pay bill, the Minister will obviously engage with the trade unions on a new public service pay agreement, which will have a bill attached to it. I want to make the point that the package did result in a reduction of 32 cent in diesel and 27 cent in petrol which benefits workers. That cannot be ignored. It happened.

Deputy Ged Nash: It was accidental.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: I am looking forward to opening the Fórsa conference as well, and we might allow them to hear my speech first. Perhaps it would be the best thing to do.

In response to Deputy Hearne, we built about 36,000 houses last year. We need to do much more, and we need to go higher again. We are going to do everything we can to provide social and affordable houses to both buy and rent.

Cabinet Committees

22. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [9935/26]

23. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [9936/26]

24. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [9937/26]

25. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [9938/26]

26. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [29778/26]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [30023/26]

28. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [30352/26]

29. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [31755/26]

30. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [31757/26]

31. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [31950/26]

32. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [31986/26]

33. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32448/26]

34. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32455/26]

35. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32458/26]

36. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32617/26]

37. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32859/26]

38. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32860/26]

39. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [32864/26]

40. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs will next meet. [34827/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 22 to 40, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs was established by the Government in 2025. It meets quarterly in advance of regular European Council meetings, and as required. Its role is to oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to the European Union, including preparation for Ireland's Presidency in the second half of this year, and international

issues. The Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs last met on 26 February 2026 in advance of the meeting of the European Council on 19 March. At the March meeting of the European Council, leaders dealt with a very full and important agenda against the backdrop of a very challenging and volatile international environment. Substantial items discussed included the situation in the Middle East, including the impact on energy prices, Ukraine and economic competitiveness.

On the last of these, leaders agreed a programme of work to be completed in the period ahead that will be central to Ireland's Presidency of the Council in the second half of the year. Other items on the European Council agenda included European security and defence, migration, the democracy shield, multilateralism and the protection of children online. There was also a euro summit which

assessed the state of the EU's economy.

European leaders met again in Cyprus for an informal meeting of the European Council on 23 and 24 April 2026, where our discussions included geopolitical developments, the impacts of the war in Iran on energy prices and supply, and the EU's next long-term budget, the MFF.

I also attended a European Political Community, EPC, summit on 4 May in Yerevan, Armenia. The EPC is an informal forum which brings together around 50 leaders from across the Continent of Europe twice a year to discuss co-operation on issues affecting the entire Continent, such as geopolitical uncertainty, economic security, trade, energy and connectivity. At the meeting President Zelenskyy gave a sobering update on the challenges he and the Ukrainian people face in confronting the continuing Russian aggression. I participated in a round table discussion with other leaders on how to improve European connectivity and economic security, as well as the pressures being faced by people as a result of the conflicts in Iran. I joined the Moldova core group meeting which focused on supporting Moldova on its pathway to accession to the European Union.

I also participated in the second meeting of the European Coalition against Drugs, co-hosted by President Macron of France and Prime Minister Meloni of Italy. I strongly support our focus on the collective fight against drug trafficking and drug-related threats. I also met with a number of leaders, including Prime Minister Starmer of the UK, President Guy Parmelin of Switzerland and Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada. This was the first time a non-European leader has attended.

The Cabinet committee will continue to oversee preparations for and delivery of the rotating Presidency of the EU Council which we will assume in July.

4 o'clock

It will be our eighth time doing so and we look forward to advancing the common European interest and improving the lives of citizens across the Union.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Irish Ministers will chair many dozens of formal meetings of the Council in Brussels and Luxembourg, and they will lead work to advance a positive policy agenda for all member states. We will host an informal meeting of the European Council and a meeting of the European political community in Dublin next November. In addition, up to 22 informal meetings of EU Ministers will be held in Ireland, with around a quarter of these meetings outside Dublin.

The next meeting of the Cabinet committee is scheduled for 18 May.

Deputy Shay Brennan: There have been some significant developments in recent days around the conflict in Ukraine, including a temporary ceasefire and comments from the Russian President about a willingness to enter into dialogue. We have also recently seen an EU member

state hold an election, the outcome of which might signify an easing of its stance towards the bloc's enlargement. Will the Taoiseach provide an update on where we stand with Ukraine's membership application?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: This morning at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Artificial Intelligence, we heard from witnesses from the University of Limerick's Centre for Robotics and Intelligent Systems about the concerns regarding AI-enabled drones and how drone warfare is impacting the battlefields in Ukraine after Russia's illegal invasion. Given that the Taoiseach will have seen drone attacks at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen last year, and we have seen them here in Ireland as well, will he assure the House that the technology will be in place to repel any potential drone attack during our Presidency of EU Council meetings?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The EU is reviewing its relationship with Israel due to the ongoing humanitarian conditions in Gaza, the settlement expansion and the International Court of Justice, ICJ, provisional measures. The Commission is reported to be considering targeted sanctions on violent settlers as well as a suspension of trade preferences under the association agreement. Has the Cabinet committee on EU and international affairs considered these measures on Israel as part of the wider European context?

Deputy Martin Daly: We are leading out on the European Presidency from July. Can we bring a focus on the cost-of-living issues throughout Europe and use European institutions, such as European competitiveness and competition law, in relation to the price of groceries? Up to 35% of families are spending a third of their disposable income on groceries each week.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I do not know how the Taoiseach can look the leaders of some EU member states in the eye given their complete and utter disregard for what Israel is doing to the people of Palestine. I also want to mention Lebanon and the brutal methods being used there. One in five of the population has been displaced and a total of 2,846 people have been killed, 552 of whom were killed after the ceasefire. Villages are being razed with the methods learned in Gaza, such as the use of bulldozers. There is an illegal occupation of southern Lebanon. What is our Government doing? It is normalising the Israeli State. For example, it is urging players to take part in the disgraceful games coming up in September and October. That is what it is. There is also no occupied territories Bill. The Government will not do something as simple as telling players they do not have to play this game and demanding that Israel should be kicked out of UEFA, like they should be kicked out of Eurovision. Instead, it is pushing the players.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Is it 30 seconds or three minutes?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Shush. People are going to take the law into their own hands and organise a campaign. Stop the Game was launched last week. Many high-profile sports people, personalities and politicians are now gearing up to organise to stop that game, and I think it will be stopped.

Would Deputy Ó Cearúil ever whisht, for goodness sake?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: You wisht.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It was a ridiculous comment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: There are rules in the House and you are going on way longer than anyone else.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: So?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: There is no respect for the rules of the House.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When are we going to see the occupied territories Bill in relation to services and goods? When will we ever see any action by the European Union with regard to the EU-Israel association agreement given the breach of the ceasefire, plans for further settlements in the West Bank and attempts by Israelis, through ethnic cleansing and every other means open to them, to create a security buffer zone in Lebanon?

I cannot mention Lebanon without mentioning our UNIFIL mission there, as well as Seán Rooney. In the parliamentary questions I submitted, I did not receive any update on the ongoing appeal process in Lebanon. The report of the independent inquiry led by Michael Delaney is now with the Attorney General. When will it be published, or at least delivered to the family of Seán Rooney?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Irish unity is now moving from an aspiration to a live constitutional question. The responsibility on the Government is to ensure we are not just commenting on that reality but actively preparing for it in a serious and structured way. If unity is to be achieved, it will not emerge from sentiment alone. It will require detailed constitutional, economic, health, educational and governance planning. This is not about accelerating a process. Rather, it is about ensuring readiness for one of the most significant constitutional developments in the history of this State. What concrete work is the Government undertaking to prepare for Irish unity? Rather than just discussing it, we must plan for it in a comprehensive and credible way, should the people of this island choose that path.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It is becoming almost impossible to find words to describe the dehumanisation of Palestinians by the Israeli State. In recent days, a Palestinian family in the West Bank buried their 80-year-old father. Israeli settlers then arrived and claimed the cemetery land as part of a settlement. The family was forced to exhume his body and rebury him elsewhere under the watch of Israeli soldiers. This is all part of an escalating campaign of terror, displacement and annexation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Yet, the occupied territories Bill, which would cut trade links with these illegal settlements, remains in cold storage. That Bill was voted through by a majority of TDs in January 2019, introduced by current Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. We all know it has been obstructed because of diplomat pressure dressed up as legal complexities. History will not look kindly on the cowardice and dishonesty of the Government in respect of this Bill when such destruction and evil are being visited upon the Palestinian people. When will the Taoiseach finally intervene to progress this Bill?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I echo the urgency for the occupied territories Bill to be passed. I welcome the Minister, Deputy McEntee's confirmation in the Dáil last week that it is to be introduced soon. It is not quick enough, however.

Regarding the Taoiseach's statement on EU engagement he had in March, what other engagement has happened between Ireland and the German Government on how its plug-in solar scheme was adapted? It is a quick investment. The savings would be seen in customers' bills. I did my own calculations. Some €150 million to €250 million - if we are being optimistic – would be saved by apartment dwellers immediately from a modest investment of €250 million.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Ireland is one of the lowest rank countries when it comes to protecting nature. A total of 90% of protected sites are in unfavourable condition. It is going to cost hundreds of millions of euro to restore nature across this island. Where will that funding come from? Is the Taoiseach having any conversations at a European level about funding nature restoration?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On Thursday, People Before Profit will bring the Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill before the Dáil. It asks the Government to act on its obligation under the Genocide Convention to prevent the commission of genocide by the State of Israel. It is an obligation we have. It calls for comprehensive economic, financial and trade sanctions against a state that is guilty of genocidal actions. Is the Government intending to support that Bill given it is a signatory of the Genocide Convention? The Bill also refers to our commitments under the Rome Statute as well as to other international legal obligations.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach rightly says that Israel has committed genocide in Palestine. I do not know whether he accepts that Israel is still committing genocide in Palestine but surely that has to mean something in terms of what he does. Surely it is a contradiction for him to say that Israel is committing genocide and then spend his time trying to ensure we do nothing to punish, impact or prevent the continuation of that genocide. Does the convention on genocide mean anything to the Taoiseach? If it does, he will vote to support our Bill for comprehensive sanctions on Israel. The idea that a state can continue in this way without comprehensive sanctions by any state that claims to stand up for human rights makes no sense whatsoever.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Has the Taoiseach spoken to the incoming First Minister of Wales and leader of Plaid Cymru, Rhun ap Iorwerth, or with the current and likely future First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, following last week's seismic election results? In the context of the growing constitutional change taking place across these islands, does he intend to meet them alongside the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the North to discuss future relationships and co-operation?

Deputy Duncan Smith: We await with bated breath the occupied territories Bill being progressed. Will the Taoiseach make it a primary objective of our Presidency of the EU for

this country to advocate on behalf of the Palestinian state? Will he place that front and centre with our EU partners?

Does the Taoiseach think our underinvestment in Garda resources is going to come back to bite the Government during the course our Presidency? I have a letter from Garda HQ which states that the development of new Garda stations in the Swords and Donabate, which have populations of 60,000 to 20,000, respectively, are not going ahead.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Ireland is the largest exporter of alumina, the key component of aluminium, to Russia. We are exporting almost 1 million tonnes of it a year. This is being used by Russia to make the drones and missiles that are being used to kill Ukrainian men, women and children. Ukrainian civilians are being murdered with weapons and missiles made using materials supplied by Ireland. Why is Ireland supplying this key war component to Russia? Was the Taoiseach aware that the Irish State has lobbied for these exports to be shielded from sanctions? What action will he take about this matter?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Israeli Knesset has approved, by a substantial majority, legislation that will permit the execution of Palestinian prisoners. This comes amid continuing international concern regarding the humanitarian catastrophe and genocide in Gaza, the treatment of Palestinian detainees and repeated warnings from human rights organisations regarding violations of international law. Most people in Ireland are deeply alarmed by measures of this nature, which risk further undermining the prospects for peace and accountability. What is the EU's response to this? How can the Taoiseach make sure that this is central to our EU Presidency?

The Taoiseach: I thank Members for their comments. I will begin with Deputy Shay Brennan, who referred to developments relating to the war in Ukraine. One of the more significant developments has been the unblocking of the €90 billion loan to Ukraine in the aftermath of the Hungarian election. That sends a real signal to Russia that Europe is in there for the long haul and that Ukraine will have the capacity, in budgetary terms, to invest in defending itself. That is significant. European Union leaders are looking at the idea of Europe opening up its own channel of negotiations with Russia at some stage. That is being tentatively explored and discussed, because we do need to bring an end to the war. The US-brokered dialogue has not yielded an outcome. We are very conscious of the need to protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Enlargement will feature as a key topic during the Irish Presidency. In our view, Ukrainian membership of the European Union in and of itself would afford some form of security and protection to Ukraine. Fundamentally, it is to say that to the Ukrainian people, who desire the freedoms that are attached to European Union membership, as opposed to what the situation might be if their country was to be taken over by Russia. We have to respond to the desires of the Ukrainian people, who do aspire to a European way of life in terms of democracy, freedom of speech and all of that. We will be progressing enlargement in the context of Ukraine. The precise form that will take has to be discussed by the various member states. Enlargement has been on the slow burner for the past decade. It has come into life more recently because of Russia's imperialist approach to many countries, including those in the western Balkans and Moldova. The latter have come under enormous pressure from Russia in the context of

attempts to interfere in their elections. They have proved resilient enough. I met with President Maia Sandu recently. The whole Moldova and Ukraine piece around enlargement will be a key agenda item for us to see if we can progress it.

On technology, An Garda Síochána has substantially enhanced its technology capability with drones, as have our military and Defence Forces. It is interesting. Reference was made to the University of Limerick, UL. I visited the university's underwater drone capacity research centre. It was a very insightful visit, and the research is ground-breaking. Ireland will be playing a role in protecting subsea cables, for example, and the gas connectors with the United Kingdom.

On Deputy Ó Cearúil's question on sanctions, there has been big progress with the European Union. Many member states are coming around to the Irish and Spanish position. Despite what is said, Ireland and Spain were the first to call for a review of the EU-Israel association agreement, and a lot more countries are coming around to our view. A breakthrough has happened in terms of sanctioning settlers, and a number have been identified. That was blocked by Hungary for quite some time but has now been lifted. There has also been progress with regard to sanctions on Hamas leaders. That is some bit of progress. There is more work to be done about the association agreement. The Minister updated the Cabinet on that this morning.

The behaviour of Israel is reprehensible. I will deal with that again later in respect of other questions. Active work is being done by the Irish Government with others at European Union level, at the Foreign Affairs Council and at the European Council.

With regard to Deputy Martin Daly's question, the cost of living will be a theme in the context of the energy crisis. Interestingly, and rightly, Deputy Daly has focused on groceries and food prices for hard-pressed families. In the context of the budget, we will be looking at how we can reduce the pressure on families in that regard, and particularly for those on the lowest incomes who inflation hits the most. I take on board what Deputy Daly has said.

On Deputy Coppinger's question, we are not urging anyone to play anything. I wish we could have a decent debate about this, but I get the feeling that the Deputy is more interested--

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You said it should go ahead.

The Taoiseach: -----in attacking the Irish Government as opposed to the Israeli Government at times. That is what it feels like in this House. In the context of all the protests and all the agitation, it is the Irish Government that the Deputy is attacking-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: And *vice versa*.

The Taoiseach: We were the first to intervene in the context of the genocide when South Africa took a case before the ICJ. We were the first European State to intervene in that legally and make a strong submission in that respect. We gave additional funding to the ICC in respect of what was happening in Gaza and in the Middle East to support it and give it the resources and capacity. We were one of the earliest to go in and defend UNRWA and fund it substantially when others were not. Likewise, there have been other measures such as supporting human

rights organisations, such as those referred to by Deputy Heneghan. We have been doing that even when they came under a lot of pressure. The Irish Government has done a lot. If you ever meet the Palestinian or Lebanese Governments-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I meet them every day.

The Taoiseach: -----they thank the Irish Government, and they thank the Irish people for their support.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They do not.

The Taoiseach: I met with the President of Lebanon, Joseph Aoun, recently when he attended after the informal EU Council meeting. He cited the Irish experience in terms of the peace process and conflict resolution as a basis for how the Lebanon-Israel situation and the Palestinian question could be resolved. That is the other side of the coin. We want to be part of solutions and we want to use our experience in conflict resolution to help in that regard.

On Deputy Ó Murchú's question about the occupied territories Bill, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has engaged with the Attorney General on that. I have made it very clear that I do not believe services should be included in the Bill. That would damage Ireland more than anything. It is largely a symbolic Bill. It will not have any practical significant impact on the ground, but nonetheless it will come before the House. We all need to be honest and clear about that. When the detailed analysis was done-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: If it is symbolic, why would it damage Ireland?

The Taoiseach: -----I think it emerged that about €190,000 worth of goods has come in. Others go through Antwerp and do not come directly into the country. A lot of work has been done on that and the Minister will come back to the House on it. At European Union level there is a real push to see can we suspend the trade association agreement.

The UNIFIL mission is on all of our minds. I keep in regular contact with the Chief of Staff, as does the Minister for Defence. I raised the Seán Rooney case and the appeal with the Lebanese authorities when I was in Lebanon. Hopefully, we will see some progress on that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: And the report?

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Cleere's question, more work has been done on understanding the differences between North and South in the last four years than was done in the previous 100 years. We have invested hugely in research on all aspects of education and health and the differences between the health systems in the North *vis-à-vis* the Republic, and school completion rates in the North *vis-à-vis* school completion rates here. The ESRI has done a lot of good studies around primary care in the North versus primary care in the Republic.

We have funded research projects between universities. We are now looking at the first potential all-island university, involving Queen's University and Dundalk. This is being funded through the shared island initiative. This has probably been one of the more radical and

impactful initiatives the Government has ever undertaken in the context of North-South relations. It has been broadly welcomed and well received across all communities. The research piece is working well. The Narrow Water bridge project will hopefully be completed in late 2027. We are going to go the whole way and complete the Ulster Canal project. It is about enhancing connectivity. We have an all-island musical archive for music from different traditions.

On biodiversity, we have an all-island network and another on climate and so on. Am I out of time?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have shown the Taoiseach some latitude.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the Michael Delaney report?

The Taoiseach: I will come back to the Deputy on that.

On the other matters, I think I have dealt with the Palestine issue for Deputy McQuaide.

Deputy Heneghan inquired about plug-in solar. There are some issues which the Minister spoke to me about. If you have plug-in solar, some houses have to have the capacity to absorb. However, I think the Minister is in favour and is trying to develop it.

On nature restoration, I am working with the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, to ensure a good funding profile for nature restoration in the medium term, as per the report that was published recently by the independent advisory committee chaired by Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shuilleabháin. That is on my radar and my agenda.

I dealt with Deputy Murphy's question about the ICJ and the ICC.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about our Bill on Thursday?

The Taoiseach: On Deputy O'Callaghan's question about Ireland being the largest exporter of alumina to Russia, again, that has not formed part of the sanctions. This is because the product from the factory is also important to wider industry in Europe. When imposing sanctions, we have always endeavoured not to harm ourselves more than anybody else when it comes to Russia. I will get the information for the Deputy, but there is an importance here to European-wide industry as well in the context of what is produced in Limerick.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about our Bill on Thursday?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now will move on to statements on International Nurses Day.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will get the answer on Thursday.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the Michael Delaney report?

International Nurses Day: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I am sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. Today, which is International Nurses Day, I would like to recognise the presence in the Public Gallery of Caroline Gourley, president, and Phil Ní Sheaghdha, general secretary, from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO. Ms Ní Sheaghdha has been president of Irish Congress of Trade Unions since last July. I congratulate here on that. I understand that we also have in attendance the CEO of the Nurses and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, Caroline Donoghue, and that organisation's president, Áine Lynch. They are very welcome here to join myself and other Members in marking International Nurses Day. This is an occasion recognised around the world to honour the professionalism, commitment and vital contribution of nurses to our health services and to society as a whole.

The theme for this year's International Nurses Day, "Our Nurses, Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives", is a powerful and timely message. It is also reflected in this Government's clear objectives to deliver structural reform that supports a sustainable supply of nurses to meet population health demands and support improved working conditions. The Government is committed to supporting innovation, a range of career opportunities and strong professional governance and leadership. Nurses have demonstrated that they can and want to work to the very top of their training, and we need that. This is essential for patient safety and a sustainable health system into the future. I want to reflect honestly on the challenges nurses face as we try to get to that.

I am aware of the recent INMO survey that indicates a high level of burn-out, stress and increasing violence and aggression in the workplace. While these issues are not specific to Ireland or to nursing here, nurses and midwives, as the largest workforce, are disproportionately affected. This poses a greater risk to staff well-being, workforce retention, and the delivery of safe patient care. Nursing is the largest professional group within our health system. Simply put, the breadth and depth of healthcare, working across every care setting. At every stage of life, and at moments of greatest vulnerability, nurses are often the first point of contact and most enduring point of contact for patients. They provide highly skilled care, lead with strong clinical judgment and deliver care with compassion that ensures patients, families and service users remain at the centre of the work they do. I would like to take this opportunity to formally acknowledge and extend my thanks to nurses in every service right across the country. I have seen first hand their leadership, professionalism, skill and commitment to the health and well-being of patients and all of our service users.

It is important to acknowledge the significant progress that has been made in Irish nursing over recent years. My Department is the great beneficiary of the work of the chief nursing officer and her team in the Department, who are leading on nursing policy solutions for the health service. I would like to make people aware of the integration of the nursing team into the Department. It is a mixed team of professionals and civil servants. Our chief nursing officer is Rachel Kenna. Her deputies are Karen Greene, who was the director of nursing in Beaumont Hospital, Kelly Mofflin, who was previously director of nursing and mental health nursing, and Gráinne Sheehan, who was previously a nurse specialist in cancer care. They are supported by nursing project officers Úna Rogers from midwifery, Claire Townsend and Tara

Mulleary, who are public health nurses, and Helen Carlin, who works in the area of renal nursing. They are supported by a team of civil servants. I mention this in order that Deputies will have a full sense of the integration of nursing into the Department of Health and the importance we place on that within the Department, leading on nursing policy solutions for the whole healthcare system. That has delivered not only a well-developed national nursing workforce, but also one that is highly regarded internationally. Significant investment in nursing has enabled a more sustainable, highly skilled and motivated workforce in line with Government commitments. That is very much in partnership with nursing representative organisations and every single nurse working in the Irish State.

Nursing in Ireland is a progressive, well regulated and forward-looking profession. Nurses are trained at undergraduate level in general, mental health, intellectual disability and children's nursing, enabling that system-wide contribution from the outset. This strong focus on education is clearly reflected in the recent review of undergraduate nursing education. This not only sets out the commitment to modernising practice, but the education reforms that reflect the future health care environment graduates will be working in. It has considered digitally enabled care, universal healthcare and integrated services. From 2027 onwards, students will spend substantially more time training in community settings, supporting early career pathways in community care and acting as a key enabler of Sláintecare delivery. I want to acknowledge how nurses and midwives work in an integrated way to provide person-centred care, combining their expertise in a seamless way to support individuals and families across the full continuum of healthcare.

The report *The State of the World's Nursing*, published in 2025 by the WHO and the International Council of Nurses, highlights that the global nursing shortages remain a critical challenge. Nursing is the largest professional group within our health system. In Ireland we are in the enviable position of having 14.3 practising nurses per 1,000 population. This is more than nearly all other European countries. I believe that only Finland and Norway have higher numbers but that also reflects the very different geographical spread of their populations. Nevertheless, I am very pleased that Ireland is so highly positioned among European countries in having so many practising nurses per thousand of population.

There are almost 93,000 nurses and midwives registered with the NMBI. That represents a 3% increase on last year and is the highest number of registrants ever recorded. Overall in 2025, there was an increase of 883 nurses. This is a hugely significant addition in a single calendar year, but it has been bettered this calendar year so far. Already in quarter 1 of 2026 we have an additional 843 nurses. That is a real commitment to recruiting nurses into permanent positions and it is very clear that nurses want to work in Ireland.

In addition to our Irish-trained nurses - who, the NMBI has told me, are staying more in Ireland than has previously been the case - we benefit greatly from the contribution of a diverse international nursing workforce. It is important to place on record that our recruitment approach is firmly grounded in ethical recruitment. Ireland has signed up to and is aligned with the WHO global code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel. When I was at the World Health Assembly last year, we sat at the front of the table, alongside the representatives from the Philippines, in terms of leading the conversation about ethical international recruitment. We will continue to need international professionals; however, given

the global shortages of health care workers, a more sustainable health and social care workforce is the focus. Nursing has a significant and unsustainable reliance on international recruitment.

Significant Government investment is being provided to expand healthcare education capacity here. A €28.5 million investment over the next three years aims to deliver 1,100 additional healthcare training places, each year, across medicine, nursing, therapy professions, pharmacy and dentistry. The years 2020 to 2025 saw first-year nursing places in Irish higher education institutions grow by 23%.

There are very real pressures in our system, such as increased demand and growing complexity, demographic changes, technology advances and financial challenges, but having a sustainable workforce is critical for the future of health in Ireland, and that is what we are working towards.

Despite the recruitment success I have outlined in 2025 and in the first part of 2026 - I hope there is more to come, and we have an awful lot more to do on that - nurses continue to experience staffing gaps in acute and community settings and there is too much reliance on agency staff in certain areas. International as well as national evidence has shown the direct correlation between nursing staffing levels and better patient outcomes, improved safety and reduced adverse events. It has also shown that appropriate staffing enhances staff well-being and improves retention.

Nursing in Ireland has shown national and global leadership by developing the framework for safe nurse staffing and skill mix, which we call the framework. This is an evidence-based approach to determining appropriate nurse staffing levels across different care areas. The framework is designed with patient need at the core. It is not about blunt staff ratios or minimum staffing levels. It is patient focused. It is flexible. It is a flexible model that adapts to the Irish context. Phases 1 and 2 of the framework are national policy. Phase 1 essentially applies to inpatient adult medical and surgical settings, while Phase 2 applies to adult emergency departments. Since 2020, a total of €56.2 million has been provided by the Government to implement this framework. That has delivered an additional 2,000 whole-time equivalent registered nurses and healthcare assistants. The framework is now fully implemented in all of our adult emergency departments nationally and it is nearing full roll-out in all applicable wards.

I believe the framework continues to demonstrate positive impacts for patients, staff and hospitals. Some examples include reduced length of stay, shorter wait times and fewer nurse-sensitive adverse events. It has improved working conditions and demonstrated a reduction in signs of burnout, lower levels of absenteeism and improved staff retention. From a cost and safety perspective, it helps to reduce reliance on agency staff and focuses on stabilisation through permanent whole-time equivalent staff. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and nursing representatives are very supportive of the framework and want us to drive as hard as we can in its implementation. In many respects, we are the envy of Europe in having this very professional structure. We want to continue to drive that and retain the leadership position we have in Europe in this way.

Advanced practice is a hugely important part of what we are trying to do to support nursing generally and support patient care. Advanced and specialist nursing practice has been the cornerstone of reform in recent years, delivering high-quality, autonomous care across acute,

community and specialist settings. Care pathways are being transformed by providing quicker access to care, timely assessment, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up. It is reducing waiting times, improving continuity of care and supporting care closer to home. Advanced practice is not only a key lever for optimising the capacity of the existing health workforce. It is important in supporting and advancing meaningful and significant clinical career pathways for nurses, and it strengthens retention. I want nurses to work at the very top of their expertise, the very top of their licences and the very top of their profession, and advanced practice is the way towards that. As a result of sustained investment, the number of nurses and midwives practising at an advanced level in March this year was 1,354. We now have 2.7% of the nursing and midwifery workforce at advanced level and we are on track to reach the 3% policy target. That positions Ireland as a global leader for advanced practice. We have begun a national evaluation of the impact of that, and this will be central to shaping the next phase of advanced practice.

Virtual care and the pace of digital and technological reform has opened many opportunities to innovate, change and improve care for patients. Let me particularly mention this today because nurses are playing a pivotal role in the innovation and safe expansion of virtual and digitally enabled care. Through nurse-led virtual clinics, remote monitoring and community-based models of care, nurses are actively improving access for patients, supporting chronic disease management and reducing unnecessary hospital attendances and exacerbations of people's long-term illnesses. Our nurses are at the forefront of embedding digitally enabled services, ensuring the new models of care are well co-ordinated, safe and focused on the needs of patients. That leadership is clearly demonstrated in the virtual wards now in every region. Those initiatives have been extremely successful at improving patient comfort. I spoke yesterday with a man in Kilkee in County Clare who had been on a virtual ward from Limerick for five weeks after experiencing a neurological event, and he spoke of it very positively. We have supported 2,800 individuals and patients like him, and it has delivered over 27,000 bed days for us, freeing up beds and other hospital resources for patients who require more traditional care. Virtual wards are not for everybody but for those who they are, they are being supported, delivered and led by nursing. Taken together, safe staffing, advanced practice and virtual care clearly demonstrate how nurses are actively shaping service reform. They are not simply responding to it; they are shaping it.

I attended the INMO conference last week and had the good fortune to meet many nurses and midwives from all over the country. I know and, indeed, heard again first hand about how passionate nurses were about what they did, about the challenges they experienced and about their commitment to their profession and their patients. I want to refer to the Expert Review Body on Nursing and Midwifery, which provides 47 recommendations of real significance. The positive impact of the expert review body's work continues to be realised year on year in many different ways, but there have been delays in implementing some recommendations and that has caused frustration. Work is ongoing to finalise processes under way for those recommendations.

I want to reaffirm the Government's clear recognition of the importance of actively supporting the continued development of the nursing workforce. I also want to acknowledge the practical improvements that will be delivered from local bargaining under the 2024 to 2026 public pay agreement. I am informed that the proposals being finalised will deliver a broad range of measures to strengthen pay and progression across the nursing and midwifery career

pathways and are an important part of supporting retention and ensuring a sustainable nursing workforce.

International Nurses Day provides an important opportunity for me and, indeed, all Members of this House to formally recognise the professionalism, skill and unwavering commitment of our nursing workforce. I want to acknowledge not only the extraordinary contribution nurses and midwives make every single day, but the leadership, innovation, compassion and support they bring to every person in our health service in the face of significantly growing demands and ongoing pressures. On this day, I reaffirm my strong personal commitment and, indeed, that of my Department and the Government to the nursing profession. I really do welcome contributions from Deputies and I hope - I know - that they will join me in once again placing on the record our sincere gratitude for the continued dedication and professionalism of our nurses today and every day and acknowledging the many improvements and supports we are trying to advance for the excellent nurses in our State.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I am pleased to join the Minister for Health today in marking International Nurses Day and in recognising the extraordinary contribution nurses make to our health service and society. I was also pleased as Chief Whip to fulfil the request by Deputy Devine, who wanted these statements held. I was pleased to be able to put this onto the agenda because it is important that we acknowledge the fabulous work nurses do.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, I would like to make special mention of the role of mental health nurses in the health service. Mental health nurses look after some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. They support individuals at moments of acute distress, at points of recovery and throughout longterm engagement with services. Their work, like that of all nurses and midwives, is grounded in clinical expertise, therapeutic relationships and sustained commitment to personcentred care. They are often the consistent presence for people navigating complex mental health needs, building trust over time and supporting continuity of care across services.

Nursing roles today are carried out in a context of significant and evolving demand. Mental health needs in our society are increasingly complex, services are multidisciplinary and care pathways extend well beyond traditional clinical settings. Mental health nurses are essential to navigating and responding to these challenges. I have seen first hand how nurses adapt practice, support innovation and help to shape how modern mental health services are delivered. I am also aware of how lucky we are in Ireland to train mental health nurses at undergraduate level. Across the EU, most countries do not train mental health nurses as a separate undergraduate field. Every mental health nurse who graduated last year in Ireland was offered a position here. It is important to acknowledge that.

The role of the mental health nurse has evolved significantly in recent years. We are seeing clinical leadership and a growing level of specialisation across the workforce, reflecting both the complexity of need within services and the expertise required to meet it. Mental health nurses work across a broad range of advanced and specialist roles, contributing not only to direct care but also to assessment, care co-ordination, prescribing, governance and service development. I want to give a special shout-out to mental health nurses who work across the psychiatry of later life. They do an amazing job supporting older people at a time in their lives

when all they want to do is stay at home to live their best lives in their own communities. They actually go to the house to support people who might have an enduring mental health condition or who might be struggling with anxiety or distress.

I have seen it first hand and I cannot pay enough tribute to them for the work they do and their kindness and understanding of the client who they are seeing. We see this also in the delivery of services such as the national clinical programme for suicide ideation and self-harm where experienced and skilled nurses work in our emergency departments to respond in real time and provide support to people in severe distress.

While we are continuing to expand crisis alternatives in the community, we know people in distress will always present to hospital for emergency care. In responding to this reality, I believe the solution is to establish specialist nursing teams in our emergency departments, staffed by advanced nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists working out of hours to support the non-consultant hospital doctor on duty and the consultant on call. I have funded these new teams for all model 4 hospitals in budget 2026, and I will do the same for model 3 hospitals in the next two budgets. This is further recognition of the role nursing can play in expanding the scope of how we provide mental health services and utilise the extensive skills and experience of our nursing workforce.

Similarly, the suicide crisis assessment nurse, SCAN, service is another example of how our nurses go above and beyond for their patients' well-being. SCAN is a key component of national suicide prevention and crisis response efforts. It provides a timely response to requests from GPs for the assessment of people experiencing suicidal crisis, with assessments often taking place in primary care or community settings.

The SCAN service provides a short-term, specialist, community-based clinical response for individuals presenting with suicidal ideation or self-harm that does not require acute hospital admission. As of 2025, there are 33 funded SCAN clinical nurse specialist posts for adults operating across 15 counties, alongside three under-18 SCAN services. Funding provided in budget 2026 supports expansion to a total of 45 posts nationally through the allocation of six new SCAN teams for Kerry, Limerick, Galway, Kildare, Dublin south city and an under-18 team for Linn Dara in West Dublin-Kildare. An under-18 SCAN service commenced in Donegal in July 2025.

As the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, said, this Government is fully committed to facilitating nurses to continue to work to the top of their licence.

Supporting advanced and specialist pathways not only strengthen services but also supports retention, professional autonomy and leadership within the workforce. These developments are essential to building a sustainable mental health system that can meet current and future demand.

It is important to acknowledge the realities of nursing in the mental health sector and, indeed, nurses and midwives across all sectors. Many work in settings that are highly demanding, emotionally complex and, at times, high risk. We are aware that these pressures can contribute to reduced job satisfaction, stress, burnout and challenges with staff retention.

My colleague referred to the recent INMO survey highlighting high levels of burnout, stress and exposure to growing levels of violence and aggression at work. The WHO Mental Health

of Nurses and Doctors, MeND, survey in 2025 found similar results across the European region.

These issues are not unique to Ireland or, indeed, nursing. This is a reality globally for the health and social care workforce. However, nurses as the largest workforce can be disproportionately affected as reference by the Minister, Deputy MacNeill. The increased awareness of these issues has, however, identified evidence-based policy actions to assist in addressing them. I am pleased that in Ireland, the Government is supporting many of these actions.

The Minister has set out the recent and ongoing policy responses, and it does not surprise me that nursing in Ireland is a global leader in some. This Government will continue to invest in our nursing workforce. Our commitment to this is reflected in our approach to workforce planning. All recent graduates, as I said, of psychiatric nursing programmes have been offered posts within our health service. This is a clear statement of the value placed on mental health nursing and the recognition of its importance to the delivery of mental health care nationwide.

International Nurses Day is an important opportunity to recognise the unwavering professionalism, compassion and expertise that nurses bring to every aspect of our health service. This is very evident in the area of mental health, where the training enables skill, empathy, and resilience that makes a profound difference to the lives of individuals and families every day.

I want to restate my deepest appreciation for our nursing workforce and to reaffirm my commitment to strengthening the profession through an ongoing focus on safe staffing, professional support, leadership and working conditions. When we support and empower our nurses, particularly those working on the front line of mental health care, we strengthen our entire health system and improve outcomes for patients and service users across the country.

Mental health nurses also play a critical role in supporting effective integration across physical, psychological and social services. This is essential to ensure continuity, improve outcomes and support holistic recovery for patients. This is important across CAMHS teams where you have multidisciplinary teams and the clinical nurse specialist embedded in the team, providing a huge amount of effective supports and reaching out to all the various definitions to make sure the young person receives the care that they need. Together, mental health nurses working in partnership with colleagues across all fields of nursing strengthen integrated care, ensuring that every patient receives holistic, compassionate and seamless support throughout their health journey.

I welcome the contributions of my fellow Deputies, and I hope they will join me in, once again, expressing our sincere gratitude for the dedication, courage and humanity that nurses demonstrate day in, day out.

As former Minister of State for older people, I want to touch on the phenomenal work that public health nurses do in communities every day of the week. Whether it is supporting a mother with a new baby, supporting people at their end of life or supporting people to live their very best life, they play a phenomenal role in the community. We have been challenged in some areas of Dublin, for example, in recruiting public health nurses into areas but I fervently believe, as somebody rooted in my own community, the importance of public health nurses, especially for older people when they are receiving the supports of home care, day care and

meals on wheels, is to know that the public health nurse is there at a time when, for example, coming home from hospital, an older person might need a hospital bed or some kind of physical supports as well as the clinical supports that we provide to support older people to age well in their own community. We are very lucky in Ireland to have the calibre of nurses we have. Whether it is public health nurses, nurses who are supporting you at end of life, nurses who are supporting you when you go into hospital or the nurse in your GP service, they are the backbone of health all over the country and I proud to salute them here today.

Deputy Máire Devine: As the only nurse in the Dáil, I stand here very proud. I am fortunate enough to have served on the board of St. James's Hospital, the largest hospital in the country. I am delighted that the Government agreed to have these statements on International Nurses Day and I thank the Minister and the Ministers of State. It is a first for the 100,000 plus nurses across this island, North and South. We hardly ever agree to things and this might be a rare occasion.

I concur with most of what the Minister said. There are details in other areas I would disagree with but today is a day of celebration and we will not get too snarly with each other. It is about, I suppose, recognising the hard work of nurses, globally and nationally. We are the backbone of the healthcare service - the glue that holds it together - and keep it going, albeit in unsafe conditions.

I recognise my colleagues from the Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland, the INMO and Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, formerly Bord Altranais, in the Public Gallery. Tá céad míle fáilte romhaibh, a cháirde. International Nurses Day was first celebrated 65 years ago on the anniversary of the birth of Flo, Florence Nightingale, also known as the Lady with the Lamp. I also honour our own Irish nursing heroes - Cumann na mBan's Elizabeth O'Farrell and the very matronly Margaret Huxley, in whose name they still have yearly awards in hospitals for the most high-achieving nursing student.

This year's theme, as the Minister said, is "Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives." This means ensuring the nursing workforce has the resources, the authority and the safety necessary to improve healthcare outcomes. Nurses are carers but they also need to be cared for. The insecurity of poor working environments with so many vacancies compromises patient care. That is just the way it is. Our healthcare system is in trouble. It is shaken to the core by the rapid and steady exit of medical professions to perceived greener pastures. An estimated 25,000 Irish qualified nurses and midwives left the healthcare system in the past two decades.

The significant long-term trend of emigration deepens the nursing crisis in Ireland with three quarters of new graduates considering emigrating due to burnout, poor working conditions and, of course, the housing crisis. Some 6,000 funded posts remain vacant, meaning that recently announced HSE staffing controls are extremely worrying to all nurses.

As the INMO warned, nurses cannot provide safe care and are scraping by with unsafe staffing levels. Essential worker recruitment is the first cut in every healthcare budget overrun. Likewise, the Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland has flagged the HSE's shocking proposals to close ten CAMHS beds in St. Vincent's in Fairview. Serious difficulties in recruitment and retention of psychiatric nurses give rise to grave concerns of the feasibility of

opening the 11 beds in Linn Dara, as the Minister of State will be aware, and the 20 new CAMHS beds at the national children's hospital, whenever that opens.

I am grateful to the registered nurses from outside Ireland who have arrived to help. A large proportion of our nursing force is now from other lands. It is a global phenomenon, as the Minister rightly said, and we are now heavily reliant on international staff to help steady our wobbly ship. While on the one hand we have a brain drain of trained nurses, we are also posing a drain on nurses from the less-advantaged countries of the world, negatively impacting their own quality of healthcare. The WHO has identified more than 50 countries that are exporting nurses, putting their own healthcare systems at risk. Everyone is entitled to look for a better life as our nurses have done abroad. However, the solution is not just in recruitment, but in retention and increased capacity for those wishing to train as nurses. That means a strong commitment to the existing workforce in terms of pay and conditions, safety, respect, support and professional development.

We must invest in affordable housing for nurses, midwives and their families near their workplaces. Locally, I am talking to the approved housing bodies and requesting of them in the Dublin 8 area, which is the health hub of our country, to retain some of the new housing builds for accommodation for local nurses through their four years of training.

I cannot help reflecting on the HSE's appeal at the beginning of the Covid pandemic. The Be on Call for Ireland campaign was heard loud and clear around the world. Tens of thousands gave up jobs and homes and returned to Ireland to assist. Many were nurses and were given a mere three-month contract, as I was. The HSE squandered the opportunity to decrease the billions of euro spent on agency workers and overtime over the last number years and instead provide skilled, knowledgeable and experienced nurses. It was a crucial missed opportunity to end long hours and burnout, provide safety and allow us to carry out our duty of care.

I conclude by acknowledging all of the healthcare professionals who have been abducted, injured and killed in Palestine due to Israel's horrific and violent attacks on the health infrastructure there. What they have endured is truly abominable. We are witnessing the loss of humanity. Humanity is a core component of what it takes to be a nurse.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Nurses are held in huge esteem in this Chamber and right across the country. It is worth asking why that is. The reality is that it is because they perform their duties with compassion, dedication and commitment to public service and to the communities in which they live. We all hold them in huge esteem. The problem is that, far too often, esteem and respect are not followed through in policy.

I am concerned at the situation we are facing in Cork and others are facing in other regions where this new control on spending could potentially - I want clarity on this - lead to a freeze on recruitment. There are some 5,000 vacant midwifery posts across the State, hundreds of them likely in Cork and Kerry. We have just had the busiest April for some time when measured by people on trolleys. The waiting lists in Cork are absolutely exploding. This is at a time when Irish nurses right across the world are desperate to return home to work in Irish hospitals to do what they can to assist in what is, in my view, still a crisis in our healthcare system. How can it be anything other when we have exploding waiting lists, growing numbers of people on trolleys, and appointments, elective surgeries and diagnostics constantly being postponed and cancelled? I find it difficult to understand why we could even be contemplating a potential

freeze on recruitment for clinically front-facing posts, which could include nurses. That needs clarity.

The other people I am thinking of today who serve our communities are our paramedics. I urge the Government to engage with them, to meet them without preconditions to ensure that they get what they have been waiting for for five or six years, which is recognition for the job they actually do in this modern day.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: International Nurses Day is about recognising the extraordinary dedication, professionalism and compassion shown every day by nurses across our health service. They are the backbone of patient care. I have seen at first hand in Mayo the incredible work nurses do every day. However, too many are working under relentless pressure in overcrowded hospitals, understaffed wards and unsafe conditions that are driving exhaustion and burnout. Successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have failed to deliver safe staffing levels. That is the bottom line. Nurses are being asked to do more for less while patients wait longer for care and healthcare workers carry the burden of a system stretched beyond capacity. If we are serious about protecting our health service, we must invest in the workforce that sustains it. That means delivering safe staffing levels, improving pay and working conditions, and ensuring that nurses have the support and respect they deserve. We also need urgent action to recruit and retain our graduate nurses. Every year, highly trained graduate nurses leave Ireland because they cannot secure permanent posts, affordable housing or decent conditions. We continue to train nurses for export while our hospitals suffer from understaffing.

As we sit here today, SIPTU members in the National Ambulance Service across the country are taking strike action. We must acknowledge the pressure facing these workers. Their concerns on staffing and working conditions deserve meaningful engagement and a fair resolution. On International Nurses Day, Sinn Féin stands in solidarity with our nurses, our front-line healthcare workers and our ambulance workers. We value their incredible work and dedicated service, and we demand the recognition from the Government that all healthcare workers deserve.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Is é inniu Lá Idirnáisiúnta na nAltraí, ina dtugaimid aitheantas do na daoine a choinníonn an córas sláinte ag feidhmiú lá i ndiaidh lae, go ciúin agus go dícheallach ar bheagán buíochais. Go raibh maith agaibh. Today is International Nurses Day, a day to give thanks to the people who are the backbone of our health service, the unsung heroes doing so much of the heavy lifting of care work in our hospitals and communities. However, one day of appreciation is not enough. Respect for nurses must be shown every day of the year. According to the INMO, we are short more than 5,000 nurses across the State, yet last week the HSE introduced a recruitment moratorium affecting nursing posts. At a time when our health service is already under enormous pressure, we need more nurses, not fewer. If agency spending is too high, the solution is to invest in direct employment, not to freeze recruitment.

Nurses are overworked and increasingly unable to deal with the cost of living. We are effectively training nurses for export. I have dealt with a young full-time nurse in my constituency of Kildare South. She is a single mother and at risk of homelessness after receiving an eviction notice from her landlord. This is happening across the State and it is

shameful. Strikingly, community nurses, predominantly women, were forgotten about in the most recent package of measures despite facing drastically increasing cost pressures tied to their work.

We must also speak about safety. No one should go to work fearing abuse or intimidation, yet we know nurses face verbal abuse, physical threats and, far too often, racism in the workplace with 12 incidents reported daily. This is not acceptable and is not inevitable. If we truly value nurses, we must provide safe workplaces, fair pay, sustainable conditions and a health service where nurses can build a life and a career in Ireland. Teastaíonn uainn an t-ómós atá tuillte ag altraí na hÉireann a léiriú le pá cothrom, coinníollacha maithe agus ionaid oibre sábháilte. Mar sin a choinneoimid altraí ag obair agus ag fanacht in Éirinn.

5 o'clock

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I strongly welcome these statements. I want to express my solidarity and thanks to all the nurses working and training across Ireland right now. For the many thousands of nurses who have been forced to emigrate by the failed policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, I want them to know this: we will work to build the conditions that give them the real choice to return home, with secure housing and a good quality of life. Over the past ten years, our health service has paid a heavy price because those in power have failed to value and respect our nurses. The knowledge and expertise that we have lost to places like Australia are hard to comprehend.

While members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will line up here today to sing the praises of our nurses, it will just be empty words. To be fair, Fine Gael has never hidden how it views our nurses. We all remember the then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, threatening to impose financial penalties on striking nurses, or Leo Varadkar telling us that it is best to keep our hospitals under-resourced, with fewer beds, because, according to him, if a hospital is not under pressure, the staff will kick back and relax. That culture in Fine Gael has ensured that any improvement in working conditions for nurses has had to be dragged out of the Government.

It is that critical mindset that shows that Fine Gael simply does not understand what it is like to work as a nurse - the long unsociable hours, the chronic understaffing, the physical demands, the high patient-staff ratios and the harsh workload. That is ever more present in St. Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny. Those who do their best get punished more. We see resources for hospitals going into black holes. Hospitals like St. Luke's Hospital do the very best with what they get, but they get a slap on the wrist for it. They do not get the resources they need. The Government needs to look at this.

Despite these harsh conditions, day in, day out, our nurses go above and beyond. They provide a level of warmth, care and support to members of the public who find themselves in need at a time of great vulnerability. That deserves more than praise. It deserves action.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on International Nurses Day. The theme is: “Our Nurses. Our Future. Empowered Nurses Save Lives”. I have just come from the new national children's hospital. I want to pay particular tribute to the nurses who are leading the charge there, as well as Lucy Nugent, the chief executive of CHI, and Julia Lewis, the head of transformation. It is wonderful to see so many nurses now coming into

senior leadership roles across the health service, where for so many years, it was dominated by the other professions.

I also pay tribute to the nurses I encountered in the Mater emergency department last night, when I was there with a friend, for the incredible professionalism and work rate that they bring every day to their jobs in what is a very difficult environment. We have seen a lot of commentary in recent weeks about violence and aggression. This is seen not only in the Mater hospital, but in many hospitals across the State. The reality is that many nurses go beyond the call of duty to deliver care across a variety of environments. It is important that when we talk about nurses today, we are not just focusing on the nurses who work in acute hospitals, who are incredibly important to the conversation, but we also recognise nurses in nursing homes, primary care clinics and GP practices, as well as community midwives and public health nurses.

Some 15% of the nursing workforce in this country has come from other countries. Our health service, particularly our nursing workforce, would not be able to survive were it not for people from countries like the Philippines and India coming to this country year after year to join our workforce. We must be very thankful to them. We also need to mind them and look after them. Certainly, the increasingly racist commentary that we hear among politicians, but also the really crude discourse that exists out there online and in our communities, has put the fear of God into many migrant nurses and other workers. It is something the Government needs to act on in a much more comprehensive fashion. We were promised an information campaign on the benefits of migration. We see it in our hospitals, day in, day out, but we have yet to see that campaign. I impress upon the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, that we need to see something specific to the health service and many other sectors to reassure those workers who have come to our country, but also to call out the racism that is out there.

I have three questions. They are principally directed to the senior Minister for Health, but I know the Minister of State will take them on board. The first concerns safe staffing ratios. We know that in 2017, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, introduced the general scheme of the patient safety Bill. It went through pre-legislative scrutiny, but it has been gathering dust ever since. We have to ask why that is, and what are the Government's intentions in this regard. When we look at the reality on the ground, the INMO national conference last week and its annual survey laid bare the extraordinary strain that so many nurses are working under. Some 67% of staff believe their current staffing levels and skill mix do not meet the clinical and patient demands required in their work area. Over half of respondents said that patient safety was almost always put at risk, or certainly very often. Almost half were pressurised to work additional hours or shifts. Shockingly, a quarter of the nurses who responded to that survey said they had to attend a GP due to work-related stress. We know that those in other grades within the health service are similarly suffering enormous stress and strain, as seen, in particular, in the Fórsa survey produced earlier this year.

We have to ask what the Government response to this is. I acknowledge that the number of nurses has gone up significantly in the past five years, by some 9,700, or just short of 10,000. That is significant. However, we know that when we benchmark Ireland against many of the other European countries and OECD norms, we are significantly short. That has to be part of the conversation on the future path for nurses working across our health system, and how we ensure that they and the patients are kept safe. That piece of legislation is vital. There are

minimal staffing ratios in childcare and education, yet we do not have that within our hospitals, where nurses and other staff are providing a crucial service.

We also have to look at the attitude of the Government and the HSE to commitments they have made to nurses and other health staff in recent years, particularly the WRC agreement in 2024. There were specific commitments with regard to agency, outsourcing and maternity cover, yet the unions had to go to the Labour Court last November with regard to the non-implementation of the WRC agreement by the HSE. That is simply not on. It is a misuse of the HSE's time that it has to go trekking down to the WRC. It committed to that agreement. Why is it not abiding by it? In February of this year, we saw nurses in Naas General Hospital going on strike because of unsafe staffing. This is a very real issue. We need the HSE and the Government to respond.

I am alarmed that we now have a recruitment freeze. We have heard all the reassurances from the Government, but the reality is that it is going to hit front-line workers. The Minister said this week that an extra €300 million is required for the health service. That is going to impact outcomes and services. We raised these issues at the budget last year, and we were told we did not need to worry because the health service was properly resourced. We knew then it was not the case, and now that is bearing fruit. That is serious mismanagement by the Department of Health in its budgeting.

The second question that I have for the Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid we are too late. I call Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I am happy to share my time.

An Ceann Comhairle: In that case, it is fine.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The other two questions I have relate to the strategic review of GPs. We have been promised this for a year and a half. It is late. Are we going to see a reference to GP nurses? They provide vaccines and smears. I refer to the new chronic disease management programme. Are we going to see a reference and proper provision for them in the new GP contract?

The last thing I want to say is with regard to public health nurses. From what I can see, the number of public health nurses across the country is lower now than it was five years ago. I looked through every region. Every single region has fewer public health nurses than it did five years ago. Why are the HSE and the Department of Health showing such contempt to public health nurses and the delivery of nursing care in our community? That needs to change.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Today we must recognise the immense pressure that our nurses are under in this country, but also other front-line health professionals across Ireland. This morning, I met with paramedics outside Mallow General Hospital who do not take this strike action lightly. Listening to them this morning, it was clear that this dispute was more than pay and grading. It is about burnout, staffing pressures, retention and a workforce that feels ignored for far too long. Last night, I spoke with nurses from CUMH and CUH who are genuinely

fearful about the impact this strike action it will have on patient care, particularly vulnerable patients who may now have to rely on private transport. I want to make clear, however, that workers do not take strike action lightly. Ambulance staff, paramedics, nurses, healthcare assistants and front-line workers have carried this health service on their backs for years. They worked through Covid, through overcrowding crises, through staffing shortages and through increasing pressure in our emergency departments and hospital wards.

This is nowhere more clear than in specialised nursing care. I want to specifically raise the concerns of Parkinson's Ireland regarding the shortage of Parkinson's nurse specialists. These nurses are essential for people living with Parkinson's disease. They support self-management, help patients manage systems and medications and reduce avoidable hospital admissions and pressure on acute services. In Ireland, we have around 60 Parkinson's nurse specialists. We currently have just 25, with two of those funded by Parkinson's Ireland itself. A recent UCC audit found that 57% of people living with Parkinson's in Ireland have documented access to specialised nurses. That is compared with 95% in the United Kingdom. There is a huge amount of work to do for front-line health services in this country, particularly for nurses.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I join the Minister in welcoming the representatives of nursing who are in the Gallery. They are all very welcome to the House. I thank them for being here. It is important to hear the contributions being made today. I am sure they are not agreeing with everything that is being said, but they are all very welcome.

I am very happy contribute to these statements as we mark International Nurses Day, and to join with colleagues across the House in paying tribute to our nurses and midwives. Every family in this country has a story about a nurse: the nurse who sat with an elderly parent through a long night; the midwife who delivered a baby and steadied a worried first-time mother; the community nurse who calls to the door each week so that a neighbour can stay longer in their own home; or the public health nurse who picked up early warning signs that a child needed additional help. These are not small things; they are moments when our health service delivers and lives up to its promises and, in certain cases, goes way above and beyond the call of duty.

In my own constituency of Dún Laoghaire, that work is carried out every day in a network of hospitals and community services that constituents rely upon. St. Vincent's Hospital at Elm Park is a major acute hospital serving a huge catchment area, with a nursing workforce of over 1,000. St. Michael's Hospital in the heart of Dún Laoghaire town runs a busy local emergency department and 130 inpatient beds, with several hundred nursing and clinical staff. I had personal experience of that over the last number of months. I want to put on the record, as it is appropriate today, that the nursing staff, Dr. JJ Barry and all the team there do immense work, not only for a relative of mine but indeed for so many constituents. St. Columcille's Hospital in Loughlinstown, with around 450 staff in total, provides the medical assessment unit and injury unit that so many people and families have turned to over the years. On top of that, there are the public health nurses, community nurses, school nurses, nursing home staff, hospice nurses and practice nurses working across Dún Laoghaire every single day. We owe all of them a huge debt and gratitude and simply say, "Thank you". We know what you do and we are grateful for it.

Gratitude on its own is not enough, of course. Nurses themselves would be the first to say that. The recent INMO member survey is a serious document, and the levels of stress, burnout

and pressure that it records cannot be brushed aside. I heard Phil Ní Sheaghdha on the radio recently talking about this document. Some of the statistics in it are quite startling. The World Health Organization recognises burnout as an occupational phenomenon. The international evidence tells us it has to be tackled on two fronts at once, that is, through individual supports and through structural change in how services are staffed and organised. That is what this Government is doing.

As of the end of March, there were 10,975 more nurses and midwives working in our health service than there were at the start of 2020, bringing the total to 45,591 whole-time equivalents. Over 93,000 nurses and midwives are now on the NMBI register – the highest number ever recorded. First-year nursing places in Irish higher education institutions have grown by 23% since 2020 and an additional €28.5 million is funding more than 1,100 extra healthcare training places every year for the next three years. The framework for safe nurse staffing and skills mix is now fully implemented in emergency departments and is nearing full roll-out in wards, backed by €56.2 million since 2020 and around 2,000 additional registered nurses and healthcare assistants. The evidence is showing what nurses have long known: when staffing is right, patients do better, missed care reduces, retention improves, and reliance on agency staff comes down.

We are also seeing real progress on advanced practice. Ireland is now a global leader in this area, with advanced practice accounting for 2.7% of the nursing and midwifery workforce. That has meant shorter waiting lists, faster access for patients, and clear career pathways for nurses themselves. Of the 47 recommendations in the expert review body report, 36 have been closed, with the rest on track for 2027.

The goal of universal healthcare, a public service that delivers the best possible care when it is needed, will not be reached without the nurses and midwives of this country. They are not a cost to be managed; they are the reason the system works at all. On International Nurses Day, I want to acknowledge them, particularly in Dún Laoghaire and right across the country, and to give a clear commitment that this Government must continue to back the nursing workforce in the work they do.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am very glad to be here today to speak on behalf of everybody in Ireland and thank the nurses for the work that they do, particularly on International Nurses Day. It strikes me, on this International Nurses Day, that so many of our nurses are international when you walk around the hospitals. I think between one in five and one in six are from overseas. Many of them come here because they have the opportunity to come here. That is an issue that needs to be dealt with. I have spoken to many nurses and other healthcare professionals who have come from overseas with contracts to the HSE. They have families and they want to bring their families here. It is very difficult to do that. That is something that needs to be reassessed because many of these people are reconsidering their options. If they are talking to others who are considering coming here, they are certainly telling them to think carefully about doing so because it is very difficult for their family to join them. These people are independent. They have their salary, a house and everything they need, yet they find it very difficult. It is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

I have personal experience. My daughter, Claire, is a nurse. She has wanted to be a nurse since she was small. As a parent, you always want your children to do well and to be successful

in whatever way they can, and to hopefully do better than you do. That is the plan that we always have in life. To be a nurse is something very special. It reflects a caring individual, somebody with humanity and great empathy. They are prepared to roll up their sleeves and do the hard work as well. There are those two sides to it. From speaking to her and others in that profession, it is often not recognised to the level it needs to be, particularly because of the stresses they are under. If I talk to nurses and ask what the one thing is that would change things and make them better, they will say more staff - more nurses, more than likely. That is the big pressure that they are under, in many cases. In many cases, they are working in circumstances where logic would tell you there should be three or four working in a ward but there are only two.

They are facing real difficulty. That is one of the big issues that needs to be dealt with.

It has been mentioned that there are over 5,000 vacancies in the service. That needs to be addressed. We need to put the pressure on to ensure we can deliver those staff and ensure we can get an adequate health service that deals with all of these issues. Indeed, my daughter, Claire, said to me that as bad and as difficult as it often is for nurses, they are not the first ones at the scene when there is a car accident or when there is somebody in serious trouble having a heart attack. The first people there are the paramedics who have driven an ambulance to get there. Often, in tragic circumstances when a person is deceased, they have to cut them out of the vehicle. The trauma and difficulty of that and the level of skill they have is not recognised by the level of remuneration. That is why they are on strike today. I visited them today in Ballyshannon, Sligo and Carrick-on-Shannon on my way here.

Many people in the health services are under huge pressure. If the State wants to celebrate nurses, it needs to celebrate everybody in the health service and ensure it deals with this issue in regard to the ambulance services.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: On this International Nurses Day, I want to commend our nurses and midwives and thank them for their work and service. Nurses and midwives need more than thanks on the floor of the Dáil. They need better working conditions, they need more staff and they need more resources. That is what would make their jobs easier.

We know April was the worst April on record for overcrowding, with 11,000 patients treated on trolleys. It is putting huge strain on nurses, midwives and staff which means really bad outcomes for patients. This needs to change.

We have also seen in the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, survey of their members really shocking and startling results: 70% say there is inadequate staffing and skill mix; 60% considered leaving their job in the last month; 40% said work negatively impacted on their psychological well-being; and 25% of nurses and midwives attended a GP due to work-related stress in the past year. The stress and the strain our nurses and midwives are under because of the working conditions should be setting off alarm bells in the Department of Health. It really is not good enough.

The Minister for Health says the safe staffing framework is well resourced. I would ask her to talk to nurses, midwives and patients because the experience on the ground does not reflect that. It has never been fully resourced and it needs to be. In other countries, they do this. In

Australia, they have enshrined in law that the safe staffing framework must be resourced. We can do that too.

Our time today would have been better spent legislating for safe staffing levels in our hospitals instead of talking about and giving thanks to nurses, and actually improve their working conditions like they have done in other countries. We know people are leaving here to go to work in places like Australia where there are better working conditions. The Australian health practitioner regulation agency saw an 86% rise in Irish healthcare workers registering there since 2019. People are moving because of the working conditions. People are leaving the health service because they are under such stress and strain and it really needs to change.

I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister in November on the staffing levels and found out there are over 3,700 funded posts from 2024 and 2025 that have not been filled. Of the 2024 funded posts, 27% remain unfilled. Of the 2025 funded posts, 80% remained unfilled. We provided the funding for them but they have not been filled by the HSE. That is on top of the 3,100 previously unfilled vacant posts. Across the service, 7,000 posts across the HSE are vacant. This is why nurses and midwives are under such stress. It is because there are vacancies right across the service. We know 1,100 funded nursing and midwifery posts remain vacant while the HSE spends €124 million on agency staff.

The decision last week on the hiring freeze on non-front-line workers was a knee-jerk reaction done without consultation with workers and unions. It is going to have a big impact. Who is going to do the administrative work? It is going to fall on the clinicians and it is going to really impact on services. While I do welcome the controls on agency spend, we have been here before. We know that since 2020, €4 billion has been spent on agency staff. That is a staggering amount of money. It is poor outcomes for staff, patients and the public purse and it needs to change.

We know targets were set for converting agency posts into permanent posts. There was meant to be 960 conversions over 2024 and 2025. However, the Department and the HSE fell 132 posts short of that, 77 of which were in nursing and midwifery. Converting those posts into permanent posts is a basic thing that could be done. It is a staggering amount of money spent on agency staff. That money should be spent on filling these permanent posts, improving the services, resourcing our health service and it is not being done.

Crucially, what needs to happen is that we need a multi-annual budget for the health service. Since 2016 it has been promised time and again, Government after Government, but we have not had it. It would lead to better planning, more sustainability and we would not have this knee-jerk reaction of pausing recruitment and stopping hiring. If you were going to buy a car, you would ask if you could pay off the loan over three or four years. You would not think of one year at a time. We need to have better planning for our health service and we need a real guarantee from the Minister that there will not be a freeze on front-line workers. I would love the Minister to make that commitment on the floor of the Dáil and say that this will not be extended to front-line workers. Ultimately, we need to have those safe staffing levels. That should be the guiding benchmark in terms of recruitment for our staff. That would have the biggest impact on nurses and midwives.

Deputy Liam Quaide: International Nurses Day should not be treated as an annual exercise in sympathetic, soothing words about how great our nurses are. Nurses do not need another

round of empty public praise or applause that carries no willingness to improve their working conditions behind it. Our nurses need a health service that take their safety, their working conditions and their health and well-being seriously. Of course, we should recognise and celebrate the work nurses do. Every day, in hospitals, community services, mental health wards, disability services, older person services, emergency departments and public health settings, nurses carry an enormous share of the health service. They are often the people who notice when a patient is deteriorating; the professional a family turns to when they are frightened or confused; and the worker trying to hold a service together when staffing is short, beds are unavailable and the wider system is failing around them.

If the tributes being paid today are to mean anything, we must be honest about what many nurses are asked to endure. One of the clearest examples is violence and aggression at work. A HSE response to a parliamentary question I submitted last year showed there were almost 17,800 reported assaults on HSE staff between 2022 and 2024. These included physical, verbal and sexual assaults reported through the national incident management system. The category of worker most affected was nurses. There was almost 11,000 incidents reported involving nursing staff over those three years. Mental health services accounted for almost 7,500 incidents. Disability services represented over 3,470 and acute hospitals recorded almost 4,000.

This means nurses being threatened, punched, kicked, spat at, grabbed, sexually harassed or verbally abused while carrying out their work. We need to be careful and humane in how we discuss these realities. Many incidents happen in settings where patients may be extremely distressed, frightened, intoxicated, psychotic, cognitively impaired, traumatised or unable to regulate their behaviour because of disability, illness or crisis. However, none of that takes from the impact of these assaults on staff. A serious response means safe staffing levels. It means proper training in de-escalation. It means appropriate security where needed and ward and service environments that reduce risk rather than compound it. It means proper follow-up after incidents and psychological support. It means managers and senior decision-makers treating workplace violence as a major occupational hazard, not as background noise in a health service under pressure.

Assaults are only one part of the wider picture. Nurses are also dealing with injuries from moving and handling, exhaustion from unsafe staffing, missed breaks, relentless pressure and the psychological toll of trying to deliver safe care inside a system that too often makes that impossible. There is a particular kind of stress and dejection in knowing what a patient needs and not having the staff, time, beds, equipment or community supports to provide it. That is not just frustrating but over time, it is corrosive. It damages morale. It pushes experienced nurses out. It makes recruitment more difficult. It affects patient care. The State cannot keep speaking about retention while ignoring the conditions that drive people away.

I want to briefly raise healthcare workers living with long Covid. During the pandemic, healthcare staff were asked to answer the call of duty in settings that were fraught with danger and uncertainty. Many were exposed to Covid before vaccines were available, before PPE was consistent and before the long-term consequences of the virus were properly understood.

Some people are still living with those consequences. Long Covid, as we know, can involve debilitating fatigue and pain, cognitive difficulties, breathlessness, post-exertional crashes and a range of other symptoms that make ordinary life extremely challenging, not to mention

returning to demanding clinical work. The special Covid leave with pay scheme for public health service employees with long Covid has now ended, with remaining staff moved onto the ordinary sick leave scheme. I welcome the Taoiseach's recent engagement with unions on this issue, but I also want to mention the many nurses as well as other healthcare workers who fell outside eligibility for special Covid leave with pay and who remain disabled by their symptoms and unable to return to work. If nurses are central to the future of healthcare, safe staffing is imperative. If nurses were asked to carry the health service during Covid, those still living with the consequences of the pandemic should not be abandoned. The tribute nurses need is not sentimental social media soundbites; it is protection at work, proper staffing, fair treatment when injured or ill and a health service that stops asking them to absorb the consequences of political failure.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: On International Nurses Day, I pay tribute to all nurses and midwives throughout the country, particularly in Kildare. We are fortunate to have Naas General Hospital in Kildare North, but many of the nurses and midwives in my home town of Maynooth, Celbridge, Leixlip, Clane and Kilcock work in Blanchardstown, Tallaght, St. James's and HSE service providers around the country. For a long time, one of those nurses was my mum. She worked in Stewarts Care for over 30 years. She trained to be a nurse in Clonsilla. The working conditions for her became far too much at one stage, so much so that she has now left intellectual disability nursing and has moved into special education, initially as a teacher and now as an SNA. I have seen first hand with my mum, a single mother of four children, the difficulty she had, particularly with the working conditions, the late hours and trying to raise four young children, my three sisters and me.

There are silver linings in how more nurses are coming on stream. I look at Maynooth University, for example, my alma mater in my hometown. Professor Fintan Sheerin has established a school of nursing there. Professor Sheerin trained to be a nurse with my mum in Clonsilla. That school has grown from strength to strength over the past year, and it is exciting to see the work happening in Maynooth University under Professor Sheerin's leadership. It shows that more can be done to train more nurses across all disciplines of nursing and all disciplines of medicine.

Looking to the future, I had a call last Friday from a young mum, an ICU nurse, who had moved back to Kildare from the United Arab Emirates, UAE. She had spent a number of years there with her husband and their two daughters. She had difficulties getting the eldest child into school. The child is going to a Gaelscoil now, even though she did not speak any Irish. She had to get grinds in the UAE. Then there are similar difficulties with childcare for the youngest daughter. There is an issue for my generation, in particular. I am 36. Many my friends and a lot of people of a similar age who moved to the UAE or Australia are now looking to move home. We need those specialist nurses and healthcare providers to come back here. There should be assistance there and a pathway for them to come home. That could involve assisting with securing accommodation, education, childcare - basic fundamentals in which the State has a role. Certainly, the HSE should be looking to try to help more Irish medical professionals to come home. They want to come home.

We have seen the difficulties with people trying to obtain somewhere to rent or to buy. There should be assistance provided in that regard. In the Minister of State's constituency in Limerick, for example, assistance could be given to particular nurses who are trying to find

accommodation in Limerick or in Clare. The same could be done in Kildare in order that there would be assistance for people seeking to come home, and that when they do come home, they are not scrambling to try to find childcare or school places for their children. It is the least we can do. The HSE needs to look at this as part of a proper campaign. I think it would benefit not only the healthcare professionals - in this instance nurses and midwives - but also the State. The State would benefit greatly from experienced and knowledgeable nurses, midwives and doctors being brought back here. We need their experience and expertise, and our healthcare system would be better because of them. It is already better because of the nurses and the midwives we have in the country.

I pay tribute to all the nurses, all the midwives and my mum for the incredible work they do in helping people. Nursing is the noblest of careers, and I thank them for their work.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank all the nurses around the country on this day, International Nurses Day. It is only fit and right that we start our speeches in here by saying "Thank you", not just as a formality or a generic line in a speech but as a meaningful and heartfelt one. All of us in here have experienced healthcare at various stages of our lives or with our family members, and nurses have always been there to help us along those sometimes most treasured moments in our lives but sometimes the most difficult moments in our lives as well. If you think about it, the first hands that would have touched many of us in this world have been those of a nurse or a midwife. When we were frightened in hospital as children, it was a nurse who sat with us. When our parents or grandparents were at their most vulnerable, confused, in pain, afraid, it was a nurse who often stayed with us, who explained things gently, who held a hand when no family member could be there, who made a cold, clinical environment feel somehow human. There is no qualification in the world that teaches you how to do that; that comes from something deeper, from the character of every one of those nurses and from genuine compassion. Irish nurses have that in abundance.

The INMO represents over 42,000 nurses and midwives across the island, 42,000 people who made a deliberate choice to dedicate their working lives to the care of others, who sat their exams, completed their training, put on their uniform for the first time and decided that this was how they wanted to spend their days. That decision deserves to be celebrated loudly and genuinely here today.

Irish nursing also carries a history to be enormously proud of. For generations Irish nurses have been regarded as among the finest in the world, sought after, respected and trusted in every corner of the globe. Their reputation was not handed to them; it was built ward by ward, shift by shift by the women and men who gave everything to their patients and to their profession. We stand on the shoulders of that tradition today and we should acknowledge it with pride.

The dedication continues. Right now, there are nurses in Cork, Munster and every county across the country who are on their feet doing what they do quietly, expertly, without fanfare. They are not looking for applause - they never have been - but they deserve it all the same.

Celebrating our nurses means asking ourselves an honest question: are we doing enough to make Ireland a place where they want to stay, where they feel valued enough to build their whole career, their whole life, right here at home? The truth is that Irish nurses are wanted everywhere: Australia wants them, Canada wants them, the Middle East wants them. Who

could blame any country for wanting the best? However, we want them here also and we need them here. More than that, they belong here, in the hospitals and communities they grew up in, caring for the people they know, building something lasting in the country that shaped them. It is worrying that Ireland has the highest proportion of foreign-trained nurses in the entire OECD, 51.8%, more than twice the level of the second highest country. That is not a badge of honour; it is a warning sign flashing red for all of us, so we need to take heed.

The INMO has told us that there are currently 5,000 nurse and midwife vacancies across the country. That is not just a number on a page; it is 5,000 opportunities for Irish nurses to come home, to step in and to be part of rebuilding something, and it is 5,000 reasons why we must make Ireland as attractive as possible for nurses to stay and to return.

That is why we should be making Ireland the best place in the world for an Irish nurse to build their career. We should be investing in pay that properly reflects the responsibility nurses carry every day. A staff nurse starts on €37,288. We need to keep building on that year on year until the gap between what Ireland offers and what other countries offer is no longer a reason for anyone to leave. We should be moving urgently towards safe staffing legislation and real enforceable ratios in order that every nurse can finish their shift knowing they gave the standard of care they trained so hard to deliver.

We should be providing genuine career progression in order that nurses qualifying today can look ahead and see a future here that is fulfilling, sustainable and rewarding. We should be making the choice easy. Right now, for too many nurses, it is not easy enough. We want the young people who are considering nursing as a career to choose it with confidence. We want newly qualified nurses to look around and see a country that has their back. We want the experienced nurses who have given years of service to feel their dedication is truly seen and truly valued. Ireland is blessed with nurses who are second to none. We should make sure Ireland is a country that is second to none in the way it looks after them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Today, on International Nurses Day, we recognise and thank nurses working across every part of our health service and at every stage of life. We think of those nurses in our hospitals, in GP surgeries and in communities. We think of public health nurses, addiction nurses, mental health nurses, intensive care nurses, palliative care nurses, paediatric nurses, geriatric nurses, and those working in disability services, cancer care, maternity care, health promotion and the Irish Blood Transfusion Service. Irish nurses have earned a reputation across the world for excellence, professionalism and compassion. That is a source of enormous pride for this country.

My aunt Stephanie worked as a nurse and a midwife for much of her life. She cared for patients here in Ireland but also in many areas affected by war, famine and insecurity. She taught nursing and midwifery in some of the largest and worst refugee camps in the world. Today, on International Nurses Day, I think of her and of all of those nurses, healthcare workers and health facilities that have been attacked, particularly in Gaza but also in the West Bank and Lebanon, as Israel continues with its genocide.

Today is also an opportunity to recognise the international character of modern nursing in Ireland. Nurses working in our health services have come here from every corner of the globe. We are deeply grateful to every nurse, whether from Ireland or beyond, who cares for people here with dignity, skill and humanity. Gratitude alone is not enough, however. If we truly

value nurses and nursing, we must ensure safe staffing, fair pay, decent and safe conditions and affordable housing. We must tackle the burn-out, exhaustion and unsafe workloads.

The figures from the INMO are deeply worrying. Too many nurses report unsafe staffing levels, serious stress and pressure to work additional hours. Many are considering leaving their workplace or leaving their profession entirely. It speaks to the compassion, dignity and discipline of nurses that, when they are asked to do more, they tend to do so until they hit the point at which they can do no more. That is not sustainable for workers or for patients.

As we are speaking here, I will also express solidarity with nurses' colleagues in the National Ambulance Service. These workers taking industrial action today are paramedics, advanced paramedics and EMTs and provide extraordinary front-line clinical care under immense pressure. They also deserve proper staffing, recognition and meaningful engagement from Government.

No more than paramedics and the rest of their colleagues in the health service, nurses are essential to society and to humanity. They deserve action, fairness and protection. They need to be acknowledged. If it boils down to one word, it is "respect". Gratitude and platitudes are easy but respect costs.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: During this whole discussion, there have been elements of *déjà vu* as regards Covid. I was not here but, like many others, I looked at the screen and saw the applause for nurses in the Dáil. It was the height of hypocrisy. There was applause but no pay rises. Long Covid supports have just been ended. Nurses were urged to go onto the front line. It was mainly nurses who suffered from that condition. I seriously wonder how nurses around the country, particularly those at University Hospital Limerick, and nurses abroad feel hearing this debate. This April was the worst on record for overcrowding in the hospitals. Some 11,175 people were treated on corridors according to the INMO's trolley watch. That long-term degradation of their working conditions has an absolutely massive impact on nurses' well-being and so on. They face stress, burn-out and unsafe conditions.

In a survey, two thirds of nurses said that staffing levels and the skills mix around them did not meet patients' needs. I could go on forever. One quarter of nurses have gone to their GP due to work-related stress in the past 12 months. To be frank, it does not sound like nurses are valued, does it? The INMO has gathered many statistics on this. Some 61% of nurses are considering leaving nursing and 80% report unsafe conditions. Nearly half of all nurses reported pressure to work extra shifts.

I will add something else into the mix. It is International Nurses Day, a day on which we also celebrate midwives. Some 15% of the entire HSE workforce come from international areas. There have been 200 racist incidents against nurses in Ireland in the last year. In some cases, nurses are travelling in groups to their workplaces because they are afraid. One member of the INMO said that things like verbal comments and exclusion can have an impact and that this comes on top of everything else you are getting on with. That is a real issue because we rely so heavily on nurses coming here from other jurisdictions. They should be treated with respect.

What do nurses want? It is obvious. They want safe working conditions, decent pay so they can actually afford to live, and to feel they are able to keep going in the job. We need massive

investment in the health service to provide the staff that are needed and to get rid of the unsafe working conditions nurses are being forced to put up with. We need less applause and fewer statements on International Nurses Day. Once again, a highly feminised workforce is just expected to put up with crap again and again.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is obviously good that we are at least getting this opportunity to talk about the issues affecting nurses but it is pretty rich given the issues highlighted by the INMO at its conference, including stress, burn-out, unsafe staffing levels and student nurses. I do not know how many years ago it was that we had motions about student nurses and the number of them who were contemplating leaving the country because they felt it was not doable for them because of the way they were being treated and what they were facing in the Irish health service. Many of them were leaving the country and going to Australia or wherever. All of those issues that the INMO have been campaigning about all of these years remain with us. Really, nothing has changed. A quarter of nurses are needing to see their GP because of the impact the job is having on them.

Last year, this all became very tangible for me rather than being somewhat abstract. I was in the hands of the nurses who were looking after me when I was in a difficult spot. It is then that you realise just how important they are and how much they do for you. We then find that nurses are treated in this way.

The Government is now talking about recruitment embargos again. I cannot believe it. When we have unsafe staffing levels and the union has been campaigning to place a legal obligation on the State to ensure safe staffing levels, we are back to recruitment embargos. The Government has given no real clarity as to whether these will impact on nurses and the front line and therefore on patients, the quality of services and all of the rest of it. The Government has consistently underbudgeted for health. That is why we get overruns. The pay, conditions and the situation in our health service are so bad that the service cannot recruit people and has to rely on outsourcing. Working in the public health service is just too unattractive to nurses. The last thing we need is recruitment embargos. We need a recognition from the Government that it has been underfunding and under-budgeting for our health service. Quite frankly, it is scary that the Government is talking about recruitment embargos as a response to its failure to acknowledge the amount of money it needs to put into our health service and into backing our nurses and other healthcare workers. "Hear, hear" for the nurses but the Government needs to step up to the mark.

Deputy Charles Ward: Nurses play a vital role in caring for patients in hospital and healthcare centres. Their work and their impact extend far beyond medical treatment. They are often the first people patients see. They are the ones who spend the most time providing care and comfort for the sick and injured. They are often the ones who provide emotional support to families during extremely difficult times. They do all of this while juggling immense workloads and dealing with overcrowded hospitals, staff shortages and long working hours.

The physical and emotional pressures they come under caring for patients every day cannot be underestimated. This is reflected most in the HIQA report on Letterkenny University Hospital where risks were identified in the emergency department, particularly with regard to overcrowding. Despite this the nurses were observed being courteous, attentive and respectful in their interactions with patients. The report said they were aware of this and demonstrated

commitment to providing care and dignity and autonomy in delivery of care, and they retained a calm reassuring presence despite the pressures of a busy department with long waiting times. This is consistent with many reports you hear about Letterkenny hospital. Despite this and the many challenges they face, the nurses are exceptional in their work and the care they provide.

I do not think they get the recognition they truly deserve, and I am glad we are taking time to recognise them today. They deserve far more recognition, and the Minister of State knows this. At last week's INMO conference, an emergency medical nurse who worked in Letterkenny hospital for 22 years described how she left due to stress, anxiety and the physical demands of the job. She said she would go back in a heartbeat except her health was so damaged. She was one nurse potentially looking after between 30 and 40 patients in a busy emergency department. The shifts are physically hard and demanding. These are 13-hour shifts where you are on your feet and it is constantly go, go, go. It also takes a significant mental toll on their health, and they suffer from burnout. This is pushing them to the brink until they can physically and mentally do no more. We must support them and support their jobs.

We must also support our National Ambulance Service. The HSE's failure to update the ambulance workers' pay scales to reflect changes in their responsibility and workloads over the past 20 years is shocking. We must do all we can to support them. Two weeks ago, I was in the accident and emergency department in the middle of the night with my youngest child who had a high temperature. I received fantastic treatment there. One of the Indian nurses came in and she was magnificent. She cared for my child like it was her own. We need to recognise this but we also need to recognise that we have to look after our nurses.

Deputy John McGuinness: I thank all of the nurses and midwives we are speaking about this evening. I certainly appreciate them. I thank them for their passion for the job, and for their commitment and dedication. I also recognise that we stood in this House and applauded all of the front-line workers and made comments and statements about nurses and others. Yet, we did not fulfil what is necessary, which is pay and conditions, the proper number of staff and allowing them to perform their functions, which they are very good at.

I stand in solidarity with the ambulance drivers today and say we should recognise what they are doing and improve the range of qualifications now in play and ensure they have the numbers to do the job the way we expect them to do it. It is hypocrisy to speak here and for the HSE or Government, whoever is at fault, to not give the appropriate pay and conditions to those we are speaking about. We need to change that radically.

St. Luke's in Kilkenny is a level 3 hospital. It is short between 70 and 100 nurses. They use a lot of money to bring them in from the private sector to nurse in that hospital. When I see that, I think of the management and structure in the HSE. It is not good. It is not best practice, and it is not good business for the country. We should be doing a lot more to manage the staff we need and the qualifications we need within the health service. We should be doing an awful lot to support the nurses and midwives financially and in terms of their work arrangements.

There is a new hospital ready to be opened in Thomastown. I hear no talk about that in the context of staffing levels. Have they been completed? We need to have fewer promises from Government and politicians with regard to how all of this going to be achieved. We should be

dealing with the reality of the crisis that faces nurses, be they in general hospitals or in the mental health setting, but we do not. I would like to see more time given to a discussion about management to deliver what we are speaking about to the front-line workers and to ensure they get the best for their jobs.

In his day, Bernard Gloster promised a skills facilitator for St. Luke's in Kilkenny. It never happened, and that is what I am talking about when I talk about promises made. You need to do what you say. You need to ensure the workers and nurses we see on the front line are properly compensated and we need to ensure those who continue to argue about long Covid are answered. They are not just doing it for the fun. Some of these nurses and front-line workers have been very sick following Covid and we have not recognised it. We have pitched them all back to the HSE to work out their deal for their ongoing income. A lot of them are really stressed about all of this. They are suffering depression, anxiety, burnout and so on. We talk about it here. We identify where the problem is but for some reason we refuse to address it. Until such time as these issues are addressed, the Government can stand and be counted as not fulfilling its first obligation, which is to keep its people safe.

Nurses and front-line workers deserve better. If the management were any way right, or any good at all, the strikers would not be out there today. That matter would have been dealt with long before it happened. If the Government was in private business, it would look across the range of employees it has and make it super attractive to keep them there, particularly when there is a shortage of skilled staff. That is what is done but it does not seem to be done by Government or the HSE. That needs to be talked about and corrected.

Deputy Peter Roche: I am glad to have the opportunity to add my voice of thanks to the many nurses around our country. I also give a shout-out to those in the ambulance services who are striking today and want us to do more for them. Strangely, my first job at 16 years of age was in a nursing home during the summer holidays. I never forgot the impact that had on me because I saw the outstanding work the nurses did. It resonated with me and the outstanding care left an indelible mark on me. Every patient was like their own parent, brother, sister or father. I thought that was incredible. From my circumstances in the past year, we lost two members of my family. We lost my daughter-in-law this time last year and my brother in recent times. I had lots of good reason to visit hospitals. I have often felt that nurses are born to be nurses. They are not manufactured. They come with such empathy, care and compassion and wonderful tolerance. They can cope with almost anything. I saw lots of times how people struggling with dementia might strike out. The nurse is able to withstand that and take that as if it is par for the course. I am not sure there is any other occupation with the tolerance to do that. The work they do is resounding. It is high time we said thank you loudly to them.

6 o'clock

Saying thanks, as others have indicated over the last while, is a small thing, though significant, but what is really needed is for us to take stock and be cognisant of what they are enduring. There needs to be fair play for the contribution they make to society. That is one of the most compelling things, which we should really be doing. All of the contributions here today have been along the lines of praising them highly and speaking about the challenges. We all know those challenges and aware of the tremendous threat.

I am one of those, and God knows there are plenty more, who witnessed the nursing staff never allowing that stress or front-line pressure to have any impact on their patient. I can recall, as I said in recent times, when my brother was critically ill just a few weeks ago that it was a comfort to him to press the red help button. The expression on anyone's face, particularly his, when that nurse arrived into the room showed that was a lifesaver.

These are the things that I take from today's conversation. It is about acknowledging that wonderful contribution that they make to society. They continue to do personal development and improve their skills. Many are finding it a struggle to find their first job in their nursing career, and there are those who are abroad and want an opportunity to come home and work here. Many of those who are abroad, be it in Australia, America or Canada, go as a life choice and come back with a wealth of experience to offer to the health system here. I add my voice of thanks to the wonderful nursing staff around the country for what they do to keep the clock ticking on life.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I begin by sending my solidarity to those in the National Ambulance Service who are engaged in strike action today. I know they would much rather be at work. Today's action should and could have been averted but the Government failed to address the issues that caused them to strike. At this late hour, I call on the Government to intervene and engage with the workers, and ensure that ambulance staff receive the respect and safe staffing that they deserve.

Nurses are the backbone of our health service. While the direct role is often to deliver medical care, the functions that they undertake span many more tasks than that. Nurses are medical professionals. They are the person a patient will trust and often confide in, the provider of emotional support to the ill, the comforting voice in a maternity ward, and the shoulder to cry on for those consumed by loss. Given the immense role they play across the health service, it is appropriate that there is a day to celebrate them today. The work they do and the hours our nurses put in comes with a cost to them personally. A 2026 member survey by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation noted high levels of stress, burnout and concern about working conditions for nurses. Some 39% of respondents reported that their work negatively impacted their psychological well-being, and 24% of respondents reported visiting the GP due to work-related stress over the preceding 12 months. These are stark statistics.

Beyond this staggering personal toll, there is a danger that we will continue to lose our highly trained nurses to other jurisdictions. The INMO survey results are damning in this regard. Some 61% of respondents have considered leaving their work area in the month prior to completing the survey. Some 80% of those reported unsafe staffing levels in their areas. It is clear from these results that staffing levels and workload pressures remain a huge stress on our nurses. We need to establish in legislation safe staffing policies to protect both our nurses and patients. How can we expect to attract people to a sector if we cannot guarantee their safety, we cannot guarantee their leave days will be available when they need them, and we cannot guarantee that they will have manageable and safe nurse-patient ratios?

I briefly mention the nurses who work in my hospital, University Hospital Limerick, UHL, and commend them. For many years, they have been doing their already challenging job in some of the most difficult conditions faced by healthcare workers in any medical facility in the State. They are among the best heroes of our health service. Over the last number of years,

the overcrowding in UHL has got worse for thousands of patients treated on trolleys all over the hospital. This severe risk to patient safety has often been mitigated by the professionalism and dedication of our nurses, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart. While people become frustrated waiting in the emergency department and despondent from being treated in the corridor, the feedback we receive regularly is that once you get in the door, the care you receive at UHL is pretty good.

I salute our nurses and midwives for the wonderful work they do. I commend the INMO for its attention to the needs of its members, and I call on the Government to ensure that our nurses are provided with safer and more secure working conditions.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank all the nurses in the country, especially five of them in a place called Athlacca in County Limerick. There is a family of six, with five girls and one boy, and five of the girls were nurses. They are Marie, Eileen, Noelle, Angela and Cliona. They are the O'Keeffes. I grew up with them. The whole family have dedicated their lives to care and nursing. It was unbelievable to see. I thank all of the families, male and female nurses across the country, for what they have done, for the care, and for the families who encouraged them and gave them the help to become nurses so they can actually provide for others. I grew up with it. My sister is a nurse who is now retired. They grew up at a different time for nursing. At the time, they were in hospitals with matrons and each ward was run by the matrons. From those times to the training that we have today, the care that nurses gave and still give is above and beyond. They are the link between all staff, between the doctors, the consultants, the nurses, and everyone else, because they meet the patients and their needs. They get to the root of the problem. I thank them for everything they have done for this country and its vulnerable people. Small changes need to be made to encourage people to go into nursing. People can become apprentices today and are funded. Those who are becoming nurses should be funded the same.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank nurses across the country. Without them, we would not have a health service, but the reality is that student nurses are being worked full time caring for patients while struggling to afford rent, transport and food. Much of this work is unpaid. Travel accommodation and fuel costs are pushing students into debt, hardship and even homelessness just to qualify. By the time they graduate, many are already burned out. That is not sustainable. If we want nurses to stay, we must support them properly during training, not after.

We also have serious issues with nurses on work permits. In Bantry General Hospital, a nurse is still waiting on her Irish residence permit card and cannot travel home to see her family. This is simply not good enough. I also raise the case of Ms Elma Joseph, an Indian national with a valid critical skills employment permit to work as a nurse. She has been told she must leave the State due to a change of employer despite being lawfully here and working in a sector crying out for staff. That completely undermines the purpose of the critical skills scheme.

I call on the Government to sort out these issues immediately. Our health system cannot afford to lose these nurses, especially on a day when all paramedics are taking strike action. The Minister will have to sit up and listen to this. I listened to the Taoiseach's answers about those paramedics who are on strike today. They have been wronged, not for a week and not for two weeks, but for years. The Government seems to be using every kind of mechanism against the ordinary working paramedic who has given their time to save lives and upskill. A

report was brought in in 2020. All of this was there before this Government and the last Government, and the paramedics have been left there and forgotten. This cannot continue. The Government has been neglectful and caught sleeping at the wheel. People are striking. That is no place for good, genuine, hard-working people who want to go out, save lives and do what they are trained to do and should be paid properly to do.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On behalf of Independent Ireland and our TDs, I start by saying thanks to every nurse working across Ireland in the hospitals, nursing homes, community care, mental health services and emergency care. I thank every one of them for the tremendous work and their vocation in this State.

Without them, we would be in a terrible situation. The irony is not lost on me as we are thanking nurses on this day for what they do for the State that there are nurses in Australia, the United Arab Emirates and Canada who want to come home but cannot. There has been lots of talk on this side of the House about nurses coming home and that we must bring our nurses home, but what would they be coming home to? They are coming home to rents they cannot afford. They are coming home to a property market so difficult to get into that there are no properties there for them to buy. We are spending €100,000 plus every year advertising in Australia and probably €500,000 advertising across the world asking Irish people to come back home, but what have they got to come back home to? That is the worrying thing. I see many people leaving. One Member said earlier that they left by choice and for lifestyle. That may be the situation when people are younger and they want to explore the world and do those things, but most people want to come home. They want to settle down near their families, near their mothers and fathers, they want to be back working in the country they grew up in. They want to give something back to this country. I do not believe that this State is truly interested in bringing back those people who we have educated and done everything right for because it is saying to forget about them. We are not making it viable to come back into this country with the tax brackets. We are not making it viable to come back and buy a property here and we are not making it viable for them to come back by giving them good work conditions. That has to be addressed.

While we are all praising nurses in this House today, we must remember that we are letting an awful lot of nurses down across the world who come from and were educated in Ireland. That needs to be addressed.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to start by thanking all of the nurses, not just in this country, but all of our Irish nurses right across the world in Australia, Canada and America. Some of our best and brightest young people are educated here, which is paid for by the taxpayer, and then essentially forced abroad. That is what has happened over many years. It is devastating to hear that there are new talks of a recruitment freeze, given that the previous recruitment freeze drove our best and brightest away. Now, the Department is talking about another recruitment freeze. This cannot happen. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. The health service is under immense pressure. Nurses are under immense pressure. There are over 5,000 unfilled nursing and midwifery positions in the HSE.

I also want to talk about the National Ambulance Service. I support all of the men and women who are standing on picket lines across the country. In Mayo, there are areas that are incredibly poorly served. In Erris recently, Stephen Lavelle, God rest his soul, was left without

an ambulance for a considerable length of time. I support them and I urge the Minister of State to do so. They are under immense pressure, and we need to support the National Ambulance Service.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am in solidarity with the ambulance workers but I want to take the opportunity to praise the fantastic work of our nurses on what is International Nurses Day. There are over 92,000 registered nurses and midwives in Ireland who all do a fantastic job, but their working conditions are far from optimal. They have raised issues like unsafe staffing numbers, high levels of burnout and pay that has failed to keep up with the cost of living.

Ireland relies to a much greater extent on internationally educated nurses compared to many other high-income countries. According to a 2024 ESRI report, 46% of the workforce had been educated abroad while 69% of all new entrants had been trained internationally. That means that over the past two decades, more than half of all nurses registered in Ireland were migrants and we are increasingly reliant on the great work they do. At the same time, Irish nurses continue to move abroad, and many do not come back. Even if they did not emigrate, we still train too few of them in any event, with a 2023 OECD report finding that we produce 31 nursing graduates per 100,000 people compared with 58 in the Netherlands and 109 in Australia. There have been some improvements, but we need to keep our Irish nurses and retain the international ones by paying them better and improving their working conditions, bringing in the likes of a Dublin allowance, because having a vocation only goes so far.

Deputy John Lahart: When I think of nurses, male or female, I think of the stereotypical attributes that we associate with them: kindness, gentleness, warmth, a reassuring smile or word, but also their dedication and professionalism, as well as world-class qualifications, ability and professional capacity. It is appropriate that every year on this day, International Nurses Day, Parliament recognises and thanks those nurses for the extraordinary care that they provide to our communities every day. Those nurses include advance medical practitioners, and I am conscious of the National Ambulance Service and its strike action. I hope that the Government can assist in resolving this via the HSE as soon as possible.

I am fortunate enough to have the national ambulance training centre in Tallaght in my constituency as part of a broader expanding health campus adjacent to Tallaght University Hospital. The national ambulance training centre is an interesting place to visit. I recommend it to anybody who is involved or interested in health. Its staff are always delighted to facilitate Deputies to see exactly how it works in terms of how calls are taken, distributed and responded to.

International Nurses Day, as we know, is marked on the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the figure we associate with modern nursing and who understood something that remains as true now as it did then. She is attributed with the words "A cure is not always possible, but care is always possible". I do not think that anyone understands that truth more deeply or lives it more fully than the nurses in our hospitals, both private and public.

Nurses understand that care is not secondary to cure. It is not an optional extra or a premium people pay for on their health insurance. It is an essential foundation of any humane health system, and it is our nurses who bring that foundation to life every day. They stand with

patients and families during the longest nights and the hardest conversations, offering support when medicine alone is not enough. They are present not only in moments of recovery but also at moments of fear, uncertainty and loss. They are the beating heart of our health system.

It is not enough for this House to simply recognise that their work is important but to ensure that those who deliver care in healthcare settings outside of hospitals in our cities, towns and villages are properly supported in their work.

We heard from the president of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation last week that nursing is a safety critical profession. Patient safety depends on having a sufficient number of skilled and experienced nurses and midwives and that they be respected and retained within our health system. That is a truth that all of us in this House agree with regardless of party affiliation.

Despite criticism, it is also an area where the Government has made solid progress. Since the beginning of 2020, there are nearly 11,000 additional nurses and midwives working in our health services, bringing the total number to 93,000. This achievement represents a 3% increase on the previous year, and it also represents the highest number of registrants to date. Progress has also been recognised internationally. Recent data from the OECD shows that Ireland is now among the leading countries in Europe for nurses *per capita*.

These statistics represent real progress, but they do not give us licence, as previous speakers have said, for complacency. Staffing levels on paper do not always reflect the pressures that are felt on the ground, and many nurses continue to report workloads that are difficult to maintain. For example, I read an interview with the chairman of the board of University Hospital Limerick at the weekend about the frustrations and overwhelming pressures on the nursing staff at the hospital. Unfortunately, it is a story that keeps repeating itself.

The safety and health, including the mental health and physical safety, of our nurses is critical. In a previous contribution, Deputy McGuinness mentioned the impact of long Covid on nursing staff. I have constituents, as many of the people in this House would have, who are nurses who suffer from long Covid and have seen their entitlements come to an end. They have had to add that stress to the stress of having a tedious, unrecognised illness and all the symptoms associated with that.

I urge those in charge of the systems that offer protection and pay to people in this situation to look on this with an empathetic eye and remember the days and nights when we applauded our nurses who stood between us and a pandemic. They were very much at the front line of that pandemic.

I read recently in the newspaper that in Northern Ireland - I hope I have this correct - nurses' unions are considering that nurses wear body cameras, such is the level of assaults and intimidation of healthcare staff. While we read about attacks in emergency rooms here, for now, the decision has been taken not to take that step because it would violate patient privacy. The point is that no one in the health service - I have spoken to doctors, consultants and nurses in this regard - seems to be escaping the break down in the boundaries and barriers of respect and protocols that existed. This affects health professionals and everyone else who works in the health system, such as orderlies, ushers, caretakers and catering staff. All those kinds of boundaries appear to have broken down. On top of going into work and being overwhelmed

by the demand on the wards, intimidation and physical violence is also part and parcel in some parts of our hospital system.

It is true that, last year alone, some 7,000 healthcare professionals left Ireland to work in Australia, at a time when we produce approximately 900 doctors and 1,600 nurses each year. That gap should and does give all of us pause for thought. It underlines that the training of more professionals, while essential, will never be sufficient on its own if we do not also create the conditions that encourage skilled staff to build their careers in Ireland and ensure that the people most affected by the change in conditions or the lack of accommodation are given a strong voice within the partnership system, or what used to be called the social partnership system in this country. Their voices must be heard and represented at the table for negotiations when discussions on their future take place.

We need to support nurses. We need to care for those who care for us. Personally, without going into any detail, I have been at the receiving end of that care on a number of times in my life, as have members of my family, both here and abroad. International Nurses Day should not only be a moment of celebration; it should also encourage us to recommit to listen, respond and keep raising the ambition of what we can do for the nurses in our health service and health system.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The 120,000 registered practitioner nurses and midwives across the breadth of the island are the backbone of our health service. As they care for us throughout our lives, those of us in public life, particularly those in government, have a duty to care for them but that has not always been the case. Our student nurses have been utterly failed, alongside other students, when it comes to student accommodation. There is a deficit of at least 39,000 student beds across Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. The Government is delivering near naught in terms of purpose-built student accommodation. It is a drop in the ocean. As these nurses progress through their careers, they endure the burden of conditions that no one would wish for our healthcare system.

In the past week alone, it was reported that last month was the worst April on record for overcrowding in University Hospital Kerry. A total of 23 people waited 24 hours on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick where doctors warn that patient safety risks identified by HIQA last year remain unaddressed. In my constituency, 16 people were waiting on trolleys in Cavan hospital. Monaghan hospital should be fully operational. Is it any wonder that some 25,000 Irish-qualified nurses and midwives, excluding retirees, have left our health system over the past two decades? We need to do better for our nurses. They are highly trained, qualified and dedicated but we need the Government to put in place conditions that both nurses and patients need and deserve.

The same holds true for many of our other healthcare professionals. Given the events of today, it is apparent that there has been a failure by the Government to properly recognise the modern role of ambulance personnel as prehospital care professionals. There have always been severe issues of workforce planning, driving overtime and burnout. In some cases, there have been issues of resourcing. The Government cannot say it was not warned, however. I have raised resourcing issues within our ambulance service in Monaghan with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister of Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and many others to no avail. This

Government is just not listening. What is needed? The Minister must intervene directly and genuinely listen to the grievances of our hardworking nurses and ambulance service workers.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas le gach Ball a labhair inniu. I welcome the opportunity to speak on International Nurses Day. I welcome all those in the Public Gallery. I sincerely thank all the nurses, midwives and my relations, both those in north Dublin and across Ireland, for the extraordinary work they do every single day. It is not just a profession for them; it is a profession built on compassion and skill. We have all seen, either through our experience or that of our family members, the brilliant work they do. They care for us when we are sick and they care for the vulnerable. I especially acknowledge the staff in Beaumont Hospital who cared for me when I fell sick as a teenager. They showed professionalism and kindness, bringing me chocolate and cheering me up when I was down. It definitely helped me get through it.

Like many families I represent across north Dublin, I know personally the difference they can make. As they support us, we too need to support them. Since I have been elected, I have raised on the floor of the Dáil nearly 16 times the current accident and emergency department in Beaumont Hospital. The nurses, healthcare workers and all the hardworking men and women in Beaumont Hospital are under enormous pressure. I welcome the €27 million that was announced at the start of this year for the initial works and improvements in Beaumont Hospital but these hardworking men and women are the ones dealing with the burnout and rise in demand. When the infrastructure in the hospital they are working in is not sufficient, they are the ones who bear the cost. I welcome the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill's visit to the hospital and what she has implemented, as well as the brilliant work of the new CEO of Beaumont Hospital, but we need to give workers safe staffing levels, fair pay and conditions, investments in training and improved hospital capacity.

Speaking as someone from a younger generation – this was mentioned across the House today - a lot of my friends who studied nursing, midwifery and a lot of other occupations are feeling the financial pressure, especially those living in Dublin. It is more financially viable for them to leave or emigrate. We need to encourage them back, and I know there is work being done on that. One thing I have raised is the need to have financial packages for those critical workers in high-cost areas, particularly at the beginning of their careers. I thank every single nurse and midwife.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to raise my satisfaction and appreciation of all the nurses in Kerry and around the country, especially the nurses with whom I have had the occasion to deal with many times, both in the past and recently. I am especially thinking of staff in University Hospital Kerry but also those in the district hospitals in Killarney, Listowel, Cahersiveen, Dingle, Valencia and Kenmare and the hospitals that Kerry people go to, such as the one over the head in Bantry. Many Kerry people also use the hospitals in Cork, including Cork University Hospital, South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital, Bon Secours Hospital, the Mater Private Cork Hospital and so forth. The standard of nursing we have in this country is massive.

I do not think they have it in any other part of the world. I had occasion to be in the hospital the other night with a patient at around 3 a.m. The nurses there were working the very same as if it was the middle of the day. They were doing their duty and they knew every patient by

name. They had such an understanding of everyone's needs on the ward I was in. It is great to have that when we need it. We must look after them.

I had occasion to meet a young girl who is 18 years old and training to be a mental health nurse. She has to go to Mayo from Milltown in Kerry to further her studies. She is determined and she will do it as she wants to be a nurse. I admire her for the determination she is showing. We need these nurses and we need them seen after, and paid and remunerated properly.

I feel for the ambulance drivers who have to go out on strike. I met one of them the other evening who had actually given up. He was a young man of only 45 years of age. He could not stick it any longer. That is the gospel truth.

To go back to the nurses, I appreciate them. We adore the ground they walk on and we appreciate them so much for the effort they put in on that roster every time they appear.

Deputy Máire Devine: Thanks, Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Healy-Rae. It is greatly appreciated.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank all the TDs who contributed today. Nursing in Ireland is a modern and highly skilled profession built on education, research and continuous professional development. This evening we heard from across the Chamber a shared understanding and deep appreciation of the vital role that nurses play across our health service. There is also a shared commitment to ensuring they are supported. My own daughter is a nurse and I am very proud of her. As a mother and as a Minister of State in the Department of Health I understand and appreciate the importance of our nurses. In supporting our health and well-being, nurses are present at every point of care and at every stage of our lives. They bring skills, care and humanity in an absolutely brilliant way. They do so in the most complex clinical environments while also shaping new ways of working that respond to patients' needs, demographic pressures and changing models of care.

I want to acknowledge the nurses within my own remit, those working within addiction services, social inclusion healthcare and sexual health clinics, and the nurses who support Healthy Ireland in its work. I thank all the nurses for their work, often with our most vulnerable people and in some very challenging settings. They are crucial to so much of what our health services do. They are the backbone of our health services.

I reaffirm the Government's firm commitment to ensuring that Ireland has a strong, sustainable and future-focused nursing workforce. The actions we are taking are not short-term measures; they are a long-term investment in the health and well-being of our people. We do not, however, underestimate the challenges that nurses continue to face in their day-to-day work. The reality of heavy workloads, staffing pressures and the complexity of modern healthcare is well understood. Addressing these issues requires long-term planning and investment. To address these issues we are expanding the supply of nurses. Ireland now has 14.3 practising nurses per 1,000 head of population, one of the highest ratios in Europe. Over 93,000 nurses and midwives are registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, the highest number ever recorded. This growth is the result of sustained investment, with €28.5 million allocated to fund more than 1,100 additional healthcare training places every year for

the next three years. Nursing places have increased by 23% since 2020, with a further 275 places secured in Northern Ireland. We continue to work closely with the higher education sector to expand domestic training capacity across all health professions.

Increasing numbers is only part of our responsibility to our nurses. We have also introduced supports for student nurses, acknowledging the amount of training time that is spent learning in clinical environments. We recognise that they are learners and students first of all, not employees. It is important that student nurses get the full college experience, immersing themselves in knowledge, research and learning through practice. The Government has strengthened the financial support available to student nurses and midwives. There is an enhanced travel and subsistence scheme, a targeted €500 annual meal allowance and additional uniform and laundry supports. We have reinstated the final year internship pay at 80% of the first year staff nursing salary. These measures ensure that no student is left behind because of financial pressures. Everyone who wants to become a nurse and has the skills and dedication should not be held back by costs.

We have also delivered the most reforms in nursing education in decades. We have huge reforms. The new NMBI undergraduate standards reflect the reality of modern healthcare, whether it is digital enabled, integrated or community based, and this also aligns with Sláintecare.

As mentioned by the Minister for Health earlier, the expert review body on nursing and midwifery continues to provide the blueprint for the future of this profession. Its 47 recommendations present an ambitious programme of reform to further empower nurses and midwives to deliver high-quality care across all settings. These positive impacts of the expert review body are clear. The workforce is benefiting from strengthening leadership and governance structures, from recruitment development to health regions, and from workforce planning based on evidence with a strong focus on staff health and well-being.

I also want to acknowledge that Irish nursing and midwifery has a respected and established global reputation. We know we have a huge global reputation. Our evidence-based approach to safe staffing and evidence-based practice is increasingly recognised across Europe and beyond, reinforcing Ireland's position as a global leader in nursing and midwifery reform. We are so well respected around the world and we are credited for the work that they do. I compliment all our nurses. Our evidence-based approach to safe staffing and evidence-based practice is increasingly recognised and reinforced. We are also making improvements in advanced practices. Over 1,300 nurses and midwives now work at advanced level. This represents 2.7% of the workforce. We are firmly on track to reach the target of 3% of nurses and midwives working at advanced level. We can also look forward to the findings of the national evaluation on the impact of evidence-based nursing and midwifery practices. Nurses in Ireland are central to reform, innovation and safety. Whether through new models of care, expanding scopes of practice or digital-enabled pathways, nurses are leading innovation across acute community and specialist settings. We are investing in education, supporting students, modernising training and expanding advanced practice.

The Government is aware of the challenges that nurses experience at work. Earlier, my colleagues the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, referred to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation survey highlighting the high levels of burnout and stress and the exposure to growing levels of violence and aggression

that nurses face. This is a concern for everyone. The survey is a timely reminder that we cannot take our healthcare staff for granted. They deserve a safe working environment and it is the Government's responsibility to support this. Nurses work every day in hospitals, community services, mental health, children's health, midwifery, disability, public health and specialist settings. They provide skilled care with compassion and grounded in professionalism. I am sure most of us can remember a time when a nurse provided reassurance and comfort to us in respect of a family member, whether at an appointment, during a hospital stay or ahead of an operation. Their role is truly invaluable and their work makes a profound difference every day.

It is important that we are mindful of and remain focused on implementation of policy change that supports a strong and sustainable workforce. This is an aim that we in Government, the Department of Health, the HSE, and representative bodies all share. Together we want to shape a health service that is resilient, modern and firmly centred on the needs of patients and communities. I want to take this opportunity on International Nurses Day to again place on record my sincere appreciation for the nurses across Ireland. Go raibh míle maith agat.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. That concludes statements on International Nurses Day. I too would like to welcome those in the Public Gallery who have listened to our debate and statements.

Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Pa Daly: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

In Ireland we have huge potential for a hopeful vision and we have a natural gift of 540 GW of renewable energy in offshore wind. We can achieve energy independence if we have the requisite motivation and we can return to the days when we had the lowest electricity prices in Europe, if there is State investment and development. However, we are currently paying the highest electricity prices in the EU. Recent reports from the ESRI and Eurostat show that we are paying 40% more than the European average, €480 more in average bills and we had the third-highest increase in costs, behind Austria and Romania. These figures are from 2025 and do not take into account the recent increases in the cost of pre-pay power.

Heat and power are not luxuries; they are basic necessities that should not cause households to spiral into debt. There is now a record number of households in arrears, with nearly 320,000 unable to keep up. Their debt levels are higher now and they last far longer than ever before. We in Sinn Féin are not the only ones calling this into question. The ESRI has called for an independent investigation and for the regulator to release the relevant data for independent analysis. However, the Government and the regulator have refused. One of the key drivers, according to Eurostat, is network costs. The Government has not intervened. It says we must get the balance right and keep our powder dry, there is nothing it can do and it is all the fault of the war in Ukraine or now the attacks on Iran. However, the question remains: why are we paying the highest price in Europe? Why do our bills fall more slowly here in response to falling wholesale costs when compared with other countries? This do-nothing Government is out of touch. It is sitting on its hands while people are pushed to the pin of their collar.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael continue to act as if workers and families are in a position to wait until the budget later on this year, but people are struggling here and now. They keep asking themselves just how bad it has to get before the Government will step in and act. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want people to believe that these prices are out of their control and that they are too complex and technical to fix, but we can see that Irish households are being fleeced. Ordinary workers and families are being hit with sky-high bills, as well as exorbitant rents and steadily increasing grocery prices. On top of that, mortgage payments and car insurance costs - which are still stubbornly high despite all the breaks and concessions given to that industry - and the cost of childcare are all increasing. The list goes on. After all, the Minister must know that Ireland once had the lowest electricity prices in the EU, and now we have the highest. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael presided over this change. Not only did they do nothing to stop it, they have reinforced the system that caused it. They have chosen not to intervene. They have chosen to protect the corporate bottom line instead of intervening to protect ordinary workers and families. People are saying the same thing: enough is enough. Meanwhile, energy giants are posting enormous profits, driven by crisis, war and instability. It is not just wrong; it is indefensible. This is not inevitable. There are solutions. This can be fixed by political decisions, but just requires the will so to do.

In Sinn Féin we believe in transparency, fairness and an energy system that delivers for the public good rather than corporate profit. If companies are not profiteering or price-gouging, they should put their money where their mouth is and prove it. They should be held to account. That is why we are bringing forward legislation which is practical and contains common-sense measures to give the energy regulator more teeth to hold the companies to account. Energy credits are essential as an interim measure because we need immediate action. We are calling for the reintroduction of energy credits to give families breathing space now, while we fix the deeper structural problems that have left Ireland with some of the highest energy costs in Europe. We want to reduce prices for the long term but, to do that, we need to address the fundamental flaws at the heart of our energy markets. Our proposals here would strengthen the oversight of energy companies' pricing and hedging practices, allow the regulator to investigate and sanction anti-competitive behaviour and increase transparency by requiring companies to provide detailed pricing data and make energy affordability a central priority, not an afterthought.

For too long, energy companies have operated without meaningful scrutiny. Take the Government's approach to data centres. They consume massive amounts of electricity, drive demand and place massive strain on our grid, but who foots the bill? Ordinary workers and families. Households are paying a whopping six to eight times more in network charges than data centres and double the unit price. What did Eurostat identify as the leading factor in Ireland's extortionate energy costs? The same network charges. I will come back to the rest of it later on.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The rip-off legacy of this Government continues unabated. Last week, Eurostat reported what we already knew, namely, that Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the European Union. This is under the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, sponsored by the Independents. In Ireland, we are paying nearly €500 more per year than our fellow European citizens. At the same time, many of my constituents in north Kildare face constant blackouts from a grid that is simply not fit for purpose. Ordinary workers and families are

being fleeced by energy companies making eye-watering profits. What is the Government doing to address the issue? Absolutely nothing. What should we expect it to do? Its reputation as a do-nothing Government precedes it.

On the other hand, Sinn Féin has offered solutions but the Government has refused to listen. The Bill before us tonight could drastically reduce the cost of electricity bills for people now and into the future. It would empower the CRU to monitor the hedging practices of these companies and sanction anti-competitive behaviour if energy companies are profiteering from a crisis. This is something the Government could do immediately. This would provide the regulator with real teeth to enforce laws that would protect households. The regulator wants these teeth but it seems the Government would rather protect data centres than households.

This was most obvious in Castlebaggot in west Dublin last year when a data centre was given a connection priority over an ESB Networks substation that was meant to be connected to new houses. It is first come, first served, but we all know who Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael serve. That one data centre consumes enough energy to power 200,000 homes per year, yet they are not paying their fair share when it comes to electricity bills. The Government gives them a sweetheart deal while it shafts ordinary families and workers with the highest prices in Europe. These sky-high prices are not inevitable, as the Government continues to suggest. They are a political choice. The choice we have given the Minister tonight is a simple question: whose side is he on?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Workers and families across this State are really struggling with the weight of the highest electricity prices in Europe. We have normalised these and it is not good enough. We all spoke earlier about nurses on International Nurses Day, and they are struggling too. This energy crisis is impacting everyone across the country. Parents and carers are cutting back on essentials, workers are rationing heating and households are falling deeper into poverty, simply trying to keep the lights on and keep heat in the house. Yet, at the same time, energy companies are making eye-watering profits off the back of this crisis. The latest Eurostat figures confirm that Irish households are paying electricity prices 40% above the EU average, and people are asking why. This means that Irish families are paying, on average, €480 more per household compared with households in Europe, for a basic necessity. The Government's response has been to shrug its shoulders and pretend that nothing can be done. This is head-in-the-sand syndrome. Ireland's energy rip-off is the result of political choices made by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to protect corporate profits instead of working people and families. Tonight, Sinn Féin is saying that enough is enough. Immediate supports like electricity credits are urgently needed to support struggling households but we recognise that temporary measures alone will not solve this crisis. Unless our energy market is fundamentally reformed and our reliance on international fossil fuel markets significantly reduced, households will continue to suffer from one global conflict to the next.

I thank my colleagues for bringing forward this legislation to give the energy regulator real powers to hold companies to account, to tackle price-gouging, to improve transparency and to prioritise affordability. If energy companies are not profiteering, they should have no problem proving it. Workers and their families are carrying an unfair burden while massive corporate energy users receive sweetheart deals.

Households are paying double the generation costs and ten times the network costs of that of data centres. How can that be justified? I have said before in this House that deciding not to end energy rip-off is a political choice. Government could choose to impose a windfall tax on the eye-watering profits of energy companies. It could choose to introduce household energy credits but it has not. Sinn Féin has always chosen to stand with workers and families and wants to end the rip-off once and for all. The same cannot be said for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Something has to be done. We cannot continue pretending that Ireland having the highest energy costs in the EU is normal. It is not normal, and it is not fair. In fact, it is grossly unfair.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Sinn Féin has brought forward legislation that speaks directly to the electricity price hikes facing ordinary workers and families across the State. This Government continues to sit on its hands and act as a spectator while people struggle to pay their bills, pensioners sit in cold homes and young families are forced to choose between heating their homes or putting food on the table. The reality on the ground is that ordinary working people are struggling. Ireland now has the highest electricity prices in the EU. Families across the State are being hammered month after month with rip-off electricity prices. Small businesses are under serious pressure. Workers are doing everything right, yet they are falling further behind because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed to act.

People are sick and tired of excuses. They are sick and tired of hearing Ministers talk about international markets while ordinary households are pushed to breaking point. The truth is that this Government has allowed energy companies to rake in enormous profits at the expense of working people and families. Sinn Féin's legislation seeks to finally bring fairness and accountability into the energy market. It seeks to strengthen the powers of the regulator, rein in excessive electricity price hikes and ensure greater transparency from energy companies on how prices are set. It also seeks to protect consumers from being repeatedly hit with unjustified increases while energy companies continue to rake in massive profits. For too long, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have looked after vested interests instead of protecting ordinary people. They have been reactive instead of proactive. Every single week, I meet families who are worried about the next electricity bill arriving through the door. Parents have told me that they are skipping meals to keep the lights on. Elderly people are rationing heat all year round. This is the reality of this Government's failure.

Government TDs now have a choice. They can continue to look after their friends and vested interests or they can stand with ordinary working people, young families and pensioners. I urge every TD in this House to support Sinn Féin's legislation and provide relief to those who are struggling the most.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I want to start by congratulating Councillor Ted Tynan of the Worker's Party who retired from politics in Cork City Council last night. The reason this is relevant is that Ted fought for the working classes and communities on the north side of Cork city for years. However, the one thing he always fought against was the privatisation agenda of Fiann Fáil and Fine Gael. We had many marches and protested together many times against that. The Minister might ask why that is relevant. I will tell him why. We have the highest energy costs in Europe and the Government has done nothing about it. This Government and previous Governments of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have done nothing. What they have done, however, is look after big business. They looked after the big energy companies and data

centres but what about the ordinary working man and woman? What about pensioners? What about people with disabilities? Who looks after them? The Government is supposed to be looking after them. Why is it not looking after them? People were shocked when people took to the streets a few weeks ago with their anger. That is why they are angry. They are angry because the Government privatised energy companies, so they could make millions of euro while ordinary people struggle. Where is the justice in that?

People tell me that they cannot afford it. Then, the Minister and Government backbenchers are saying the summer is coming. I do not know whether the Minister is living in Jamaica or wherever but it is still cold in Ireland. People still need to wash clothes, cook and clean. It all costs money. It is all energy. With the summer coming, parents are asking whether they can afford summer camps, give their children a holiday or pay for childcare. That is how desperate people are. It is the Government's job to stop us having the highest energy prices in Europe, and it is not doing it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are very proud in Ireland of building up electrification at a time when our country had limited resources. It is a great story of our people. That led to us having the cheapest electricity in Europe. This was infrastructure and a resource that belonged to our people. Whenever the privatisation agenda was pushed by the European Union, Ireland was at the top of the queue to privatise what was publicly-owned infrastructure. That is fundamentally the reason today our workers, families and small businesses are being crippled with electricity prices. It is the failure historically of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to protect a precious national resource we had built up. We just handed it away, and that is the price that we pay today.

This is the other issue. I heard the Taoiseach talking about wind energy. For God's sake, does he ever talk to anybody in County Donegal? We have wind farms all across Donegal and half of them remain dormant because the electricity infrastructure is not there. There is no point talking about solar and wind energy independence and reducing our prices when we are allowing these wind farms to remain dormant and are not working or functioning because we do not have the electricity infrastructure. This is failure after failure.

Our people need to know the reason we have the most expensive electricity in Europe is the historic failures of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael because they are working closely with industry and huge profit-makers rather than defending the public interests of their people.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend colleagues on bringing this forward. The reality is that the vast majority of people around the country are finding it very difficult to meet their energy costs. We all know that. We can see it in the arrears. We can see it in the difficulty people are having when it comes to the cost of living across the board. All of this basically stems from energy. That is one of the big issues we have. This country has fallen so far behind where it could have been. I remember when Eamon Ryan was in this House talking about how we were going to be the Saudi Arabia of Europe because there was going to be so much energy produced in Ireland. We do not have the infrastructure to deliver that energy to the people in Ireland never mind export it elsewhere.

What we have is a situation where the Government has totally dropped the ball with regard to energy infrastructure. Even when we look at microgeneration, a lot of people are putting

solar panels on their homes now; I have put them on my home. People can get a grant. The grant was €1,800 but they cost €9,000. That is the reality for most people who are on a low incomes or even reasonably good incomes. They cannot afford to do it because the grant does not come near where it needs to be in order for people to have that possibility of being able to generate their own power. If they want to put batteries in, it is an awful lot more. We need to recognise that Government needs to step up to the mark and assist people to be able to do that and certainly people who are already paying a mortgage, a car loan and everything else. They would not be able to afford to provide the microgeneration they need to be able to because the subsidies that are in place are simply far too low and totally inadequate to be able to do it.

This particular legislation to try to get the regulator to have the teeth to be able to see why we have the highest electricity prices in Europe needs to be put in place. That is why I appeal to the Minister to ensure that he supports what we are doing here and that we all work together to try to hold the energy companies to account. It is simply wrong that Ireland is paying through the nose for the mistakes of others in the past.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am probably repeating it but surely it is long past the time that Government takes action to protect workers and families from spiralling energy costs. People tell me they are sick and tired of hearing that wholesale electricity costs are going down while their household bills are still eye-wateringly high. One of the main aims of this Sinn Féin legislation is to empower the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, to monitor wholesale and retail prices in the energy market and strengthen its powers to monitor anti-competitive behaviour of gas and electricity suppliers. Who would be opposed to that? The CRU must have a greater role in consumer protection and much stronger powers to address energy affordability. Otherwise, what is the point? Being told that the electricity prices are going up and going down without any power to effect change is meaningless and only leaves consumers feeling utterly abandoned.

As we speak, hundreds of households are being disconnected each month for falling into arrears on their energy bills. There are over 300,000 households now in energy arrears. That is one in six or one in seven. We all know these people.

7 o'clock

Simply lighting and heating their homes is becoming increasing unaffordable for many families.

Irish workers and families are tired of being ripped off. The cost of electricity in Ireland, as others have said, is 40% above the EU average. How is this happening? Successive Governments have steadfastly refused to take any real action to either assist people with an energy credit or tackle the root cause of what makes electricity unaffordable. All Sinn Féin wants to do is protect energy consumers from unfair pricing, price gouging, restrictive practices and anti-competitive behaviours.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am speaking on behalf of the Government on the Bill. I thank Deputy Daly for tabling it.

I will speak to the legislation and explain the rationale as to why we are opposing it, which we are doing on the basis that the CRU already holds significant existing powers to monitor,

report and regulate gas and electricity suppliers. Additionally, as the Deputies will be aware, a review of the comprehensive suite of legislation underpinning the work of the CRU has already been commenced by Government. This is in line with our programme for Government commitment to prioritise a review and reform of the legislation underpinning the CRU and to emphasise that low costs for households and businesses are a central tenet in the updated mandate of the CRU. A review of the legislation underpinning the commission has been completed. The next phase of the work involves an assessment of what is adequate or in need of change, including whether a stronger mandate for the CRU is required. I believe that it is, and that will come out of this process. In light of this, any changes to CRU's mandate right now would be premature. However, I acknowledge the manner in which this has been put forward.

The Government is putting in place additional measures to ensure a well-functioning energy market and to support energy affordability. Additional staffing resources have been sanctioned and have been allocated to CRU. That is to ensure that the latter can fully and effectively fulfil its remit.

The forthcoming transposition of the electricity market design directive by my Department will also provide further consumer protection measures and monitoring of energy supplier hedging practices. Intensive work is under way on the preparation of the energy affordability action plan, which we discussed last week and which will examine cost drivers in the energy sector and identify measures to enhance affordability of energy for households and for businesses.

Deputies will be aware that we have brought in targeted measures in what is an international crisis in order to support 470,000 households. Those measures included extending the fuel allowance to those on the working family payment scheme. This is a direct payment to households.

Insofar as retrofitting is concerned, 250,000 homes have been retrofitted, bringing about permanent savings for families. We are targeting a further 73,000 this year with grant offerings that we recently changed. There is a major role to be played by solar and battery storage, but we need to expand our grid. We need to improve the resilience of our grid to enable us to take more renewables into our system. That is the purpose of the capital investment plan for the period 2026 to 2030, which includes critical pieces of infrastructure, as I am sure the Deputies opposite will be aware, such as the North-South interconnector. The latter is a critical piece of infrastructure for the island of Ireland that operates under a single electric market. That needs to commence construction on both sides of the Border. That one project will drive down electricity prices for us.

Like the rest of Europe, we are unquestionably at the mercy of the vagaries of international markets. We are an island nation that imports a substantial amount of fossil fuel, but, thankfully, now we are seeing well over 40% of our electricity being generated through the use of renewables. In March, 49% of our electricity was generated through renewables. There is 8 GW of capacity of renewables within our system. Ireland is the number one country in Europe for the integration of renewables into its energy system.

Price reductions take time to pass on. There are families out there who are struggling to meet energy bills. That is why any supports we bring forward need to be targeted. That is why

I have also amended the grants to bring forward a retrofitting passport to break down the grants and make them more accessible, particularly to middle-income families. We have seen 29,000 applications in quarter 1 of this year - a 189% increase on the same quarter last year. That is significant.

With the warmer homes scheme, which is 100% grant-aided for low-income families and those at risk of energy poverty, we have managed to retrofit 34,000 homes and are targeting 12,000 this year alone. These are very targeted measures, most of which are paid through the carbon tax which the proposing party opposed. It is the right of those opposite to oppose this, but they have never indicated how the gap will be filled.

What I have outlined are real measures that would protect against further price shocks and crises, but what is really within our grasp is that acceleration of the delivery of additional renewables into our system, including more onshore wind and solar. In only 11 years, we have gone from 2 MW of solar integrated into our grid to 2,553 MW being integrated into it as of last month. The acceleration of delivery is happening. There is still, however, the issue of our reliance on gas, particularly imported gas. Approximately 20% of the gas that we use comes from the Corrib field. The remainder is imported. Unquestionably, there are costs associated with that.

What drives me is ensuring that we get energy prices down for households and businesses. That is why business support grants are important, particularly to enable businesses to retrofit but also to switch to renewable forms of energy.

On offshore renewables, Deputies opposite will be aware that the five east-coast schemes still remain in planning. From my engagement with the offshore renewable electricity support scheme, ORESS, 1 developers, I can tell the House that we expect at least two of those to come through planning toward the end of this year. That will mean that we will be able to commence construction by 2030. The original plan was that they would be electrified and that 5 GW of offshore renewables would be integrated into our system by 2030. That will not happen. I have been very honest with people. What we need to see is construction of that offshore wind resource, and to scale that up. Whilst our target is 80% renewables by 2030, our projections are between 68% and 72% by the end of the decade, but we can bridge the gap.

Battery storage is critical, particularly long-duration storage. Only yesterday, Euronews highlighted a Eurostat report which shows that is in the top four countries within the European Union for long-duration battery storage within our system, and that has expanded greatly. That is important because Deputies, both in government and across the House, look at curtailment of renewable energy resources of sometimes up to 16%. The more battery storage we have within our system, the more we can deploy that energy at the appropriate time. We are seeing now approximately 1.2 GW of battery storage connected within our grid.

We are also seeing a rooftop revolution when it comes to solar panels on houses. People are accessing the grants that Deputy Kenny mentioned at an accelerated rate. Savings of approximately €1,500 per year can be obtained by households that install solar photovoltaic panels on their roofs. I would like to see more of that being done by businesses.

I appreciate that the Bill has been tabled and that Deputy Daly and colleagues went to some effort to produce it. The measures it contains are being looked at right now. It would be premature to accept the Bill at this time because the review to which I referred earlier has been

concluded. The next phase is to look at the recommendations within that and to make the relevant changes, should they be needed, to the CRU, which already has a substantial mandate overseeing retail energy costs within our system.

Furthermore, as the Deputies will be aware, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, also monitors energy prices. It has an important role in that regard. Recently, the CRU produced a report, with input from CCPC, and found that competition in the Irish electricity and gas markets is functioning effectively and is generating meaningful rivalry. The point I am making is that we have to make it easier for people to switch providers - not enough people do so - and there are major savings to be made by households and businesses that switch electricity providers. There is an issue when it comes to enabling the senior cohort of our population to access switching of energy providers in as appropriate a way as possible.

Our focus is absolutely on delivering affordability. Much more work needs to be done on that. In the budget, we reduced the VAT on electricity and gas to 9% permanently out to 2030. In July we will have the final report of the energy affordability task force, looking at things like network charges and what we can do in the round on that to drive permanent savings on household and business bills. Fundamentally, within all of this is reducing our dependence on fossil fuel. It is creating more domestic energy generation through renewable sources and the projections for that are very positive.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: While energy giants protect massive profits, ordinary people are sitting at kitchen tables terrified to open another bill. Sinn Féin has repeatedly warned about profiteering, weak oversight and consumers being left completely exposed, all while 23% of our electricity goes to feed data centres in circumstances where the EU average in that regard is just 2%. The State will continue to lurch from one crisis to the next unless action is taken to reform how we approach our energy. The CRU must given expanded powers to allow it to monitor wholesale and retail pricing, investigate anti-competitiveness, oversee hedging practice and examine affordability. We need to end the wall of complexity and secrecy because consumers are expected to continually suck up price hikes.

In one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, no family should have to choose between heating their homes and feeding their children. This situation was created by years of weak regulation, market failure and political choices that prioritised energy companies over ordinary citizens. Across Ireland today, there are parents skipping meals in order that electricity meters stay running. Pensioners are sitting in the cold afraid to turn on their heaters. Workers are falling deeper into debt despite doing everything that is asked of them. The Minister said that this Bill is premature. In that context, how many people must be in energy debt before Government finally acts? We continue to have electricity prices among the highest in Europe. That is neither normal nor acceptable. Sinn Féin will never accept a system where energy companies thrive while families struggle to survive.

We need stronger consumer protection, real accountability and long-term investment in affordable public energy infrastructure. Above all, we need a Government that is willing to stand with ordinary people instead of standing back while prices spiral out of control.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Irish householders pay 40% more for electricity than the EU average, which comes to €480 more per year. On average, households owe €500 to their energy suppliers. The vast majority of them simply do not have that. Over 320,000 households are in arrears on their electricity bills and 180,000 are in arrears on their gas bills. This is scandalous. Irish people, when they can, always pay their bills. These figures demonstrate the scale of the rip-off that our Irish householders face. While Irish workers and families struggle in an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, energy companies are making obscene profits.

Surely if the Government were concerned about the well-being of its citizens, it would step up and hold these energy companies to account. Instead, we get inaction and a hands-off approach, with citizens abandoned by the do-nothing Government across the Chamber from us. The Government is committed to the corporate bottom line as opposed to the well-being of its citizens. That is, unless there is general election in the offing. When that happens, course, energy credits are available. However, once the election ends, those supports conveniently disappear like snow off a ditch.

Since the onset of war in Ukraine, we have warned that the regulator requires more power to get this escalation of prices under control. However, the Government has sat on this legislation for three years. It is an outrageous situation when we consider that Irish households pay ten times the network cost of data centres. In this State, 23% of electricity goes to data centres. That compares with an average of 2% across the EU. However, one Government policy after another has supported data centres rather than Irish households.

This Bill offers an opportunity to hold these energy companies to account. It offers transparency through regulator reporting responsibilities. However, our do-nothing Government seems more than content to allow Irish householders pay more than their European counterparts. It seems determined to not rein in these companies. Irish consumers and families suffer, yet data centres and energy companies benefit from the Government inaction and a failure to hold them to account. With no election on the horizon, citizens are suffering through a cost-of-living in crisis while the Government sits back and watches.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Another week and another Private Members' Bill to try to address the real issue that is adversely affecting the Irish people, and yet another seemingly disinterested and dismissive amendment from this do-nothing Government. What is beyond laughable is that it will ignore this issue and continue to inflict the highest energy bills in Europe on the Irish people. Then, come election time, the Government will suddenly be interested and most earnest and will introduce one-off or short-term measures to reduce people's gas and electricity bills and actually help them where it counts, namely in their pockets. That is one of the ideas in its playbook. Like all of its ideas, it has been worn out. It is too little too late.

Let us get real. The energy bills the Irish people have to pay for are not fair. They are the highest in Europe. Joe and Mary Public have to pay twice the rate that multibillionaire data centre companies have to pay. Energy company profits are through the roof and yet the Government refuses to introduce a windfall tax. Profiteering and price gouging must not continue to go unchecked, and energy companies must be held to account. Just like in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East has been exploited by corporate interests. Energy companies are laughing as they go off into the sunset with sky-high profits. Meanwhile, ordinary households are being fleeced. We in Sinn Féin have

repeatedly warned the Government that the regulator must be given the powers to get this under control. However, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have sat on this legislation for over three years, demonstrating once again that their priority is always the corporate bottom line over ordinary people.

Sinn Féin's legislation would enhance the power of the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account, to tackle price gouging and to prioritise energy affordability. Until that is done, people will continue to fall into arrears in their electricity bills in the midst of this cost-of-living crisis. Half-measures will not make a difference and this has been proven. The Irish people are sick to the back teeth of being ripped off. They expect action from this Government but all they get is complacency. They expect accountability and all they get is deflection. They expect support and sadly all they are getting is shafted. That is the level of delivery to the Irish people from this Government and it is utterly shameful.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Since the 1920s, the ESB has been at the core of secure electricity generation across the entire State. It did that to great effect, getting power lines out to the most rural communities. The ESB, as a State-owned body, worked to deliver electricity not as commodity for profit but as a resource for the Irish public. Because it operated in the national interest as oppose to in the interests of lining the pockets of stakeholders and investors, the ESB was able to do all of that while providing affordable electricity and great working conditions for its staff. As a result of Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's blind commitment to EU policies that are not always in the national interest, there was a push to open up our energy sector to private ventures. They tried to fool the public into believing that liberalising the market would bring more choice and reduce prices. Instead, in the early 2000s the Irish Government drove up prices for ESB customers by nearly 70%, for one reason only: to force customers to leave the ESB and to make the market more profitable for private energy companies.

Just as the private market has failed the Irish public in the supply of affordable housing, so too has it failed in the supply of affordable energy. However, the private market has ensured record prices for investors and stakeholders at the expense of the Irish public. For Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the interests of ordinary people have always come second to the interest of capital and profits for private companies.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: This do-nothing Government has stood back and watched while fuel and energy prices have spiralled out of control. Families, workers, carers, pensioners and people with disabilities are being squeezed from every angle while this Government refuses to act. People cannot afford to wait until the next budget to find out whether they will once again be left worse off like workers were in this year's budget or forgotten about entirely like so many people with disabilities feel today.

A record number of households cannot pay their energy bills. Carers cannot afford to fill their cars to get to work to care for people. -Parents are lying awake at night wondering how they will pay the rent, buy the groceries, cover insurance, fuel their cars and keep the heating on. People with disabilities are not able to charge their vital equipment. What has this Government done about this? Very little. The Minister may pat himself on the back and point to extra fuel allowance payments, but I ask him to speak to those people receiving them and ask them if it is enough. The answer from the people I speak to is clear: it is not enough. The

Minister should ask workers and families if they can afford to heat their homes, ask them if they are getting into debt to survive, ask elderly people if they are afraid to switch on the heating and ask parents if they are skipping meals so their children can eat. This is the reality of the Government's failure.

What is needed now is action. Sinn Féin has put forward solutions. The Sinn Féin mineral oil tax Bill must be enacted and the planned carbon tax increases must be scrapped. People need relief now, not more excuses or delays, and not more spin. We need the Government to stand with ordinary people. We need elderly and vulnerable people to be able to heat their homes without fear and those with disabilities to be able to heat and eat as opposed to having to choose one or the other. We also need to see carers, workers and families able to afford a decent standard of living.

The Government should show it is willing to support those who are struggling. It should stop the fact that Ireland has the highest cost of energy and bring it back down to an affordable cost.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank Deputy Daly and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this legislation. I am disappointed that the Government will not be supporting it. The Labour Party and I have long called for enhanced powers for the CRU. Indeed, I have my own electricity regulation Bill, which seeks to give the CRU the ability to issue specific emissions reduction or offsetting obligations on large energy users, like data centres. I hope we get the opportunity to debate that Bill on Second Stage in the House in the not-too-distant future.

I am broadly supportive of Deputy Daly's Bill. There are elements that I think could use some strengthening, which I will come to, but on the whole, it is a noble endeavour. We are discussing this in the midst of what the head of the International Energy Agency has described as the worst ever energy crisis. However, the sense of dread with which people open their energy bills long proceeds Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war in Iran. Low-income households, small businesses and pensioners are the cohorts that have been put to the pin of their collar for years now. Virtually everyone is being touched in some way by this fossil fuel crisis. While the Government has produced a €750 million package, however necessary it was, it was designed to placate sectoral interests. It has done next to nothing for ordinary PAYE workers, certainly not those who take public transport, cycle or walk every day. The Government has resisted every effort from the Labour Party, including the costed mini-budget that we proposed last week, to give workers a dig-out during this perpetual cost-of-living crisis.

This Bill seeks to amend the 1999 Act in several important ways, which have already been outlined by Deputy Daly and others. The governance and mechanisms of the energy markets are convoluted and complex, to say the least. We cannot expect the average consumer to know the ins and outs. That is hard enough for those of us in here, whose job it is to understand it. In that respect, greater transparency in energy pricing is necessary and good. Stronger consumer protection is necessary. Better scrutiny of suppliers is necessary. Affordability must be recognised as a core public policy objective, not just an afterthought.

The provisions in this Bill would set us in the right direction. I suggest that we could perhaps go even further. I am on record on a number of occasions as not just calling for greater regulation in the energy markets but also for greater intervention and a crackdown on some of the profiteering we have seen on the part of the energy companies. The Irish energy system is

dominated by a relatively small number of large actors. The liberalisation of our energy markets in the early 2010s was supposed to bring about lower prices through greater competition. That clearly has not happened. Instead, we have repeatedly seen cartel-like behaviour from the companies operating here. When international energy prices rise, bills fly up immediately. When wholesale prices fall, however, consumers wait months or even longer to see any meaningful reduction in the prices they pay.

This fundamentally undermines public trust in the energy markets. People know they are being ripped off. This Bill proposes enhanced monitoring of wholesale and retail prices, including average supplier margins and changes in prices paid by domestic and business consumers. That is a welcome proposal. Transparency matters. The public deserves to know not just what prices are being charged, but why they are paying them. There has virtually always been insufficient visibility with regard to supplier margins and the relationship between wholesale costs and retail prices. Consumers have basically been asked to accept on trust that price increases are unavoidable and proportionate. That is not good enough, particularly in the current context of market volatility.

If a supplier claims that international gas prices necessitate major increases, then the CRU should have the capacity - indeed, the obligation - to rigorously scrutinise that claim. We know there is an active investigation being carried out at present by the CRU into price gouging and the failure of energy suppliers to pass on wholesale price reductions to consumers. The wholesale cost is down 72% from its peak in August 2022, but the prices being paid by consumers remain stubbornly high. It has been more than five months since that investigation was commissioned by the Minister, and we are still to get any update from the CRU on the progress of that investigation. That says to me there is something seriously lacking in terms of the CRU's capacity to investigate matters such as these. Crucially, we must also see statutory powers for intervention where unjustified pricing practices are identified. Transparency cannot become a substitute for action or accountability. If that investigation eventually finds that there has been price gouging, what then? It cannot just be another report to add to the pile, and let that be the end of the matter.

The Bill also addresses hedging. This is one of those technical issues that is probably quite remote from the concerns of ordinary consumers, but it is really important because different hedging strategies directly affect the prices people pay. In theory, hedging allows suppliers to protect themselves and, potentially, consumers from market volatility by purchasing in advance at agreed prices. Done responsibly, it can provide stability and predictability. However, we have seen the lack of transparency in this process create legitimate public concern. Consumers have repeatedly been told during periods of falling wholesale prices that suppliers remain tied into earlier purchasing arrangements and, therefore, cannot yet reduce bills. However, as we know from very recent examples, energy and fuel suppliers are very quick to hike their prices during periods of wholesale price increases, despite having purchased their supply weeks or months prior. Consumers cannot hedge their bills or protect themselves against sudden price spikes. Therefore, stronger oversight of hedging practices, including investigative practices and powers for the CRU, would be very welcome. We need to ensure that what people are paying reflects what it costs the supplier.

The provisions in the Bill regarding anti-competitive behaviour are welcome. This goes back to my earlier point about the state of competition between actors in the Irish energy

market, which is highly concentrated. Consumers do not experience this market as competitive in the everyday sense of the word. Most providers offer more or less the same high prices with minimal variation, and all too often, a price hike by one precipitates a price hike by the rest. We saw this last year, when more or less all of the energy companies raised their prices well above the rate of inflation.

Barriers to switching between providers have increasingly become an issue, particularly for more vulnerable households, like older people, people with disabilities and those with limited digital literacy or access. That reality needs to be recognised. It is not enough to tell people that the burden is on them to switch. We need to have real competition in the market. If a market is technically competitive but practically inaccessible, then many consumers remain unprotected.

Energy should not be viewed simply as a commodity. It is an essential public good. Electricity is not a luxury. Heating is not optional. When people cannot heat their homes, we see the consequences, be it in public health, child poverty, educational outcomes or mental well-being. I have dealt with people in my constituency who have gotten sick because they have not been able to heat their homes, and people who have skipped meals in order to pay their bills. These are not exceptional cases. They are the far too common reality of so many people in this country at present.

I welcome the consumer protection elements that are included in this Bill, and welcome that the interests of the consumer and protection against unfair pricing would be central considerations, but we also need to clarify what that looks like in practice. Does it mean clearer information on bills? I certainly hope so. Does it mean stronger enforcement powers? Absolutely. However, it surely must also mean preventing energy poverty before it actually occurs. Fundamentally, that means wider structural reforms in our energy system. As I have said on numerous occasions, the only way we can genuinely protect consumers from future fossil fuel crises is by reducing our dependence on those fossil fuels in the first place.

I will continue to bang the drum on this for as long as I need to because the Government has been moving at a snail's pace. We need to see a much greater level of ambition in our home retrofitting programmes. We need to see low and middle-income households targeted in particular. We need to rapidly scale up public investment in offshore wind, solar, plug-in solar and battery storage. We need to accelerate grid modernisation while ensuring that the large energy users, like data centres, pay their fair share. At present, the bulk of the funding for grid improvements comes from ordinary households and small business consumers through their energy bills. Meanwhile, data centres are getting a discount. Working people are being asked to bear disproportionate costs in order that large corporations can continue to make massive profits. In order to make the energy transition a reality, we need to improve and modernise the national grid, but we cannot make this a choice between climate action and affordability. The two can and must be pursued together.

One of the great failures of recent years has been the inability of successive Governments to communicate that renewable energy, energy efficiency and public investment can reduce household costs. Instead, many now associate climate action with an additional expense because the big polluters and the large energy users have not been paying their fair share and properly contributing towards a just energy transition.

If our transition towards a cleaner economy and society is perceived as something imposed on ordinary workers while wealthier actors remain insulated, public support will fracture. Perhaps that is already happening. Affordability must be central to our energy policy and our energy transition. A functioning energy system must be measured in terms of whether people can actually afford to heat and power their homes. In a country as wealthy as ours on paper, it is just unacceptable that for so many that isn't the case.

We in Labour acknowledge that our energy challenges do not exist in isolation. The volatility experienced in recent years obviously reflects broader geopolitical instability, but external factors cannot excuse the local inertia we have seen from the Government. Countries with stronger public infrastructure, greater energy independence and more developed renewable generation capacity have been able to weather this storm far more effectively. Look at Spain. Following the fuel crisis that arose as a result of Putin's illegal war on Ukraine, they turbo-charged their solar energy capacity and have been largely protected against this current crisis. They are paying some of the lowest prices in Europe now. While Spain took that fossil fuel crisis as a wake up call, our Government hit the snooze button. We remain overly dependent on imported fossil fuels. We remain vulnerable to international price shocks. Despite our enormous potential in offshore wind generation, we still have not added a single additional turbine in more than 20 years, and the Minister has told us again tonight that we will not see anything in construction until 2030 at the earliest. The only urgency that we have seen from the Government with regards to our energy system is in its attempt to import even more fossil fuels via a new liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal. I sincerely hope that this Government takes the right lessons from this crisis, the ones that it did not take from the crisis in 2022.

I will conclude by again commending Deputy Daly on his Bill. It poses an important question to the Government about what kind of energy system we want in Ireland - one in which energy is treated as a commodity subject entirely to commercial logic, or one in which it is treated as a public utility and social good. My Labour Party colleagues and I certainly favour the latter and we will be supporting this Bill.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank Sinn Féin for introducing this Bill. The Social Democrats will be supporting it. Transparency in our energy pricing sector is long overdue. This Bill ensures that. It also strengthens the mandate of the CRU to actively intervene in the energy market in the name of the public interest. It places energy affordability at the heart of energy regulation. This is all very welcome. For too long, Irish households have been asked to accept price increases and to trust that those increases are justified and fair without concrete evidence that this is true. This debate goes to the heart of that problem. It is about transparency and restoring public trust in our energy sector by enhancing the CRU's reporting obligations and requiring regular published data on retail prices, supplier margins and price changes. That is an important and necessary change.

Last month, I raised the CRU's price gouging investigation with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. I asked him for an update on the CRU price gouging investigation that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, had called for at the end of 2025. Yesterday, the CRU finally published its interim review. When I spoke to the Minister of State in mid-April, he had no update on what the CRU had actually done or where the CRU was at with its investigation. I find it surprising that the Minister of State did not know that the publication was just weeks

away. There is a clear disconnect between the Government and the regulator. This is a concerning thing.

The CRU's interim review concludes that it has found no evidence of excess profitability or price gouging by suppliers. For me, that raises more questions than it answers. The CRU will appear before the climate committee tomorrow to go through the review. This is only an interim review and it is not the full investigation. The CRU states that more detailed analysis is to come. In this interim review, the CRU does not dispute that wholesale prices have fallen dramatically since 2022, that the International Energy Agency, IEA, states that those reductions were not passed on to households and that the Eurostat data states that Ireland has the highest household electricity prices in the EU. This is all still true. Yet, according to the CRU, there is nothing to see here. The market is functioning as it should. There is nothing to worry about. I just do not understand how that makes any sense.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said earlier on that he believed there needed to be a strengthening of the mandate of the CRU. I would question exactly why he believes that the mandate should be strengthened. If the mandate of the CRU needs to be strengthened, that would imply that any investigations into things like price gouging are potentially not up to scratch or the CRU does not have enough teeth or remit to deal with them. I would be interested to hear from the Minister on exactly what additional powers he would like the CRU to have.

People all over this country are being crushed by incredibly high electricity prices that are just going up and up. Over 317,000 households are now in arrears. These are people who work hard, who do all the right things, who get up every morning and go to work, but they simply cannot keep their heads above water. All the while, wholesale electricity prices are 72% lower than they were at their peak in August 2022, yet retail prices continue to rise. If that is a well-functioning market, it is a market that is failing consumers.

For many people across the country, this energy crisis is getting worse by the day. Hundreds of thousands of people are in arrears on their electricity bills. Families are being forced to make impossible choices every day between paying their bills and covering basic daily essentials. The cost-of-living increases from 2025 alone have led to an average Irish home paying €480 more per year than households in neighbouring countries. When the Government is challenged on that point, it points to the national energy affordability task force that was established last year. It keeps on saying that solutions will come later in the year, but people are struggling now. They need help now and they have needed help for months. That answer is completely unacceptable.

This task force, even with the fact that it will only be reporting fully at the end of the year, has only met on three occasions between its establishment in June 2025 and February 2026. Three meetings while electricity prices climbed and climbed and more families fell into debt. That response is not reflective of the scale of this crisis. It appears to me that the Government is not taking this seriously at all. Irish households have been struggling with skyrocketing energy costs for years. It did not begin in February with the USA and Israeli war on Iran. It has been going on for years.

Last week, we learned in the *IrishIndependent* that Irish households were now €2,000 a year worse off due to rising energy, grocery and health insurance costs combined. Energy is not an isolated expense, but part of the wider cost-of-living crisis that is squeezing people to breaking

point. When the Minister of State and this Government tell people to wait, that relief is coming and that assistance is on the way, he can understand why people do not believe them and why their trust in this Government is eroding. EU state aid rules have been relaxed in the context of the current energy and oil crisis. Targeted price interventions have been permitted by the Commission. The Government has options, options that make this inaction inexcusable.

In the face of this cost-of-living crisis, the Social Democrats have proposed a targeted €400 energy credit for households with low-to-middle incomes. That is a practical and deliverable measure. It would offer direct relief to those most under pressure. However, short-term financial support is simply not enough. We also need structural change. We need to accelerate our transition to green energy and start future-proofing homes against future price shocks. The Social Democrats have a plan for that as well. Our solar for all proposal is a five-point plan that would expand and improve access to solar nationwide. It includes doubling the existing solar grant, reinstating the grant for battery storage, including free solar panels as part of the warmer homes scheme and increasing grants for businesses to install solar. Crucially, our plan also addresses the need to roll out new technology like plug-in solar. These are practical proposals that would cut bills, reduce emissions and insulate households from future shocks.

Energy security is about more than just affordability. Energy security is national resilience. Transparency needs to lie at the heart of everything we do. Without it, public trust will be lost, if it is not already. Irish people are being asked to pay the highest electricity prices in Europe while being told everything is working as it should, that prices are fair and everything is fine. This simply does not add up.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome this Bill. I support it and thank Sinn Féin for introducing it. The Bill gives the Commission for Regulation of Utilities the power to monitor wholesale and retail prices in the energy market; to increase the frequency and level of reporting; to monitor and regulate hedging practices; to strengthen its powers to monitor anti-competitive behaviour of gas and electricity suppliers; to give an expanded role in consumer protection; and to strengthen its powers to address energy affordability.

The Bill is definitely going in the right direction but we must go further and more must be done. The Bill raises the whole issue of Ireland's soaring energy costs, which are the highest in Europe. Households in Ireland are now paying €480 more in electricity than in other countries, with overall energy costs costing households an additional €2,000 a year each. Families are being fleeced and energy companies are taking advantage of the illegal US war on Iran to make families pay through the nose while making huge, unearned war profits.

Statistics on profits are horrendous. The oil companies are making \$30 million per hour in unearned war profits. In March alone, these companies made an extra \$23 billion in unearned war profits. It means they will have an additional \$234 billion in unearned war profits in 2026. These profits are coming straight out of the pockets of the public who are paying higher prices. These are windfall, unearned war profits. They must be subject to a significant windfall tax. That tax can be used to offset the huge cost to ordinary workers and families.

This whole area is flooding into the most horrendous cost-of-living crisis we have ever seen. The Government's withdrawal of energy credits in the 2026 budget and its refusal now to reintroduce energy credits means that record numbers of households are in arrears. In fact, approximately 500,000 families are in arrears on their gas and electricity bills. Some 317,000

families were in arrears on their electricity bills in February. This is an increase of 58,500 compared to the same month last year, a rise of 23%. Furthermore, 191,000 families are in arrears for over 90 days, up 36,000 or an increase of 23% on the same time last year. The level of debt has also reached new heights. The average amount now owed by families is €492.72, an increase of €64.94 on last year. Families now owe electricity suppliers €156 million. On gas, 179,500 families are in arrears on gas bills, up 8,000 on the same period last year. In fact, a quarter of all gas customers are in arrears. It is now a question of heat or eat for these families. Many families are at or beyond breaking point. The level of disconnections indicates that is the case, as they are up 64% on the same time last year. That is an outrage, and it is outrageous that the Government refuses to introduce energy credits in this situation.

Do not tell us that these credits are unsustainable or that the Government does not have the money or needs to be prudent. We know - and if the Minister of State read the *Sunday Business Post* on 3 May, he would know - that the Government has €39 billion in State cash reserves held by the National Treasury Management Agency. They are liquid assets. Two weeks ago, the Government announced an increased budget surplus for 2026, up from €5 billion to €9.2 billion. There was a budget surplus in 2023 and 2024 of €30.9 billion and there are rainy day funds, the Future Ireland Fund and infrastructure funds of another €20 billion. The truth is that the Government is awash with money. Before the 2024 general election, the Government found €2.2 billion for a package straight from the back of a couch to help it win and buy that election. It is time to now reintroduce credits. Families are at breaking point. They are at the pin of their collar and they need energy credits now of at least €500 each.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for introducing this Bill on electricity regulation. People Before Profit is happy to support this, which is a serious attempt to address the issue of the energy price hikes and the energy poverty that has resulted from those as well as the price gouging and profiteering of energy companies. The idea that there would be a body in legislation that would monitor price gouging and price levels is an admirable one and we are happy support it and see it go to the next Stage.

I have to be honest, though, and say that we need to go a lot further than this. There is immediate stuff, which I am sure Sinn Féin would agree with and that others have articulated, about energy credits and the cuts that were imposed in the budget this year, but this Bill is obviously an attempt to deal more structurally with the whole issue of price hikes, profiteering and price gouging. It would be good to monitor pricing, and we need to monitor it, and this Bill has provisions on protection against unfair pricing and so on, but it is still predicated on a privatised and deregulated market. I believe the problem is the privatised, deregulated market. If we look at electricity, what has happened is absolutely clear. I said this to Professor John FitzGerald today in our committee and, surprisingly, he agreed with me. I will be careful to say he agreed with me "to some degree". I find it grimly amusing to go back to 2011 when Eamon Ryan fully and finally deregulated the Irish electricity market and read what he said. He said that competition was going to be good for the consumer, that we were going to have competition in the market and that prices were going to go down. He said the consumer was going to benefit.

This process had started under Fianna Fáil. I think Mary O'Rourke was the Minister back in 2001, and then Noel Dempsey. The Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 2001 removed the not-for-profit mandate of the ESB. Eamon Ryan finally removed all regulations on price

in 2011. It was all based on private competition and how deregulating the market would benefit the consumer because competition leads to prices going down. However, the exact opposite happened. All the market claptrap and dogma did not lead to prices going down and did not benefit the consumer. The prices went up almost immediately. Profits for the ESB and all the other energy players went through the roof and have consistently continued to go through the roof since then, as have prices for ordinary householders. We went from being under a regulated market that was not for profit, where the ESB controlled the market and we had the lowest electricity prices in Europe, to being deregulated, privatised and with the highest electricity prices in Europe.

That is what happened. It is obvious when you look at the profits being made that that is the problem. We need to take that sector back into public control, not because it is a good idea coming from the lefties but because it worked. We had it before and it worked, and we should not have fixed what was not broken. We had good electricity prices. The ESB was a fantastic company. Then, a market dogma and claptrap were introduced and we have paid a bitter price for it. Half a million ordinary people, as a result, are in arrears on electricity and gas. That is where it ends, with super profits for the energy companies. Let us go back to what we used to have, which was a company that had a not-for-profit mandate and where there was not massive profiteering.

I also believe we just need to introduce energy price controls. We have them. We do not even need new legislation for this. Fianna Fáil, for all the criticism I have of it, brought in legislation, the Consumer Protection Act, which actually empowers the Government to impose price controls when there is an emergency. Why on earth did Fianna Fáil bring it in? It did so presumably because it thought we might need it some time, but it has never used it and it refuses to use it, even though this is the definition of an emergency in terms of the cost of energy. There is a war going on and prices have gone through the roof and people cannot pay their bills because of it, and there are the price hikes that have made energy unaffordable. Why on earth do we have something on the Statute Book that was designed for exactly that situation but we refuse to use it? We should impose the price controls that that consumer protection legislation empowers the Government to use. The Government will not do it because it seems to think it is okay that people are profiteering off the cost-of-living misery that ordinary people are suffering, or maybe it is a commitment to market dogma, or both, but it has failed us.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As others have said, people are fed up, exhausted and worn down by the current energy crisis. Some of those already challenged to make ends meet - those with disabilities, for example, or those on very low incomes - are now living hand to mouth and cutting back on food just to keep a bit of heat and light, and that is before the darker winter months crawl back in again. We have also found out that small businesses are hanging on. I have spoken to quite a few in my constituency. We see that prices always shoot up in an incident, but when wholesale prices drop or a Government initiative provides a belated relief, we do not see the same movement downwards. It is all about the hedging and the margins, but a lot of it is basically "Wizard of Oz" stuff and no one can see what is going on behind the curtain.

That is why I welcome the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026. In the same theme as "The Wizard of Oz", it is not a magic wand to reduce prices but it might just lead to fairer pricing and help people make better decisions because of the suggestions like the monthly

publication of the supplier margins, the oversight of the hedging, the quarterly reports showing how quickly the retail prices are tracking the wholesale costs and giving more and stronger powers to the CRU to investigate any kind of anti-competitive behaviour.

To be clear, there are real reasons prices stay up. Ireland's wholesale prices are still higher in general. Network and grid charges are higher, and that is before we put the investment into upgrading the grid so we can actually be supplied wholly by homegrown energy and be a net exporter. That is a long way down the road but we should be starting now. Hedging, to an extent, does delay price reductions, and our dependence on oil and gas for electricity and for other forms of energy makes us very vulnerable.

The Bill is restricted in what it can do. The CRU cannot override EU law. The Government might say EU law is already in place so we do not need this, but it cannot get better than EU law and it cannot set direct pricing either, and it does not tackle the root cause of our dependence on imported fossil fuels. To be clear, however, it is an improvement on what is there already. Every piece of relevant information can only push the system a little closer to fairness for people. Let us remember that we are paying among the highest, if not the highest, electricity prices in Europe, but we are probably the ones that get the lowest amount of information as to why. A little bit of transparency would not go amiss, and I cannot see why this Bill would be opposed by the Government. Even if there are measures that its advice says cannot be implemented, the Bill can be amended and made better. In that context, more transparency is a good idea.

Deputy Michael Collins: In recent years, energy suppliers operating in Ireland recorded profits running into hundreds of millions of euro, even as households struggled with some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. That reality is why stronger transparency, oversight and consumer protection are not only justified, but necessary. This pressure has been felt most sharply in rural Ireland. When people in rural areas do not have access to cash, they have no alternative. They rely on electricity, oil and solid fuel, often in older homes that are expensive to heat. When prices go up, they have nowhere to turn and fuel poverty sets in quickly. I saw that clearly myself time and again while canvassing in Galway last weekend. On doorsteps in rural areas, people raised energy costs as one of their main concerns: pensioners, working families and small business owners all said the same thing. They feel squeezed, they feel forgotten and they are worried about how they will manage the next winter.

While people are struggling like that, profits are being made. The ESB recorded profits of €868 million in 2023 and €706 million in 2024. Bord Gáis Energy made €72.5 million in profit in 2025. SSE's Irish operations reported profits of over €50 million. These are huge figures when set against the reality being faced by households across the country. We also know what actually provided relief before the last election: energy credits were issued. I did say "before the last election". I heard again on the doors of Galway how important these credits were to people, who remember them because they made a real difference. They reduced fear and bought people breathing space. Energy prices remain high. Fuel poverty has not disappeared. That is why I make a direct appeal to the Minister of State: those energy credits need to be reintroduced, not as a political gesture, but as a necessary support for our households, particularly in rural Ireland.

This Bill is a step in the right direction. It pushes transparency and accountability, but legislation alone will not keep homes warm. People need practical help and they need it now. Energy is an essential service. No one should be forced to choose between heating and eating. That is why stronger regulations, real affordability measures and the return of energy credits are not optional but essential.

We are, unfortunately, not energy independent. We should be. We are laggards. That is what the powers in Europe think Ireland is: laggards in relation to renewables. People out there are trying to put solar on their houses and on the roofs of their sheds. The pittance grants they are getting are shocking compared with those in other countries in Europe and in the UK. They are getting treble in Scotland what we get in Ireland. We are not moving in any direction. All the Government wants to do is tax the people as hard as it can - carbon, the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy, VAT, the whole lot down the hard-working man and woman's back. The people know it and they are angered out there about this because the Government has neglected the good hard-working people of this country.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin for introducing this Bill. It is a very good Bill and works quite well. I was kind of shocked when I was reading it because I wondered should this not have been done a long time ago by previous Governments. I welcome it in that sense.

The cliché every Member in this House is using is the phrase "heating or eating", but that is the truth. That is what is happening in Cork, Dublin, Donegal, Galway, Kilkenny - anywhere in the country. People are choosing between heating and eating. Recently, I visited a gentleman's house where they had one bar on the fire and were wrapped in blankets. He is afraid to turn on the heating in his house. In my constituency, there are many families leaving their kids in bed late on the Saturday and on the Sunday to ensure that they do not have to turn on the heating in the house because that is how difficult it is for them.

I know the Minister of State is scrolling through his phone. I am sure he is very busy there, but the other thing is that-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am listening to the Deputy. I am not just-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Well, I would like the Minister of State to listen to me and pay attention, if that is okay.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am sorry, but Chair?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am only asking for a small bit of respect-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I have heard everything the Deputy has said.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----and for the Minister of State to have a small bit of respect for the Leas-Cheann Comhairle as well.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I have heard everything the Deputy has said and I will reply to him.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister of State. He will reply-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will. Do not worry.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----and he will have his opportunity to do so. Fine.

The reality is that there are people in this country who have never been worse off. The Government goes out and says every day of the week that it is doing fantastic and asks people to give it a clap on the back because it has this deficit and that deficit.

8 o'clock

You cannot eat a deficit. There are people now choosing between turning on their heating and eating and the Government is not listening to them. More than 300,000 people in this country are in arrears with their ESB and gas bills. There is something wrong with that. There is something fundamentally wrong when people are in significant arrears in a First World country. The Government does not seem to be listening and does not seem to understand. I do not know if Government Members are knocking on the same doors as we are in Galway and Dublin but, at the doors we are knocking on, people are telling us straight out that they cannot take any more, that they are sick to death of it, that this is the final cut and that they cannot keep on going. I appeal to the Minister of State and to his Government. My colleague has just spoken about the renewable energy schemes that are available, which the Government continuously says are fantastic and marvellous. The truth is that you would want a ball of money under the bed to avail of these schemes. Some of these measures cost €16,000 but you only get €2,000 back. It is ridiculous. It does not make sense.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will be supporting this Bill. No one has mentioned the elephant in the room. This Government signed off on allowing networks to charge up to €120 per megawatt hour. It costs €50 per megawatt hour to produce electricity but the networks are allowed to charge up to €120. People in some areas have gas and alternatives. They can swap between different groups to get cheaper rates. In rural areas, we are lucky to have ESB at times. People in rural areas only have one choice. If something is not broken, they will not fix it. They will not swap between different networks because they do not have the opportunity to do so. The Government brought out so-called targeted funding but it is taking it back through VAT increases. It is giving with one hand and taking back with the other.

The Government then came out with a solar panel scheme. I am all for solar panels but the Government brought out a grant that only allows you to put up to 6 kW of solar panels on your roof. Even if a roof could take up to 20 kW, the Government says people can only put up 6 kW. Why is that? It is because the infrastructure is not there to take the power fluctuations. The Government does not want you to be able to power your own house for free and send back electricity to the grid because the infrastructure is not there. The Government limited the number of solar panels and the amount of grants that would allow people to get cheaper electricity.

Some people wait for the bills to come in at the end of the month and do not know what price different things are going to come in at. They take every chance they can to turn off lights or heating to save as much as they can, even if it means doing without. Everything the

Government has done has only benefited the electricity suppliers. They are making profits off these exponential increases.

Along with Eamon Ryan and the Green Party, the current Government parties were part of the Government that stopped the designated maritime area plans, DMAPs, that would have allowed us to generate offshore wind power in Ireland coming out because they wanted it to go on the east coast. They would not allow it for the likes of Foynes and other areas on the west coast, where the highest wind speeds are. For five years, they held back the DMAPs to stop us developing offshore generation and are now talking about being environmentally friendly. We could have produced power offshore. We would have needed no wind turbines inland, where they have health implications. That is what they did. They held this up for six years and are now part of another Government, which is giving the people a pittance back and telling them they are looking after them. They are giving them nothing.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: First, I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important Bill. As I have said in the Chamber several times, it is a fact that the cost of electricity has gone up every day since we closed down Bord na Móna. Reflecting on it now, that should not have happened but Eamon Ryan and the Greens were in a hurry. It should not have been closed down until we had at least made some preparations or had enough wind power or energy from other sources to replace it, although I fervently believe there was nothing wrong with generating electricity from turf or with cutting turf. I have turf cut and ready to save myself. It is very important to have your own fuel. People were wrongly advised that they should not cut turf. Many people are now afraid to cut it. They think they are breaking the law but they actually are not. They can provide turf for themselves. That is legal. I hope that will never change.

The worst thing that is going on with the energy companies now is that there are so many of them and they are making fortunes on the backs of poor people. Even working-class people and small businesses are suffering. I cannot understand what is going on. Some companies are putting up their prices by a given percentage while others are putting them up by even more. One company has even brought its prices down. It seems there is no regulation whatsoever. The regulator is asleep, not there or not acting for some reason or other. It is not good enough. I call on the Minister of State, the Taoiseach and the senior Minister for energy to bring these electric companies before the relevant Oireachtas committee, whether that is the committee on energy, the committee on finance or some other committee. The ordinary people on the ground whom we represent are the people we are answerable to.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, spoke about the amount that is being put into retrofitting but there are many people who are not benefiting at all. You need a lot of money to meet the qualifying conditions for the grant. On the warmer homes scheme, I was talking to someone last week and many people are being excluded because they do not qualify. They are not told for a year and half although they are waiting for it. That is not on at all. That should be rectified. Like everyone else, I am afraid that many people will be in the dark and cold this winter.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar an mBille seo inniu. The ESB, Ireland's own exaggerated prices, surpluses and bonuses board, has been charging households and businesses some of the highest energy prices in Europe while boasting about profits and posting record

profits. It is obscene and extremely unfair on households and businesses that are struggling to survive and yet it goes on and on. That is partly why I am broadly in support of this Private Members' Bill, which offers a focused and practical measure that finally gives the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities the statutory tools it has long lacked, including monthly price and margin transparency, proper oversight of hedging practices, stronger powers to address anticompetitive behaviour and an explicit legal duty to protect consumers from unfair pricing. However, two critical deficits remain within the Bill. Unless they are rectified, the Bill risks becoming yet another well-meaning statute that delivers little on the ground or in reality.

The first deficit is that, as far as I can see, the Bill contains no automatic consumer relief mechanisms. Monitoring margins is useful but, when suppliers' profits surge, the CRU still cannot impose or mandate automatic rebates. The second deficit is that the legislation hands the CRU and the Minister broad discretionary powers but does not guarantee resourcing. We have seen this before. We only have to look at the unfair trading practices legislation and the Agri-Food Regulator. Both were launched as new oversight mechanisms to protect farmers and small suppliers but, because the underpinning legislation and the powers granted were not sufficiently robust, they have failed to deliver real and meaningful change.

New institutions without real teeth simply become expensive talking shops and we have had more than enough of those.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. People across Ireland are exhausted. They are exhausted by constant worry about bills. I welcome engagement with the Department, but it is not happening fast enough. I submitted a parliamentary question on the October 2024 consultation on EU Directive (EU) 2024/1711. There were five submissions from the ESB, Electric Ireland, Bord Gáis Éireann, Energia and the Electricity Association of Ireland regarding plug-in solar. Can what they said about plug-in solar be made available to the House so we, as legislators, can have a debate on plug-in solar? It is important that the people of Ireland understand what was said to the Department and why we have not acted on this. The UK and German governments are doing it. We have seen there is war and instability in global energy markets. I am blue in the face. We cannot just keep relying on temporary financial supports. We need to continue examining more reductions for home heating oil. However, subsidies alone are not good enough for a long-term energy strategy. The only long-term solution is reducing the cost of energy and moving from being a petrostate to an electrostate. That means accelerating renewable roll-out. Members have already spoken about battery storage and long-duration energy storage and whatever means, grid upgrades and local energy infrastructure. We already know the current system is under pressure. That is why the investment the Government gave for ESB, and the grid infrastructure announced under the programme for Government, were welcome, but we need delivery and we need it quickly. That is one more reason for plug-in solar - it would be done quickly. It makes no sense to ordinary people struggling with bills why we have not acted on this. We should be examining practical ideas that could directly help households.

Renters and social tenants I represent constantly contact my office. I recognise we have different wiring standards and safety requirements than other countries. That should not stop us from examining a safe framework that could be developed. We should not be afraid of innovation in this sense, and I welcome the engagement I have had on this with the Department. I understand it is examining multiple things but the goal with regard to private wires should

not be to replace the national grid or create an uncontrolled private system. The goal should be reducing pressure on constrained parts of the grid. So many studies out there show that accelerating these renewable connections, reducing curtailment and decentralising our grid will allow energy to be used more efficiently where the bottlenecks already exist. I have heard multiple people mention it in the Chamber today. When we bring in the private wires Bill I would love to see them support it and engage with it to make sure it is done for the betterment of the Irish people. If we are to bring in a private wires Bill that will be used by large-scale energy, there should be a proportionate community benefit fund that is directly linked to the savings associated with that private wires Bill. Anything we do in this House should benefit the Irish people. That is what the public needs and that is one of the solutions. We need delivery and we need to lower bills. I believe the Critical Infrastructure Bill in conjunction with the private wires Bill will help. This means acting faster on these so Ireland becomes more resilient and secure.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted to speak on this Bill. It is timely, and I support it. The Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026 cannot be viewed in isolation. If we are serious about reducing electricity costs, we must address the core structural issues that continue to drive prices upwards. Only by tackling these areas together can we deliver lasting reductions in electricity costs for households and businesses across the country and reduce Ireland's dependency on imported energy. Almost 50% of the average electricity bill is driven by energy costs. Natural gas generates roughly half of Ireland's electricity and approximately 70% of the gas is imported, meaning Irish consumers are tied to the global price swings. We must have different options. This dependence on gas has had a direct and severe impact on our electricity prices. Gas prices today remain more than three times higher than before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These elevated prices have fed straight into higher electricity costs for households.

In 2022 the then rural Independents, including Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, Deputy Nolan, other colleagues and I, introduced a Private Members' motion calling on the Government to allow oil and gas exploration off the Irish coast at Barryroe with the aim of strengthening Ireland's energy security and reducing reliance on volatile international oil. The Government of the day, at Eamon Ryan's behest, with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, voted against the motion. The then Minister, Eamon Ryan, wanted to fill the pipe with Readymix concrete to block the pipe to make sure it could never be used. Concrete is scarce enough and dear enough. I do not know if it ever happened. I hope it did not. I called it national sabotage. If it did happen, it would be an act of vandalism and national sabotage. Now here we are. We had people here at that time and you were afraid to be seen talking to them. It was an international company that was going to bring in the oil at its own risk, produce it here and have it for us. It was taboo. We could not be seen talking to them. We had to have records of our meetings and everything else because we had to be too PC. That is what is wrong here. We have allowed big business to dictate.

It is a holy terror that data centres are paying less for electricity than householders in Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir, Cahir, Cashel, Tipperary town and the other rural areas. It is a holy terror we have a Government that would allow that and continues to allow that and to allow them to continue expanding data centres when our grid is at crashing point with amber lights, warnings and outages recently in Nenagh with no explanation. We are on a tenterhook, and we stopped our turf and briquettes, and we are importing them. That is what we have.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Ar dtús báire gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Daly as ucht an rún seo a chur os comhair an Tí. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Baill a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht an-tábhachtach seo. Deputy McGrath is right. We cannot have this debate in isolation, and it goes back to Deputy Heneghan's contribution about the turmoil in global energy markets. I make the point that in this debate some people are running to the hills to have their social media posts up. They want to score cheap points and do the kinds of things that some people do. That is not what this debate should be about, and I appreciate Deputy Pa Daly's sincerity in this. I made the point here last week that words and language matter. I pose a question to all of us in this Chamber tonight. We all accept there are too many people in energy uncertainty and in arrears with their bills, but I ask the Members to tell me how many people in Ireland were disconnected. How many? They should come back to me. How does it happen that people are disconnected? I make this point as a practising politician who has people in his office, who meets people, does not live in an ivory tower and who understands the frustration articulated by many in this Chamber. How is it that people are disconnected? I make the point that our language matters and people listen to us. For somebody to be disconnected there has to be no engagement whatever with the energy supplier. Let us be real and honest. If we engage as an advocate or if we engage with a person in arrears with an energy company, there will not be disconnection. We have all been that advocate and that person working for the vulnerable person. Let us be clear about that and not have Deputies coming in here tonight castigating some of us as uncaring and unkind because we are not. We understand full well. Nobody mentioned the moratorium on disconnections. I wonder why. I accept that people are faoi bhrú and I share the views expressed by many in the House that there needs be greater transparency on the pricing structure of bills so people can understand.

If you sit down in an office or in a person's home and talk and engage with them, it is a comment that is made quite clear.

People came into the Chamber tonight, in some sections of the House, like confetti at a wake, speaking about the profiteering and high profits. I ask people to read the CRU's report from yesterday about profitability. I ask Members to do that. The CRU said there was no evidence of energy companies profiteering, but there was a question as part of the report about the profit margin and further examination being needed. It goes back to my fundamental point that our words do matter and we have an ability to lead as Members. That is why I think, to be fair to Deputy Daly, that his contribution and what he is trying to do here is that. I readily accept that. In his reply at the beginning of the debate, the Minister outlined why the Government is opposing the Bill, and I will not go through that again. The Minister said that Government is committed to putting in place a well-funded energy market and tackling energy affordability. I repeat the point tonight that I do not believe any of us in this Chamber want to have people struggling to pay or to engage with the energy companies and suppliers.

I totally understand the frustration and annoyance of people, but part of the overarching debate that we do not seem to have done is to speak about a move, as we should, away from fossil fuel dependency. I was at the Cork development forum yesterday and we got a paper on Cork's energy grid, our current capacity and future opportunities. We all need to have that conversation about the future of our energy supply.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Commission for Regulation of Utilities with regard to our energy markets. The Government is deeply committed to ensuring that the CRU can effectively monitor and regulate electricity and gas prices and suppliers to ensure the best outcome for the customer. That is at the heart of what I want to be as a person in this Chamber representing people. It is to ensure, like many in this House have done, that energy is affordable. It is important that we do that. Equally, if you look at what the Government has done, there was action. While if you listened to some of the contributions, you would think Government did nothing, and I would take criticism any day of the week about being late, slow, or whatever, we did act. There was the VAT reduction, multiple rounds of energy credits, and protections given to customers since 2022. Nobody other than the Minister referred to the fact, as part of the debate, that we are now getting 49% of our electricity from renewables. We are moving away from the fossil fuel dependency.

We need to continue to do more as a country and a people. We had consternation last week about the Taoiseach and Deputy O'Connor's intervention about nuclear energy, yet we are getting nuclear energy through the interconnector. We need to look at the structural factors around our energy prices. That is why I welcome the debate tonight. I know I am repeating myself, but I think this debate has been important because it gives us that opportunity. We are too energy-dependent on fossil fuels. There is a market vulnerability due to price that none of us, or at least not me, can predict for next week, let alone October or November. Looking at the debates in the House of Representatives in America, for example, with American prices, there is now a movement by some of President Trump's own people in the Republican party relating to his war in Iran.

Former Minister Eamon Ryan has been criticised left, right and centre here tonight, but he was very successful at retrofitting, warmer homes, solar panels and offshore energy. We are working to ensure that households benefit directly from that renewable energy transition. Since 2019, €1.7 billion has been spent on SEAI schemes in support of homeowners, delivering almost 250,000 home energy improvements. That is fully equipped upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme. Last year, 5,000 businesses and community groups received grants to retrofit homes or install solar. As the Minister said in his contribution, that rooftop revolution has begun, and our job as leaders is to help, support and augment that so we can expand the number of people who are benefiting from that and their energy bills can be reduced. Where energy is produced, it can be sold back into the grid.

Government supports have been discussed tonight. We are very much aware of and concerned about the pressures that people are under, be it householders or businesses, with the higher energy costs. We have provided support of the second-highest, if not the highest, packages in Europe in the last number of weeks. As a Government, we are taking action to help householders and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy.

In concluding on behalf of the Government, I know the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has addressed the issues about the Bill. I thank Deputy Daly for bringing it forward and having a good debate. I wish that some in the House would use their contributions to have a proper, meaningful, informed debate. Unlike them, Deputy Daly did put forward an informed debate. As the Minister said, the Government will be opposing the Bill.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: My constituency of Dublin North-West has a growing older population, showing high concentrations of older residents, particularly those over 80 years of age. The constituency also has areas of economic disadvantage and high unemployment. People are struggling daily and this cost-of-living crisis and escalating costs are continuing to impact families, who are forced to make hard choices between putting food on the table for their families or paying for essential utilities and various housing costs, including medical care. Families are facing an almost €2,000 annual increase in household bills. Over the last number of winters, we have seen how families have struggled to heat their homes, as energy costs have gone through the roof. Electricity bills now make up a big part of the annual household expenditure. Families have received exorbitant electricity bills in recent years, leaving people stressed and fearful for the future, especially in these economically and politically unstable times.

Many have gone into significant arrears and have even gone into debt because of these huge electricity bills. Families need protection from price-gouging and anti-competitive behaviour, and they need proper monitoring of energy prices. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities needs to be given additional powers to carry out such functions. Ireland once had some of the cheapest electricity prices in Europe. The break-up of the company has led, over time, to Ireland having the highest household electricity prices in the EU, with costs roughly 40% above the EU average. This is not sustainable and it is the ordinary person on the street who is suffering. This amendment to the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 will protect consumers and struggling families. It is needed now more than ever in this uncertain world. Families who are suffering need a break and to be protected from the rip-off energy prices.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank Deputy Pa Daly and my colleagues for bringing forward the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026. It is to monitor and regulate hedging practices, monitor anti-competitive behaviour, and force energy companies to provide data on pricing strategies to the regulator. It also provides legislation to regulate standing charges through the regulator. The current power of the CRU is minimal, to say the least. As someone said, it is like a dog with no teeth. Its public enforcement action is weak and limited. Energy companies need to be held to proper account.

These companies are making millions upon millions of euro on an annual basis. Every time energy costs increase, so does the cost of living from food to clothing to services. This gouging is damaging lives and our economy. They must be regulated through legislation. How many times must the Government be told by Eurostat and the ESRI that energy prices are the highest in the European Union? This was before the illegal war started in Iran and Lebanon. Householders are paying double the generation costs and ten times the network costs of data centres. How can this be justified? How could the Government cut energy credits during a cost-of-living crisis with over 300,000 households in energy debt? I am sure more will follow when the figures are published in the next quarter.

Sinn Féin is calling on the Government to act to back the workers of this country, to back the grannies and grandads, and to introduce a windfall tax on these energy companies to shield the most vulnerable in society and give the people the break that they deserve. We cannot continue to allow these energy companies to dictate and rip off the country by setting prices that are putting workers to the pin of their collars and driving masses of people into more debt. Sinn Féin asks all TDs to support the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The biggest issue here is that while we have not had the Government attack this legislation, we have had it talk about the fact that it is premature and not the time. When we make proposals in respect of many issues, we hear that it is not the right time. The fact is that people are dealing with a cost-of-living crisis that was in existence long before the Iran and Lebanese war, and we could go back a long time before that.

Once upon a time, we had the cheapest electricity prices in Europe. We now have the most expensive by 40%, and we did not really need Eurostat to tell us that. The fact is we have spoken for a huge period of time about the need to tackle energy costs properly.

This regulation deals with the monitoring and regulating of hedging practices that are always used as the excuse why energy companies cannot do this, that and the other. It provides for enhanced powers to monitor and sanction anticompetitive behaviour because it is not okay for energy companies to screw over the Irish people. We need to see transparency. This is very straightforward. It is about having the ability to provide data on pricing strategies to the energy regulator so we can see what exactly the situation is. It is about taking energy affordability seriously.

Again, Sinn Féin proposed legislation which will give the regulator the power to regulate standing charges. How long have we been talking about that? It is an absolute joke, and everyone believes it when we hear about data centres getting far cheaper, and from their point of view far fairer, costs than the regular Joe and Josephine out there. None of this is good enough. We need to see restructuring of the network charges and the PSO levy. We have talked about this for a long time and, yes, we think that there is a need to do it, while accepting that the Government made some moves under pressure from people who went out and protested initially. That is the only reason that any action was taken in the first place, and nobody will tell me different.

There is huge anger out there. We know what we need to see and that is cheaper petrol and diesel at the pumps. The issues of those who need home heating oil to heat their homes - about 750,000 people - need to be dealt with. However, we do not see movement from the Government in relation to any of this.

I am also told that the SEAI has a particular solar panel grant scheme for those who are vulnerable medical users that is not sufficiently funded at this point in time. Will the Minister of State come back to me on that?

First, we need to deal with the profiteering of the energy companies. We need to see these sort of moves made and then we need to see energy and electricity made cheaper for the Irish people because this is a disgrace at this point in time.

Deputy Pa Daly: This all goes back to the fact that Ireland once had the lowest electricity prices in the EU. We now have the highest. Successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have presided over this change, did nothing to stop it and in fact reinforced the system that caused it. I thank all of the other speakers of the Opposition, maybe bar one, who agreed with many of the merits in this Bill and who are calling for more transparency. We agree with their calls for more transparency, more public trust and more power for the CRU. We agree on many of the issues. Indeed, we agree with some of what the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said earlier

on. He acknowledges the problems and accepts that extra powers are needed for the CRU to be revamped.

Where we disagree, however, is where the Minister said that this is premature. That has been the problem to date because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are continuing to act like workers and families are in a position to wait until next year's budget, but they are not able to wait that long. The Government may say that there is a review in place or that a review has been completed, and we have to wait for the energy affordability task force, which was established about a year ago but still has not recommended any reforms. Unfortunately, people do not have the luxury of waiting around for that.

I have listened to what has been said. Unfortunately, the Government is way behind with the retrofitting grants. EV-charging infrastructure and EV cars are weighted too much in favour of the wealthy. It is not fair. We are way behind on offshore wind. We are way behind on the onshore guidelines, and it is no wonder that one of its own Ministers said in an interview that the Government has been sitting on its hands and navel gazing about offshore wind. It has been way behind, and nothing has been done even in relation to the energy cloud.

In the course of the debate, the Minister for State mentioned the disconnection moratorium but there are many people who are on prepay or pay-as-you-go plans. In effect, there is a disconnection policy in place for all of those people. The problem is that we do not have statistics or the data. We need the CRU to be revamped. The Minister of State referred to the energy credits which were in place in the months running up the last election and then stripped away. The new alliance between Deputy O'Connor and the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, whereby they are tapping each other on the back, is unfortunately distracting from the main issues. We need a windfall tax. We need transparency and we need the CRU to be revamped.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 13 May 2026.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Third Level Costs

150. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider additional financial supports for students on a temporary basis due to increasing travel costs that students are currently facing as we approach exam time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34974/26]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Will the Minister consider additional financial supports for students on a temporary basis due to the increase in travel costs that students are currently facing, particularly at this time of exams?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): The Deputy's question is timely. I am always conscious of the desire to reduce the cost of education for students. I met a number of students recently at the cost of college event where I had very good conversations. I am meeting AMLÉ tomorrow and I meet student unions across the country on an ongoing basis.

On many occasions, I have outlined my commitment to improving student supports in a way that is equitable, funded, fair and provides certainty for families. That is one of the reasons I prioritised student supports in the most recent budget, my first budget in this role. Real and permanent changes were introduced that support students from all backgrounds and help reduce the cost of education, particularly for those who may not have traditionally been able to access it. As a result, more people are allowed in and the pool of access is broadened. Access to higher education is a life-changing event.

The Deputy posed a specific question about travel costs and temporary supports. I agree with her, and so does the Government. That is why we recently agreed at Cabinet to provide €750 million of additional money to support people suffering as a result of the fuel crisis across a number of sectors. Most importantly, this is done in a way that supports everyone who uses motorised transport through reductions at the pumps. There is a 10 cent additional excise duty reduction, bringing the total reduction put in place this year to 32 cent per litre on diesel and 27 cent per litre on petrol, combined with a package of other measures.

For any student who, as the Deputy described, is incurring increased travel costs, be it through their car or travelling on a bus, train or other vehicle, which all have heavy fuel costs, the idea behind the excise duty cut is that every household, family and student in a car or bus will avail of some sort of subsidy and relief on a temporary basis for the cost of travel, as the Deputy suggested. In short, I agree with the Deputy. That is exactly why the Government is moving swiftly on this.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I welcome the fact the Minister said he is trying, although the 10 cent reduction has already come and gone and it is still costing students and their families more to travel. Some students have no choice but to live at home and travel because there is no accommodation for them. We are coming into the exam period and there is also uncertainty around the student fees with the current cost of living. I know the Minister can only do so much with the allocation he has, but students are telling me they need this. Students should not be the ones to carry this burden. They should be able to put fuel in their car, but they cannot do so. They cannot afford it and are getting into debt. They have to take on extra time in work just to pay for this. I would welcome even more supports than what the Minister has outlined because the current supports are not enough.

Deputy James Lawless: As the Deputy knows, the student supports I introduced in the most recent budget targeted, in particular, those students who have to travel extra distances. They are categorised as being "non-adjacent". All four bands of non-adjacent maintenance grants were increased by between €200 and €400 to reflect the additional costs for those commuting those distances.

The Deputy mentioned accommodation, and rightly so. I am aware it is a key concern for most students. As the Deputy knows, I published the student accommodation strategy recently.

It is building up steam. There have been almost 3,000 new commencements since it was introduced only a month or six weeks ago. I visited Whitebox Student Campus in Limerick where a site of approximately 1,200 to 1,400 beds is getting ready to move forward. That site used my new student accommodation design template. The fruits are already beginning to bear, but I am conscious it will take time to build those sites out, secure planning and move through the process. We are up and running with that now.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Would the Minister look at the costings for a temporary free travel scheme for students affected by the current fuel crisis? We are not looking for this to be a permanent measure but, rather, a temporary one to get them over this period. Such a scheme could lift the burden on students commuting long distances to colleges. Any relief on the cost of living would make a significant difference to students. Not only are they trying to afford to stay in college, but their mental health is being affected by this too.

Deputy James Lawless: We are doing that. This week or next week, we will pass the Finance Bill through the Houses to give effect to those measures we have already decided, as a Government, to take. We are doing exactly as the Deputy suggests. We are providing further subsidies on the cost of travel to students in two ways, namely, through direct intervention at the petrol pumps for those students who travel by car and motorised transport and by additions to the maintenance grants, which are already in the system and being paid out to students across the country. Students are receiving those benefits from the new grant amounts that I increased for exactly that reason.

I am always having ongoing conversations with students. I will be publishing shortly the outcome from the cost of college event I hosted this year. That will be in the form of a paper and it will be available for reference to the Deputy, as her party's spokesperson for this area, and to all Members of the House. It will outline all the different options students suggested, with a costing against each one. For the first time this year, the paper will contain an impact analysis detailing what each measure would mean in terms of outcomes, policy goals, widening access and the material difference it would make to allow students to make the leap into education and navigate through it.

Third Level Fees

151. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he and his Department have considered not proceeding with the planned reduction in student contribution fees for the 2026-27 academic year, in light of the recent Government decision requiring Departments to absorb expenditure overruns within existing budgets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34357/26]

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing interest in this matter and all matters pertaining to higher education. As he knows, the programme for Government addresses the cost of college in a balanced way. It does so deliberately by combining universal and targeted measures. The programme for Government commits to incrementally reducing student contribution fees as well as increasing SUSI grants; providing targeted support measures for specific cohorts; providing more pathways into higher and further education; and

improving how students navigate within the system. The programme for Government also states – this is less often quoted by commentators – that all this must be done in a financially sustainable manner. That is the wording. It is on the website for all to see.

In the current budget, I was pleased to introduce the first permanent reduction to the student contribution charge in approximately 30 years. It is a €500 reduction. That flat-rate reduction has reduced the top rate from €3,000 to €2,500. That is in effect from the current academic year, and we backdated it to make it available to students already in the system. That is the first permanent cut. It has benefited 108,000 undergraduate students and 14,000 apprentices. It is only right that apprentices also benefit from a 17% *pro rata* reduction in the fees they pay.

The State provides grants that cover all or part of the student contribution for eligible learners on a SUSI grant. Up to 70% of households are now eligible for the full student contribution fee to be paid, half of it to be paid or, for those at the top level with a household income of up to €120,000, a €500 subvention. A family with a household income of, say, €118,000 that is availing of the flat fee of €2,500 is eligible for the €500 fee grant, meaning they effectively pay €2,000. For a family with an income of, say, €60,000, half of the fees are paid for. Below that, families get their fees paid in full. There are a number of interventions aimed at different sectors in a targeted fashion.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate that. The Minister will be acutely aware of the level of concern among families and students to the news that there is a possibility that the incremental decreases in student contribution fees will not go ahead. The Minister mentioned that this must be done in a financially sustainable way, which is something that is not spoken about perhaps in the media or by other spokespeople. The Department might be financially sustainable, but why should students or the Department cover the cost for other Departments that are not so financially sustainable? That is not good enough. It is not acceptable to students. I do not doubt the Minister's bona fides on this and I am sure he would love to be able to decrease the student fees or even get rid of them altogether. A financially sustainable way of decreasing fees should not mean students have to bear the brunt for the Department of education's overspending every year.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy makes the point well. I will not comment on collective Cabinet decisions, but I hear what the Deputy said. It is very fair. For my part, I attend to pursue a multitude of options to further support students. These include making progress on fees but also a number of other options in areas such as maintenance grants, funding for students with disabilities, mental health supports, the student assistance fund, accommodation support through the non-adjacent grants and so forth. As I mentioned to Deputy McGettigan a few moments ago, we will be publishing a paper that sets out the different options available to us, along with the costings of each one. This year, for the first time, I commissioned, through the new economics policy under my Department, an impact assessment that tells us what the benefit of each measure will be on particular cohorts and how it will be of assistance and progressive in reducing the cost of education. I assure the Deputy that I am committed to continuing the work of the programme for Government in full, including the fee reductions.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Is there a date on which that paper will be made available? Those costings will be very important to politicians in this Chamber but also extremely important to

the very students who we profess to represent in this Chamber regarding to the amount they will have to pay for the coming academic year. I represent the students across this country and the important issue for them is that there was a commitment in the programme for Government to reduce the student contribution fees, albeit in a financially sustainable way, incrementally year on year during the Government's term. It is something I will absolutely call out as a spokesperson on education. An overspend within the Department of Education and Youth and an overspend across government as a whole should not have knock-on effect for the Department of further and higher education or for the very students we stand here and represent.

Deputy James Lawless: I assure the Deputy and the House that I will make the case in the budget negotiations to secure the maximum possible package for my Department for the benefit of students, apprentices, researchers and all the people within and for all the good reasons the Deputy articulates.

I expect the cost of college paper to be available in June or early summer, and certainly it will be with us before the summer break. It has been commissioned at the moment. It derives from the cost of college event, which we held with students and other stakeholders, and it will also draw upon information meetings with a number of groups, such as AMLÉ who I will meet in the morning, and many other groups I meet on an ongoing basis. When the paper is published, I will inform the relevant spokespeople.

I also welcome any collaborative input from spokespersons on education in the House as to the opportunity cost because it would never be possible, even if we had plenty of time, to do everything. Choices will have to be made. I would welcome a debate and formal discussion. The intention of that paper is to put the choices out there with the costings of this but not that, for example, and to take an in the round view on what is the optimal approach.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Student Accommodation

152. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the framework or protection he will put in place to ensure that any service charge will be included in the rent charge for students in student accommodation, given that otherwise the service charge can soar up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34975/26]

Deputy James Lawless: It is a priority of mine to make higher education more accessible, as I have been saying in reply to earlier questions. Part of this is the cost of accommodation, the cost of putting a roof over everyone's head, and making sure that the students are ideally as close to their college as possible. I firmly believe that the student experience and the college experience necessitates, and is enhanced by, being proximate to the college and having the opportunity to not only be in college for classes, but to attend extracurricular activities and to form new friendships and new networks. Notwithstanding that hybrid lectures and online study can be useful and can be of assistance in certain ways, there is no substitute for the real life in-person interaction. Student accommodation, therefore, is so important for many reasons. There are two ways we go about that. One is through viability and the other is through supply.

Specifically on the Deputy's question and focusing on the service charges and whether they are used as a way around rental restrictions in terms of the law, there are two points. The legislation governing that is the law on rent pressure zones, which is outside of my Department. This jurisdiction is within the preserve of the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, and his Department. I would say strongly that student accommodation falls under the remit of the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. The board offers a dispute resolution service and it has the authority to investigate breaches of rental law, any improper conduct, any unlawful rent increases and any misbehaviour by landlords, including student landlords. This all absolutely comes into the domain of the RTB. The board can impose sanctions of up to €15,000 in fines. Any student or any representative of students who comes across a situation where they believe the RPZs are not being honoured or that the legislation is not being adhered, should make a report to the RTB and have it investigated by that independent body, which is commissioned for that purpose, so the full force of the law can be brought to bear in those situations.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The Minister said that he does not like to see this happening in reply to me in committee. However, the RTB has said that if the rent is set out at the start with the services charged separately, the charge can stay separate. We have seen in institutions that the increase is around 7%, when we look at the rent rise and the rise of the service charges. I would like the Minister to sit down with the Minister for housing to try to work this out a framework and put protections in place. Otherwise, service charges that are separate to rent will soar high and then students will be ripped off again. This cannot go on. We have already had this in other institutions. I acknowledge the Minister cannot do anything about that because it is already in place but I would like him to sit down with the Minister for housing to discuss this.

Deputy James Lawless: I have indeed sat down with the Minister for housing. We had a number of good interactions over the past year, and particularly when he announced his intention to bring forward the reform of the rent pressure zones and to legislate for that. We immediately engaged on that and we spent a long time working out the details of how that would affect students. One of the outputs of that is the special protection regulation for students specifically stating that student-specific accommodation is safe from the regular rent reset that can happen in other private accommodation when a tenant vacates. Where there is a student apartment, regardless how many students come and go, the rent cannot be reset for a minimum of at least three years. This is a very specific protection measure to save students from the annual reset. We know the way students operate and how they come and go with each academic year. This is in law. It passed through these Houses and is now enshrined in the rental acts, and rightly so.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I hear that but I am still not hearing that the Minister will examine the service charge and the rent section going out together. It is a loophole and it will cause issues for students down the line if service charges can go up. They did in one institution recently where the cost increased by 7%. We need to sit down with students, with the Minister for housing and with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to discuss this important issue. This loophole needs to be closed to protect students and others in rental accommodation.

Deputy James Lawless: I have ongoing engagement with the Minister for housing and we have had a very structured and productive engagement, which led to the student exemption and the protection window of three years being imposed in the new rental protection Acts. I hear the issue that the Deputy raises. I have written directly to one or two institutions where I was made aware of this practice. I advised them that I did not feel this was in the spirit of the law, while within the letter of the law. It certainly is not within the spirit of the law. I made my views very clear on that. The Deputy will understand that there is a limit to the powers I exercise here. They are independent entities. There is legislation in place to govern it but we have a dedicated stand-alone agency, which is the RTB, to investigate any breaches of the laws. Where there are situations that come to the Deputy's attention, or to any student's attention, I strongly encourage them to make a report to the RTB and they could be investigated accordingly.

Question No. 153 taken with Written Answers.

Third Level Education

154. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for an update on the progress in providing third level courses through the medium of Irish across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34976/26]

Deputy James Lawless: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta McGettigan. Aithníonn mo Roinn an ról tábhachtach atá ag earnáil an oideachais threasaigh maidir le cur chun cinn agus cothabháil na Gaeilge. Tá réimse cúrsaí ar fáil do mhic léinn trí mheán na Gaeilge ar fud na hearnála treasaí. Is iad na hinstitiúidí féin a dhéanann na cinntí sin i gcomhréir lena neamhspleáchas acadúil. Léiríonn anailís a rinne an tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas le déanaí gur chláraigh 420 mac léinn i gcúrsaí a sholáthraíodh go hiomlán trí mheán na Gaeilge sa bhliain acadúil 2023-24 agus 265 mac léinn eile ag déanamh staidéar i gcúrsaí a sholáthraíodh go páirteach trí mheán na Gaeilge. Den chuid is mó, is i réimse an oideachais iad sin. We need to make further progress on what we have done. I recently visited an t-acadamh in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe Déardaoín seo caite. We spoke to a number of the students and educators there about their plans and their ambition to deliver education in the medium of Irish. It is important also that we recognise the difference between cúrsaí sa Ghaeilge and cúrsaí through Gaeilge. Are we teaching Irish or are we teaching other courses through the medium of Irish? Sometimes that distinction is not always picked up on but it is important. We have a very strong ambition, working with the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Dara Calleary, to reach the goal of 20% of public servants working through the medium of Gaeilge and having it at their disposal. It is something that I am very much committed to and am very much working on. This is why I visited with an Teachta John Connolly and an Comhairleoir Keane at the acadamh in Galway last week. I am very committed to this.

9 o'clock

We will be publishing a national plan for Irish-language public services. This will include research into existing and future demands for Irish-medium tertiary education and then look at how we will roll that out up to 2027.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The Minister will have to excuse me. Táim ag foghlaim Gaeilge anois. Níor thuig mé gach rud a dúirt an tAire. I welcome any progress made on this issue. My son went through bunscoil and Gaelcholáiste and when he went on to college, there were certain words and phrases he struggled to understand, particularly in science. The Government has set a target that 20% of new recruits to the public service will be able to converse with the public and provide services through Irish by 2020, but currently less than 1% of third level courses are being provided in Irish, despite over 50,000 students attending Gaelscoileanna. Would the Minister agree that this is a bit slow?

Deputy James Lawless: Níor cheart go mbeadh inní ar an Teachta faoina cuid Gaeilge, táimse ag foghlaim chomh maith. Maith thú as an bhfoghlaim. We will learn together. It is commendable when anyone attempts it. To meet the target, the goal is to have a workforce capable of speaking at least partly as Gaelige, but ideally 20% would have a strong ability and competency. A wide range of courses is available already. Some are fully in Irish, some are partly through Irish and there can be combinations. Course provision is determined by the institutions, because they are academically autonomous. It is not just within na hollscoileanna. I visited an education and training board, ETB, recently that was providing Irish-language education in night classes. We also support clubs and societies in a number of different activities on campuses, outside of the formal learning experience. I am very supportive of that, as is the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: In a recent submission to the committee on further and higher education, Conradh na Gaeilge called for at least 5% of third level courses to be available through the medium of Irish. Does the Department have any plans to have this? The Irish language is enjoying a cultural revolution, particularly through the music scene. An awful lot of young people now want to take up the language, to learn the language and to continue in their life with the language.

Deputy James Lawless: I know Conradh na Gaeilge well. I will be meeting its representatives in the near future to discuss their submissions and requests. I am very supportive and I hope we can do as much as we can for them. I mentioned some of the actions we are taking. There are a couple of specific actions we are taking to meet the target. We are working with the Department of Education and Youth to examine the transition of students from Irish-language post-primary education because we know there is a huge growth in the bunscoileanna and Gaelscoileanna. The question is how they move on to tertiary education, because we do not want their Irish to fall away when they move to third level education. We are working with the Department of Social Protection on the sectoral working group I mentioned already to see how that can contribute to the targets. We are undertaking research to understand the demand and availability of both the courses and of students wishing to take them up. We are also examining the inclusion of Irish-medium courses in future expressions of interest. We are running a number of expressions of interest with the HEA at the moment for new course provision in areas like disability, therapies, medicine, veterinary, etc. We will see if we can include Irish as one of those in the future and if there is an option to provide those courses, we will.

Grant Payments

155. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views regarding the holiday earnings disregard for students applying for Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants; his views on whether it is unfair that only income from work during holidays is considered, and students who have a small weekend job lose out on the SUSI grant as that puts them over the threshold for a grant; and if he will review this matter. [35185/26]

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is very unfair that only income from work during holidays is considered for students who wish to avail of the SUSI grant. If they have a small weekend job they lose out, as there is no disregard for that. What is the reason for this? If they have a bit of work for weekends, why not allow it to be disregarded, like the holiday pay? Youngsters appreciate work.

Deputy James Lawless: I worked all the way through second level and third level and afterwards. Then I ended up studying while I was working, so I did it both ways round. I totally appreciate the industriousness and the necessity in many cases for students to work through their education. How we have it structured is that under the SUSI grant scheme, income from employment that represents holiday earnings outside of term time is calculated on the basis of Easter holidays, summer holidays and Christmas holidays. This can be disregarded when calculating the means of the family for the SUSI grant application. In the current budget, we are increasing that from €8,424 to €8,830, which is an increase of about €400, or 5%. That is something I was minded to do. As I said in response to a question earlier, there are a number of choices in each budget. We cannot do everything so we try to look at how we can approach something with targeted measures. This was one of the ones that was important, even if it was only 5%. It was something I was conscious to do in order to keep student earnings in line with inflation and allowing that to be taken into account. Students should not be penalised for going out to work outside of term time.

We have what we call an options paper on the cost of college, which is an analysis of engagement with students. I had a meeting with a number of students' unions and other stakeholders recently in Portlaoise. We examined the different asks they had regarding grants, fees, thresholds, student accommodation and the earnings disregard for students' income at weekends or over term breaks. Next, I will take all those different requests and publish them as an options paper and have a costing and impact analysis against each one. We can make decisions then and I would welcome the input from those in the Houses who are interested in the brief, as to which options are preferable to others and why people believe that to be the case. I will engage in good faith with Deputies in the House as we approach the budget to consider those options.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister for his reply. What I am saying is that it will cost the State nothing to allow the work students do at weekends to be disregarded for the SUSI grant. The costs are exorbitant now for students going to college and it is only natural that they would want to help their parents out and help to get themselves to college and pay for all the things the Minister listed, including the fees, student accommodation and travel from

places as far away as Cahersiveen and Dingle and all the places in Kerry that they have to travel from to colleges right around the country. What benefit is it to the State to stop youngsters from going to work for the weekend? It is hurting businesses that may have built up a relationship with these youngsters during the holidays. I see no point whatsoever in it. It has been known all our lives that we should encourage youngsters to work but this is doing the opposite.

Deputy James Lawless: They do not need to leave Kerry any more at all, because we have a fine university in Tralee with MTU. I visited it recently with the Minister, Deputy Foley, and Deputy Cahill and we saw it in action. Professor Maggie Cusack and the then chairperson, Jimmy Deenihan, welcomed us to the facility. The university is providing world-class services. If students do want to leave Kerry, however, there are course options available to them. I know it is expensive, and I talked earlier about the recent cuts we have implemented. There is a €750 million package to assist with the cost of travel, in terms of excise cuts and many other measures. There is also the student Leap card and the young adult Leap card to use on public transport and, of course, there are the €500 cut to student fees, which is permanent, and all of the increases to grants, particularly the non-adjacent grants for students who have to travel that bit farther. However, there is a cost to the State. It was calculated last year that exempting all students' earnings would cost about €26 million. To put that into perspective, that same amount could pay for a 10% increase in all maintenance grants or could increase all income thresholds by 10%. There are choices to be made regarding whether we increase grants or thresholds or disregard student earnings to a greater extent.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: As much as anyone else, I welcome the MTU in Tralee for students in Kerry. However, I would say again that it does not make any sense at all if these youngsters could work and earn another bit of money to help themselves to go to college. It would help to take the burden off their parents. The Minister is talking about all the things the Government has given out and that is fine, but these people and their families are still under financial pressures that were never seen before. This is especially the case in families where there is more than one student in the house. I ask the Minister to look at this and to give these lovely young boys and girls a chance to work. They love to work. I always had someone like them in the bar at home and I appreciated them. We can learn things from young people that we might not otherwise learn.

I ask the Minister to look at this again in a favourable way.

Deputy James Lawless: As I said at the outset, I worked all through college at a variety of things through weekends, evenings in some cases, and all through my summers and, indeed, often Christmas and Easter holidays as well. I would make the point to the Deputy that there is nothing stopping students from doing that. Students can work, and they can choose. It equates roughly to Christmas holidays, Easter holidays and summer holidays. However, if students want to say they are going to work every weekend instead or work one part of the year and not another, it is entirely up to them.

A threshold of €8,830 has been imposed now. To work it through, if we were to take that away and say there is no threshold, theoretically, a student could earn not €8,000 but €80,000 or €100,000. It would actually be a backdoor to the household or family suddenly having their

income threshold nearly doubled. I know the Deputy would agree that is not desirable either because we have to have a progressive, fair system that targets supports to those who need them the most. I know that is maybe an extreme example, but there is logic to this and how it is calculated. Originally, the idea was to discourage students from working during term time. That is why it was applied to holiday periods. That is more relaxed now and they can choose to work weekends if they wish. There has to be some level at which it is set, however.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Further and Higher Education

156. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way his Department is aligning higher education courses with current and projected skills shortages in Ireland; if he will provide details of any new initiatives in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34803/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: As the Minister knows, the jobs requirements by companies are very fluid at the moment, especially with the introduction of AI. What steps are being taken to ensure that higher education courses are aligned with current and projected skills shortages, and will with Minister make a statement on it, please?

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy very much. He mentioned AI and skills shortages and understanding the new trends that are emerging in higher education and across training our graduates and, indeed, our apprentices. That is an absolute priority for me and the Department. We are doing a lot of work on skills and identifying skills needs and skills gaps, working through SOLAS, the National Skills Council, the expert group on future skills needs and other groups and agencies. I have done a couple of things in recent times. One is that we have set up the national skills observatory, which is data driven and, effectively, a database for the State to be able to plug in searches and see what patterns have emerged in terms of job vacancies, job advertisements, skills needs and employer reports. That would be a real-time engine to see what skills employers are seeking and, indeed, what is on the move and what is going in the other direction.

I have also commenced a series of skills round-tables, where I bring together employers from different sectors along with the training agencies, SOLAS, the HEA, the ETBI and the different higher education institute and university associations. That conversation I am having will, at the next event on the 27th of this month, focus on construction skills. The Minister, Deputy Browne, and Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, are joining me for that as well. We will be bringing the construction employers into the room and looking at the trades, apprentices, engineers, architects, town planners, etc., and asking whether they are receiving the skills, graduates and competencies they as employers require from the training system and skills system, especially at a time when construction of housing is our number one goal as a Government and, indeed, more broadly across infrastructure, building out our railways, grids, ports and energy supply. We have a huge construction challenge, so it is particularly timely. The next event I am planning for the month after will look at the impact of AI on the

professional workforce, consultancy firms, accounting, legal firms and so on. That deep dive will bring employers around the table to have a solid engagement.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the focus on aligning higher education with current and projected skills shortages. Like the Minister said, it is about meeting with the industries to figure out what requirements are needed but also to find out and make sure that the courses we are providing at the moment are giving the students the proper skills when they actually finish those courses.

It is clear that artificial intelligence is now fundamentally changing the nature of work and the skills that will be required in the years ahead. Across every sector, whether it is healthcare, manufacturing, finance, education, agriculture or retail, AI and digital technologies are rapidly reshaping how businesses operate. Our education system must be agile enough to respond to the challenge and there is now a growing need not only for specialist AI and technology graduates, but also for broader digital literacy and adaptability across the workforce. At the same time as we embrace these new technologies, we also have to ensure we do not lose the core knowledge and fundamental skills on which industry will depend.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy is exactly right. One of the interesting outputs of the inaugural skills round-table I held about six weeks, which had the accommodation sectors at it, was that there was a common theme. Regardless of semiconductors, biosciences, pharmaceuticals or construction, there was a common theme. They said they want to be able to hire graduates, trainees and skilled workers who have broader skills, such as communication skills, teamwork skills and the ability to work on a team, analytical skills and strategic skills and the ability to make judgment calls on a particular set of facts. That is one thing the computer will never be able to replace - that human intuition and experience and that unique set of circumstances that has brought us all to where we are.

As I noted recently, there is a concern that some firms may be beginning to put a brake on graduate recruitment and might be thinking that AI can replace certain junior jobs. However, there is recognition that we need the senior people and experienced people in every organisation. If people stop hiring at the entry level, they never get to the experienced layer beyond that. It is something employers really need to take stock of.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister for his response. While AI presents enormous opportunities, there is also understandable concern among many workers and students about how it may affect future employment. I think it will actually increase employment, but it is important that our education system prepares people not just to adapt to technology change but benefit from it. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to ensure that students across all disciplines develop AI and digital skills while also maintaining the core fundamentals and professional knowledge that remain essential in the workforce?

Deputy James Lawless: There are a couple of things. I recently launched a website called *aiready.ie*. The Deputy might have tried it out. I urge anyone who has not already to do so. That website is specifically targeted at short AI familiarity skills. It is not necessarily building up to expert user level but building up an awareness of AI and how it works - how it can be used, for example, in a small business, for personal use, planning a holiday packing list,

organising an event, etc. It is the intention that it will help with that. That is very much the first phase of it. That will ramp up over time, with multiple courses added to it. I am also working with my team to look at the micro-credentials delivered through Springboard+, Skillnet and similar courses to have a wider range of offerings, with greater subsidies available for learners who might want to take them up. Some might be in employment, some may wish to go independently, but I am looking at greater subvention of those courses to make them even more affordable than they already are. Those are two measures.

The Higher Education Authority has published guidelines around the use of AI in education to make sure that student competence is still coming through both in terms of testing but also in terms of the competencies and skills that are being taught to the student.

Student Accommodation

157. Deputy Eoghan Kenny asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the engagement he has had with University College Cork and Munster Technological University Cork on the housing crisis and the impact on student accommodation in Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34346/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish to ask about the Minister's engagement with University College Cork and the Munster Technological University in Cork on the housing crisis and the impact on student accommodation in Cork. This is something that has been spoken about at a consistent level by the Labour Party and by me and my colleagues, Senator Harmon, and an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Sheehan.

Deputy James Lawless: I am aware of the Deputy's interest in this. I am pleased to be able to advise the Deputy that I have met the presidents of both UCC and MTU on a number of occasions. I have also visited both institutions on a number of occasions and, indeed, I will do so again this week.

I am very aware of how the supply and affordability of accommodation is impacting students in Cork and more generally across the country. That is one of the reasons I was very pleased to be able to publish the national student accommodation strategy, which sets out the pathway to make higher education more accessible by addressing two critical challenges. There are two pillars of that strategy, as the Deputy is probably aware. One is the viability challenge and incentivising the development at scale of student accommodation and large, high-quality student developments, ideally on campus lands or in and around campus. This will be supported through the strategy and through a number of measures within it. There is also a focus on affordability, with €176 million in new supports being placed in things like the maintenance grants for non-adjacent students and a range of other measures to make it somewhat more affordable for students to be able to pay their rents, effectively, in the different developments. Of course, both MTU and UCC have been engaged in that with me and my officials.

My Department held a briefing for both universities very recently to walk through the new student strategy and explain how that is going to work. Part of that is the extension of what was a TU, accommodation programme across the traditional universities and what we are

calling the higher education institutions student accommodation programme, HSAP. That has been up and running now since we launched the strategy. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that there are three locations being targeted in the first wave, namely, Dublin, Galway and Cork. Cork is up and running already. We have had extensive engagement and we have had a number of inquiries coming in already.

That is going well. It is something I am keen to move on at all possible expedition to ensure we begin to deliver those much-needed beds for the students.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate that there have been developments in student accommodation. However, Cork, as a county with a huge university city, has the lowest proportion of public student accommodation beds available at 18%.

In February 2026, a report by Sherry FitzGerald showed that the State needs at least 38,900 beds to keep up with the demand. The report says that for every 13 students across the south-west region, which is inclusive of Cork and Kerry, there are ten beds, and that with roughly 30,300 students enrolled, there is a shortfall of approximately 9,900 beds. This report assumed that those living in their own counties do not avail of accommodation. We are taking that assumption that people from towns such as my own, Mallow, do not move up to Cork city, if they are attending UCC or the Munster Technological University, MTU, or any other further or higher education facility.

The significant shortfall is there. It is probably due to a lack of forward planning for many decades, within the former Department of Education more so than the newly formed Department of further and higher education. I understand that there has been progress but significant progress has to be made in Cork.

Deputy James Lawless: I totally agree with the Deputy. We need to see significant progress and we need to see it soon.

On the theme of progress, we saw 206 beds with a commencement notice issued only last month in Cork. There are 3,000 around the country since I launched the strategy approximately six weeks ago. Approximately 206 of those are in Cork, and they are badly needed. There are another 1,700 beds in Cork with planning granted which I hope will become viable through the strategy. There were a number of beds at sites around the country where planning was granted but where inquiries took place at the stage of planning. They were not progressing for various reasons. The strategy, as the Deputy knows, includes a number of viability levers to assist with that and move those on to construction and move those forward.

Additionally, there is planning permission in the system in Cork working its way through for another 500 beds already. Those are positive numbers to consider. That will provide an additional 2,200 beds when those come on stream. I expect there will be many more coming behind that with the new sites that are being identified. In addition to that, I should point to the beds available under the rent-a-room scheme - 926 beds for MTU Cork and 72 beds being offered at UCC at the moment.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: In relation to what my colleague, Senator Harmon, has said in relation to the technological universities being allowed to borrow to build student

accommodation, is it something that the Minister and the Department are taking seriously? There would be an appetite there from MTU.

In relation to private rented accommodation, we have had many debates across this House on private rental student accommodation, particularly in Cork city where a lot of the time, in a lot of the situations I have come across, the accommodation has been completely unsatisfactory. It is due to the fact that we have students in our county who are going to our colleges or further and higher education institutes and have been forced to go into these private rented accommodation settings because of the lack of publicly available student accommodation beds. While I appreciate that progress is being made on it, we have to move this on as quickly as possible. Will the Minister give an assurance to the House that technological universities, such as MTU, could borrow to build?

Deputy James Lawless: I am conscious of this and I have met all the technological universities, TUs, on it. It is a programme for Government commitment and it is one I have given effect to through the student accommodation strategy because the strategy includes provision for nomination agreements. Nomination agreements are technical arrangements, but they allow the technological university to take on a contingent liability upon its balance sheet which could be construed as a State liability. It is something that we are supporting through the student accommodation agreement. That has involved work with not only my Department but also the Departments of Finance and public expenditure. Those discussions have been ongoing with both Ministers. We have managed to secure within the accommodation strategy provision to do exactly that. That allows the technological universities to enter into agreements with providers to book out large blocks of beds in a long-term fashion in a way that commits them to expenditure in the long term that is a form of borrowing, but one that is done with full State support. That was an important measure that was called for. It is one I was keen to ensure was included in the strategy, which it is.

Third Level Admissions

158. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has carried out any analysis of university courses in which maximum leaving certificate points did not guarantee admission due to demand; if he will list the courses where this applied alongside the number of places available through the CAO for these courses; the number of places available for international students in those courses, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34562/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: My question to the Minister is whether his Department has carried out an analysis of those university courses that have maximum or very high-level CAO points requirement for which some students who meet those points requirement are not successful because of random selection. Will he will list those courses that it will apply to, outline exactly how many places are on those courses and the number of places therein that are available for international students?

Deputy James Lawless: As the Deputy will be aware, under legislation, the Irish higher education institutions are autonomous in their decisions and the processes they follow in

relation to admissions, and rightly so. They operate without political influence in terms of their admission criteria and enrolment.

Both public and private institutions, all use the CAO, which is well understood, to centrally process the applications for most undergraduate programmes. Further information on how that works, including statistics and data from previous years' offers, is all publicly available on the CAO website, if the Deputy wishes to refer to that. Based on publicly available data, my Department has identified the higher education courses where attaining the maximum points from the leaving certificate did not guarantee admission due to high demand. Where that happens, the CAO applies a system of random selection.

Going specifically to the Deputy's question as to how many courses did this happen in this year, there was one course where a student was denied entry because of random selection at 625 points. There was a second course but it was not on the first round; it was on the second round. All students on the first round that sought a place received a place. There was one course, that I am aware of, where this happened on the first round. That is the scenario there.

On the courses where it has happened, there is a pattern, if you look back over the past number of years, in terms of the courses that have a 625 points target and use random selection in the final rounds. These are dental science, management science and information systems, dentistry, management science and dental science. Going back over the past number of years, those were the courses. Obviously, there is a strong pattern.

Briefly, to talk about dental science and dentistry, since it is one of the courses where that has happened in recent years, I am adding another 35 dental beds or, I should say, "chairs", which is what we need for dental places, through the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI. I opened 20 of them in Sandyford earlier this year and a further 15 are coming on stream next year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister cannot finish an answer by claiming credit for providing extra places in courses when he started his reply by saying this has to be an autonomous-based system where there is no political interference because political decisions affect the number of places available on courses. I am sure the Minister will accept that.

Last year, we are told that entry to 25 undergraduate courses with high level points were determined by random selection. That means people secured very high points in their leaving certificate but were not able to secure their preferred choice because of random selection. Essentially, it was a lottery.

The Minister did not answer the question in respect of the number of international students. It is important that we get those answers because the Minister has been quoted as suggesting that some universities are gaming the system. If people are being denied places to courses in areas for which we have shortages in the State and universities are selling places in those courses to international students, that is a problem this House needs to be aware of and informed of.

Deputy James Lawless: I am just clarifying. The Deputy's question asked about the courses in which maximum leaving certificate points did not guarantee admission due to demand and he has moved on now to high-points courses. The difference between maximum and high-

points is that it is a meritocracy. Rightly or wrongly, the CAO system awards courses on the basis of points. A student had maximum points and missed out on a place, which arose in one instance this year for a course that I mentioned. The other scenario I talked about is where the students that took up the course were students who had higher points than students who missed out. There were students who had the maximum points and students who had points less than that, ultimately, over descending order, until they got to the last place on the course. There were then two students who had the same points but they were not as high as other students who got into the course. One always, of course, feels sympathy for the student in that situation, but it is not the case that students on maximum points were displaced. It is students that did not get maximum points. Put simply, the students with the highest points got the places. In the case of students on lower points, at some point there was a cut-off. Unfortunately, some students missed out, but that is the way across any course in the entire CAO.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is there a reason the Minister will not answer my question in relation to international students? I have asked it twice now and it was in the written question that was submitted.

Here is what we know. There are areas of speciality for which we have chronic shortages in many parts of this State.

Dentistry, as the Minister, mentioned is an obvious place. The Irish Dental Association has said that one of the issues is that in many courses which the State has provided for dentistry, a significant proportion of places are actually being sold by universities to international students. That is not a meritocracy. That is a problem that we need to address but we cannot address it unless we have the information. Can the Minister provide the information in respect of these vital courses? I accept it is important that there is an element of international students but is it the case that places that should be filled by people coming through the CAO route are ultimately being sold to the highest bidder on the international market?

Deputy James Lawless: Not to my knowledge. My Department does not collect data on the number of international students or the share of places offered through the CAO on a course-by-course basis. That falls under the remit of the individual autonomous higher education institutions and they determine that annually. The Deputy may wish to correspond with them to make his own inquiries. I reiterate my point because the scenario he is depicting is suggesting that some students have been displaced by international students coming into the same course.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am asking for the information.

Deputy James Lawless: In actual fact I do not have the information.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Why not?

Deputy James Lawless: It is because these are autonomous institutions that manage their own course and manage their own systems within it. The Deputy is welcome to correspond with them, if he has not done so already, to see what information he can derive. Every student

who wanted a course, bar one, got into a course. In the latest CAO round, there was one student in one course in entire country. It is regrettable and I would prefer if no students missed out. I think that we can agree that out of 108,000 students, one student missing out on a place is very regrettable for that individual and I would have preferred if it had not happened. That is why I am increasing the courses by 1,100 place this year alone. The problem is certainly not of the scale the Deputy wishes to depict.

Education Schemes

159. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to outline his priorities in relation to Erasmus+ in the current negotiations for the EU's multi-annual financial framework from 2028 to 2034. [34852/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan will introduce this question.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am asking this for Deputy Cathal Crowe. Will the Minister for higher education outline his priorities in relation to Erasmus+ in the current negotiations for the EU's multi-annual financial framework from 2028 to 2034?

Deputy James Lawless: We have been engaging intensively with European partners on the future of Erasmus+. My officials are working closely at the technical level and I am working at the ministerial and political level to advance negotiations on this important programme. Good progress has been made under both the Danish and Cypriot Presidencies. As the Deputy knows, the Cypriot Presidency comes to a close at the end of June. I was in Brussels yesterday at the Education Council. I am pleased to advise the Deputy and the House that we reached agreement among education ministers at the Council on the partial general approach for the next Erasmus+ programme. That is a really significant milestone. The partial general approach is the agreed framework among officials and across ministers at Council to now take that forward to what we call the tripartite negotiations. I will be privileged to chair those debates over the next six months. We will be taking Erasmus+ into tripartite negotiations with the European Parliament to progress that. That is very positive and I am excited about the opportunities for us and the opportunity for Ireland to put our stamp on the Erasmus+ scheme when we bring those negotiations in.

One of the plus points of the new Erasmus+ programme is that it opens up integration to the European Solidarity Corps. As the Deputy will be aware, the Erasmus+ programme has been largely an academic college-based exchange. We are broadening that out to include community programmes, sporting programmes and youth programmes. That is really important because it widens civic participation. It is not necessary to be a student to be involved in Erasmus+; young people may be involved in many other strands of public life. They will have the opportunity to exchange with other European nations, centred around European values and have the experience of living and participating abroad, which is to be welcomed. It was very good news coming from Brussels yesterday.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I realise that next year will be the 40th anniversary of the Erasmus programme and it has gone from strength to strength. Like the Minister, I know dozens of students who have availed of it over the years. I believe Ireland has sent more than 65,000 students since the programme's inception. It is a programme that we all support and would like to see go from strength to strength. The funding for the programme has increased to €40 billion now, which is far greater than its predecessor of €26 billion. However, because of the further reach to people not doing academic courses as the Minister has outlined, from what I am reading from the European Parliament debates on it, there is a concern that proportionately, the money going to each individual student might actually decrease. I ask the Minister to speak to that.

Deputy James Lawless: It would be regrettable if that scenario were to come to pass. I understand the concern and it is well voiced. We are at the partial general agreement, meaning that specific parts of the proposal have been agreed. Ultimately the budget has yet to be agreed and that is what we have to negotiate with our colleagues in the European Parliament as we move on to the tripartite stage. I will be meeting some of the relevant committee chairs in the European Parliament and some of the members of those committees. I will engage with them further in July, I think at the Strasbourg session, to try to move this along. However, the fact that we reached partial general agreement yesterday is critical because we could not have opened negotiations had we not done that. That will be part of the overall MFF negotiations.

It is also very much a goal for the State and for me to seek maximum funding for the Horizon research programme envelope. Some €175 billion is bracketed in at the moment, a very significant figure. That is available to Irish researchers, including small and medium enterprises, as well as the academics.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We know the value of the programme in terms of the student experience. People pick up linguistic skills and become more rounded students. It is proven academically that students who engage fare better in terms of their academic life and their job prospects afterwards. There is no denying how important the scheme is. I believe it was worth €14 million to the Irish economy in 2016 with 25,000 students coming here as well as their families who might visit them. In 2025 we received 44,500 students showing how it has grown exponentially. I ask the Minister to fight for every penny he can to increase that budget because there are concerns that proportionately, students in the scheme will not fare as well. I ask the Minister to emphasise that in his negotiations.

Deputy James Lawless: I very much take the Deputy's points on board. He is right about the contribution to the economy that arises from having the student inflow here as well as the visiting families and so forth. When I was growing up, my own house was home to many visiting students of many nationalities on different courses. It also provides for a richer rounder experience for the host families and the students. Earlier we were talking about the age of AI, digital skills, skills gaps and some of the automated tasks being carried out now. A student who has travelled, experienced other cultures, and acquired language and communication skills will be much more resilient in the face of AI and changing digital transformation and the new world we are entering into. I agree with the Deputy that it is an extremely important progression. I

will absolutely be keeping a watchful eye on that, as Ireland assumes the Presidency of that Council, to ensure the budget is maximised for Irish students.

Veterinary Services

160. Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the veterinary course at Kildalton College will have its first intake of students in 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34804/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Question No. 160 is being taken by Deputy Tony McCormick on behalf of Deputy Cleere.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere, a great Kilkenny sportsman in his day. I want to convey his congratulations to Offaly on their great performance at the weekend. He wants to wish Offaly well in the upcoming Leinster Championship.

The question is to ask the Minister if the veterinary course at Kildalton College will have its first intake of students in 2026 and if he will make a statement on the matter.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Minister has two minutes to-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Marian Harkin: Do not forget Roscommon in the Connacht final.

Deputy James Lawless: Well done to all the winners and commiserations to all who did not make it over the line. The ongoing success of Offaly hurling is to be celebrated in Offaly but perhaps to be feared in other counties in Leinster. We will wish the Deputy well for now, but we will see where it goes.

Before I speak about Kildalton College, I compliment the team in Mount Bellew Agricultural College in County Galway, which I visited with Deputy Albert Dolan and Senator Anne Rabbitte recently. It is also hosting the veterinary course in ATU, which is coming on very well. Both of the courses in Mount Bellew and Kildalton are part of the new veterinary expansion. A number of years ago we realised that there was a huge demand for veterinary places and many of our students were leaving the country to study in Poland and further abroad - some in Edinburgh and some in eastern Europe - and we needed to up the ante in veterinary course provision.

Two new veterinary schools are being provided now, one in ATU and one in SETU, with 40 students in each.

The SETU programme will be supported by the Glassworks site in Waterford, but also through Teagasc's Kildalton College, which operates a working farm. That reflects international best practice between the academic laboratory experience at the Glassworks site and the practical hands-on farm knowledge at Kildalton.

There is some good news to report on that. The planned commencement of 40 places for this September has received a significant boost with the opinion of reasonable assurance from the Veterinary Council of Ireland inspection of the bachelor of veterinary medicine programme. What that opinion of reasonable assurance means is that the regulatory body has now said that it is satisfied that this course passes muster, something that was expected, but which we could not take for granted would come through. My officials have been engaging intensively on this, and we have now received that assurance. This means the students are guaranteed it will commence as planned this September. It is a very important step, which will be welcomed across SETU and ATU for the reasons I have mentioned.

Deputy Tony McCormack: The Minister's answer marks a hugely positive step forward for agriculture and animal healthcare in Ireland. The introduction of a veterinary course in Kildalton College offering 40 places each year is something that cannot be overstated in its importance. For too long, we have faced a serious shortage of qualified vets across the country. This has impacted farmers, the meat industry and even everyday pet owners who rely on timely and professional care for their animals. At the same time, many Irish students have had no choice but to travel abroad, often to countries like Poland, as the Minister mentioned, to pursue their dream of becoming veterinarians. Now, with these additional places here at home, we are not only strengthening our educational system, but also investing directly in the future of Irish agriculture and animal welfare. This is a practical, meaningful solution to a very real problem, and one that will benefit communities nationwide.

Deputy James Lawless: Absolutely. I look forward to visiting Kildalton, and I am going to arrange to see it myself shortly. This has that best practice combination of academic theory in the college institutions and hands-on farm experience on the practical college farm at Kildalton. I visited the UCD Lyons Farm just outside Celbridge in my constituency a number of times to see the wonderful work it does. This is an essential part of it. What is welcome in these courses is that while the students will, of course, have the same veterinary degree as a veterinary degree awarded from institutions anywhere in the world, there will be a particular opportunity to focus on large animal practice in these facilities at Kildalton and Mountbellew, for SETU and ATU, respectively, because there will be more of that traditional agricultural setting. In time, it might allow them to develop small animal practice for, dare I say it, city vets and large animal practice for vets in more regional centres of education. Of course, it also makes it much more accessible and available to students from the south east and the midlands, and from the north west for ATU.

Deputy Tony McCormack: The establishment of a veterinary course in Kildalton College is not just an educational development, but a boost for the entire Piltown-Kildalton region. Bringing 40 students into the area each year will have a tangible impact on local life and businesses. These students will live and study in, and become part of, the community. They will support local shops, accommodation providers and services that may have been struggling in recent years. This kind of steady, long-term presence brings the vitality and economic activity that rural areas truly need. At the same time, we are building a pipeline of skilled professionals who will go on to serve farms, clinics and industries across Ireland. It is a win for education and for the whole area. I compliment the Minister's team on the hard work they did to ensure this course happened.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. I agree with him about all the benefits that will flow to the regional areas from this. The expansion is being funded through the veterinary places activation programme. That wider programme is backed by €155 million, with €80 million specifically ring-fenced for veterinary education. It is a very important programme. I set a target across government to increase the number of healthcare places, and professional places overall in order to reduce the points pressure on the high points courses like medicine, veterinary and dentistry. Already, we are seeing 1,100 new places across a number of professions coming good on that. In this case, in particular, there are 80 new places for this September across the two new veterinary schools. Even the fact that there are two new veterinary schools in existence is wonderful. They now have representative bodies in the different agencies and boards. I am sure they will play their part in shaping the future of Irish veterinary and making a strong contribution to the regions where the colleges are located. Their graduates will be an exciting new, dynamic force within the veterinary sector. I wish all of the students who applied this year every success. I thank SETU and ATU for rising to the challenge.

Further and Higher Education

161. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the actions being taken to improve access to higher education in regional areas, particularly in the midlands; and if additional funding is being allocated to institutions serving these regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34802/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): It is a high priority for me and my Department to support the development of high-quality and accessible tertiary education systems that reflect the full diversity of Irish society and ensure that all learners can access and successfully complete their education. Since the establishment of the first technological university in 2019, the Department has prioritised targeted investment of over €300 million in technological universities to ensure structural, high quality, inclusive education, training, research and innovation across the regions. As part of this funding, last year, my Department announced the targeted enhancement fund, which delivered €65.8 million for the technological sector and publicly funded specialist colleges.

ATU operates nine campuses across the northern and western region. As of now, it is a region in transition, but thankfully, it is being reclassified as a more developed region. However, due to its lagging status, ATU was allocated €10.5 million from this fund over the next two years.

The Deputy is particularly interested in the Technological University of the Shannon, TUS. It was the third technological university to be established and the first cross-regional technological university, with its main campus in Athlone. Since its establishment, it has considerably assisted higher education access, growing regional development and providing more opportunities to students, staff, business and enterprise, and local communities, serving communities in counties Westmeath, Limerick, Tipperary, Clare and Offaly. TUS has been

allocated €6.3 million from this fund over the next two years. As the Deputy can see, this is a significant investment that is improving access to higher education in Offaly and the midlands.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State. Improving access to higher education in regional areas is critical, not just from an educational perspective, but also from a social and economic perspective. The Minister of State spoke about the great work that is being done by TUS and also Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, LOETB, in its third level exploits in Offaly. Too often, students in regional counties face barriers that are less pronounced in larger urban centres. Cost-of-living pressures, accommodation shortages and travel distances can make access to higher education significantly more difficult for families. It is important that students feel they can pursue further and higher education opportunities without feeling they must leave their communities permanently in order to succeed.

I welcome the important role being played by TUS and the work being done by LOETB. However, it is important to note that Offaly still has very limited direct access to third level education provision, although excellent work has been done locally through LOETB. I am passionate about improving the situation and ensuring that students and families in Offaly have greater access to opportunities. Will the Minister of State outline what additional investment is planned for our area?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am pleased to say that the midlands are well served by Technological University of the Shannon because it offers students from Offaly and surrounding counties high-quality university education. What I am talking about in particular today are the tertiary programmes. They offer students the opportunity to begin a course in further education before transitioning to complete their degree in higher education. We have invested €4 million from budget 2026 towards the development of these programmes. In 2026 and 2027, Laois and Offaly ETB will be offering four tertiary pathways, in partnership with SETU and TUS, in programmes including business, technology and nursing. Students on these courses can spend the first year of study in their local education and training board before transitioning to higher education, with no fees, smaller classes and additional support while they are in the ETB.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Regional education provision is not just about access to courses. It is also about supporting balanced regional development and ensuring that talent can be trained within communities. Will the Minister of State outline how the Department is ensuring that regional institutions are properly resourced to compete, grow and respond to emerging skills needs, particularly in areas linked to technology apprenticeships and further workforce demands?

How will the Department measure whether progress is genuinely being made in improving regional access to higher education over the coming years?

While the tertiary courses are absolutely fantastic and brilliant, we would like to have an outreach in Offaly from somewhere like TUS that is providing third level education for people who want to participate in third level in their home towns to avoid the cost of having to pay for accommodation by moving away and avoid the cost of transport by travelling on a daily basis,

and to make sure that we have that offering in Offaly in order that they do not have the burden of the extra costs.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I hear what the Deputy is saying. Tertiary education is a great pathway. It is such an opportunity for students. It is not within the CAO system, so it allows students to access tertiary education. They can start in their local ETB and, if they like, progress on to further education in third level institutions. That is available to students across the country - in Offaly just as well as anywhere else. TUS and SETU are the Deputy's main partners in all of this. That is where the third level institutions are. Of all the locations I visited in the country, the one that impressed me the most when it came to tertiary education was the national construction training campus in Mount Lucas. To me, that is a standout initiative. It offers training in areas like modern methods of construction and near-zero energy buildings. That is an example of regional education provision. It is so important for the region the Deputy represents.

Further and Higher Education

162. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he is satisfied that there are sufficient higher education places in STEM disciplines in Cork to meet projected regional demand over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34332/26]

Deputy James Lawless: I am aware of the Deputy's interest in STEM, drug discovery, life sciences, pharmaceuticals and all those related matters. They are also a key priority for me, as is support for STEM overall, as well as being a key strategic priority for the Government, given its increasing criticality to economic growth, to resilience, future skills needs and regional development. I know the Deputy is very close to that in Cork with a number of significant employers in this space.

In relation to Cork particularly, the provision of higher education places in STEM is kept under review through workforce planning and higher education institutions. My Department also supports a network of regional skills forums to help employers to address their skills needs. I will be in Cork this week. On Thursday, I will be visiting UCC, among other venues. Part of the conversation, as it always is, is understanding their requirements, needs and skills and making sure they have a strong STEM ecosystem in place. Of course, they do. The presidents of both UCC and MTU, Professor O'Halloran and Professor Cusack, provide significant STEM courses and options, along with the ETB STEM pathways through the tertiary system.

There is a number of tertiary degrees with a STEM focus being delivered in Cork. I advise anybody engaging with students to make them aware of the tertiary degree paths, because these are ways that students can enter third level and higher education through local FET colleges and local ETBs. Fees are nominal. They may be €50 but may not even be that much in some cases. Students can progress into second year and move into a more traditional university for third year and beyond. There is a number of tertiary courses in STEM as well. Significantly, I recently visited the Tyndall National Institute in Cork, where I made a €160 million commitment in terms of building out the next generation of semiconductors, photonics and

quantum and AI technologies. It is a world-leading institution. That was the first output of my new INSPIRE research programme. That is money well spent in the Cork area.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I will take from the Minister's response that he is satisfied or somewhat satisfied that enough courses are being filled and enough graduates are coming through the pipeline. The Minister knows the importance of Cork. He outlined it himself. According to the *Irish Examiner*, we are home to seven of the top ten pharmaceutical companies in the world. Approximately 14,000 people are employed across Cork in those pharmaceutical companies. We are a hub for the global life sciences. Maintaining that position is imperative for us in Cork. The most important thing that can help us to maintain that competitive edge is our people. As the Minister has said, UCC and MTU do phenomenal work. He mentioned the Tyndall National Institute. We are a hub of innovation. We are looking to grow the 14,000 jobs to 21,000 jobs by 2027. There have been recent job announcements by Eli Lilly, Regeneron and AbbVie. The demand is quite clear. The question is whether our STEM pipeline can keep up. Fundamentally, the Minister's stat data here is saying that while we have the highest proportion of graduates, we are going to come under increasing pressure in the coming years.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. I would welcome his input, with his strong local knowledge and policy knowledge of the area, for STEM provision in Cork in particular. If he thinks there are particular gaps that we need to fill or areas we need to work on or address, I would welcome that engagement. One of the policy initiatives I am pursuing is a widening of our doctoral programmes because many STEM workers ultimately come through PhD programmes. Many of those go on to work in industry. I think up to 90% of them do. The earning potential of those with doctorates is significantly ahead of undergraduates coming out at earlier stages. The statistics show us that those with doctorates are more likely to found campus companies or to go on to very successful enterprises afterward. Between the Tyndall National Institute, which I mentioned already, and other activities where we are investing in research and research funding, I opened this morning the first call for the more general round of the INSPIRE programme. A total of €150 million is being made available, and I strongly expect Cork to be making significant bids and submissions of interest to replace the foundational equipment across each university, labs, libraries, equipment, etc., as a refresh and rebuild module. That is the first phase and it is open as of today.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: If the Minister asks, he will receive my local knowledge. I visited a company recently. I will not name the company, but I would love for the Minister to visit it at some stage - maybe not this Thursday because I know his schedule is full, but perhaps at another stage when he is in Cork. This company employs 65,000 people internationally, 500 of whom are in Cork and based in the city centre. The vast majority of them are PhD graduates. I recently attended there in late January. A total of 80% of their workforce have had to be brought in from abroad because they cannot satisfy what is required here in Ireland. That then has knock-on effects for housing and renting. These people are in high-paid jobs but struggle to even get a rental. We genuinely need to put the money in domestically, as well as bringing in international expertise. That is part of what we have to do. That is part of the success story to keep fuelling this. I was listening to a previous question in relation to the number of people coming in from abroad undertaking courses here and so on. There is a balance there. Nobody

is saying we do not need foreign people to come in and study here, of course we do, but there is a balance there that we need to strive for. This particular company would put a spotlight on some of the difficulties that are coming down the pipeline.

Deputy James Lawless: That is important to hear. I have set up what I call a skills roundtable series of events where I am engaging with sectoral employers. The first event took place about six weeks ago in Grangegorman with a range of employers. I am hosting a construction skills event with the Minister, Deputy Harkin, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, later this month to hear from different construction employers such as the Construction Industry Federation, etc. I will be talking to AI and professional services employers before the summer, and then moving onto life sciences. I think pharmaceuticals will be the next up. The Deputy may have an interest in that and may wish to suggest attendees. Perhaps the company he referred to may be a suitable panellist at that. The entire point of that exercise is to engage with employers and with industry in the same room as my training agency, SOLAS, the HEA, the ETBs, etc.; to have the conversation in real time; to ask what the gaps and needs are; and to ascertain what patterns are coming through. Are they being supplied with the relevant competencies? Is the training system providing? One of the findings from the most recent event was that transversal skills need to be increased in terms of communication, analytical ability, teamwork and those sorts of universal skills, which are not as specialist as some courses might provide, but are ultimately foundational to everything.

10 o'clock

Student Accommodation

163. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the plans in place to address the accommodation difficulties at ATU Sligo; to provide an update on the purchase of a 16 acre site near the ATU Sligo campus that was earmarked for student accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34365/26]

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Deputy Scanlon. He has made representation on this issue to me on many occasions.

To provide the background to this, in February 2025, under section 8(1) of the Technological Universities Act 2018, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, approved Atlantic Technological University's request to acquire a 16.35 acre site near its campus, to be funded from existing reserves. However, the HEA has since confirmed that the purchase did not proceed. I will come back to that in a moment. Both Deputy Scanlon and I are aware of what has been happening on that.

However, I want to assure the Deputy that I recognise the significant impact that the supply and affordability of student accommodation is having on students, including in Sligo. In March, the Department published the national student accommodation strategy, which sets out a clear pathway to improve access to higher education by addressing supply, viability and affordability challenges, with projections showing demand for around 42,000 additional beds

over the next decade. The strategy addresses barriers to student accommodation development through a balanced approach. I will not go through the list but it is quite detailed.

My Department has engaged extensively with technological universities including ATU Sligo, and both the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and I will be meeting them again this week. The Department has developed multiple programmes that will be brought forward on a phased basis this year through the newly established higher education institution student accommodation programme.

I have spoken to the county manager in Sligo, who tells me Sligo County Council is in discussion with a private provider to see if it would develop the 16 acre site Deputy Scanlon mentioned in order to provide student accommodation. My most up-to-date information is that these discussions are ongoing.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The announcement in February 2025 represented a significant boost for the university, particularly given that this site had long been identified as a crucial element in addressing the ongoing accommodation crisis in Sligo. For several years the shortage of suitable and affordable student housing has placed considerable pressure on both the university community and the wider local area. It is, therefore, understandable there is ongoing frustration.

In November 2024, Sligo County Council voted to sell the land to ATU, specifically for the development of student accommodation. We are now 18 months on from that decision and, despite initial optimism, progress has been slower than many had hoped for. The sale was agreed on the clear condition that a substantial portion of the lands would be dedicated to the construction of student housing, reflecting the urgency of the situation.

The site has the potential to make a transformative impact, with early proposals indicating capacity between 300 and more than 900 beds alongside the possibility of future campus expansion. Such development would play a vital role in easing the acute housing pressures faced by students each year.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I cannot disagree with anything the Deputy has said but I reiterate that in February 2025 the Minister granted ATU Sligo permission to proceed with the acquisition of that 16.35 acre site at Ardaghown in County Sligo. The approval did not convey or imply approval for any proposed capital investment that ATU might be considering for the lands. ATU was directed to fund the cost of the acquisition from within its existing reserves. ATU Sligo did not progress with this site purchase.

I know what the Deputy is saying about what the local authority is doing. As I said, it is my understanding that, as we speak, the local authority is in discussion with private providers to see if they could develop that site for student accommodation. Without being specific about it, right now that seems to be the best possible way forward.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: To be honest, I was not fully aware of the situation. In recent years hundreds of students in Sligo have found themselves without suitable accommodation following the repurposing of two privately owned student housing complexes that had traditionally provided beds for approximately 500 students. Their conversion to facilities for

international protection applicants significantly reduced the availability of purpose-built student accommodation in the area, placing immense pressures on both new and returning students. The shortage had a profound impact on student life at ATU. Currently, an estimated 60% of students are commuting, with many travelling long distances each day simply because they cannot secure a place in which to live.

It is crucial that, whatever considerations have to be taken and whatever proposals are in place, this site move quickly to provide student accommodation to ensure the fine university we have continues to grow and grow.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I appreciate Deputy Scanlon's considered and reasonable approach to this. I am just as familiar as he is with the history, what has happened and the fact that we had student accommodation that is no longer available to students. A lot of people are extremely concerned about that. What the Deputy has said underlines the urgency to move forward with whatever mechanism we have to provide student accommodation in the shortest possible timeframe. As I said, the Minister gave that permission to ATU but it did not proceed with the purchase of the site and now Sligo County Council is actively looking at the site and what role it could play. It is great to see that our local authority is playing such a positive role in looking at the provision of student accommodation. Obviously, everything is in the initial stages so I cannot say anything more than that, but I can tell the Deputy they are working as best they can to ensure that student accommodation may be provided on the site through a private provider. Even so, I must insist we still have a long way to go on it.

Artificial Intelligence

164. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way the newly launched AIReady.ie platform will specifically support workers who are at immediate risk of job losses due to AI; the plans that are being considered in expanding the platform's content beyond introductory AI literacy to keeping pace with AI advancements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34869/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I welcome the launch of the *aiready.ie* website and its aims to upskill over 1 million people through free, short, accessible courses. As an introductory platform, it is very helpful and is a positive in that direction. My concern is whether *aiready.ie* in its current form is equipped to support workers who are facing immediate displacement and whether it connects clearly into deeper retraining pathways.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank an Teachta Moynihan. The pace and scale at which AI and technology in general is changing, adapting and transforming continues to astound us all, so it is all the more important that we try to stay ahead of it and that we drive our national AI skills agenda forward. It is one thing I am very conscious of right across education, research and innovation. As a productivity tool, so many businesses and users are adopting AI now in different ways. In my view, it is positive when properly harnessed and it is welcome. I do not think the worst-case fears are founded, nor do I think the wildest exaggerations of its abilities will be borne out. It is a bit like the Microsoft Excel programme, Google search or, indeed, a

smartphone when they came along. We have advances in technology that we can reap benefits from, but ultimately we will move on to a different paradigm.

Among the goals of strengthening literacy for all users, I recently launched *aiready.ie* as an AI skills platform. It is developed by SOLAS in partnership with my Department. That was based on the advice of the national skills council, which had identified that AI literacy was a fundamental competency and that we had strong skills in the expert-user area but were not as pervasive across the ordinary user or person who wishes to use it for their accounts, for productivity gains or even for planning a personal event to build a foundational awareness. That is an essential element.

I am also launching a new range of courses, free or heavily subsidised through the Springboard+ programme, which will bring a number of microcredential courses and other courses to learners. They can be in employment, they can be independent but those courses will be offered at a heavily subsidised rate, with over 7,200 places being delivered by 36 providers nationwide. Between *aiready.ie*, Springboard+ courses and a number of microqualifications being delivered through the ETBs we now have quite a wide array of courses and training providers in the AI space.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Demystifying AI and familiarising people are an important first step. It cannot stop there, however, and the current AI Ready platform is focused very much on the first steps of introduction to AI. AI, as the Minister said, is rapidly evolving, and I am concerned that AI Ready may be focusing on yesterday's AI already. Can it bring people towards deeper retraining pathways? Can it act as a gateway? I look, for example, at MTU in Cork, with a wide range of micro credentials assisting people mid-career with courses in cybersecurity and AI skills and then doing those courses over a number of weeks and getting recognised qualifications on them and skills. Will the website, *Already.ie*, be able to evolve into a gateway or a portal so as to bring people towards those courses and put them in a stronger position to work their job for their future roles?

Deputy James Lawless: Absolutely. That is very much the intention. It is, as the Deputy rightly said, currently pitched as an entry-level offering to raise the level of awareness among the general public and to broach that AI literacy or AI familiarity challenge in order that non-technical users can become more *au fait* with the technology, that it is demystified, as the Deputy said, and that they can get ready for it. That is the goal of the first round. It is very much the intention to continue to build on that platform, to host increasingly more sophisticated courses, to diversify and multiply the number of course offerings through it and to have the *Already.ie* platform as a portal to other platforms. For example, a number of ETBs, including my local ETB, KWETB, have recently launched their own AI programme, which is a series of skills and training courses they are now offering at local level but also online in many cases. Every ETB in the country is taking up that baton as well similarly to roll out those AI courses. *Already.ie* will continue to be expanded and to have additional course offerings as well as having finger-posting to the different options available on other compatible websites.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: AI Ready is an important first step and it needs to evolve quickly from the basic introduction into a more meaningful enabler and a gateway for other courses. I am glad that the Minister has been engaging with the various colleges, SOLAS and

others about the courses they are offering and developing. Will they be available through the *Already.ie* portal? Will it act as a gateway or a portal? Because some sectors will be more affected by AI than others, will there be sector-specific courses and pathways set out and signposted for people? It is very much a different situation in financial services and the skills that would be needed there with AI, for example, skills that might be needed in graphic design for AI. Will the Minister outline how it is intended that the platform will be developed so as to support people whose jobs are at risk from AI?

Deputy James Lawless: Again, the Deputy made strong points, and I fully agree. The intention is to continue to expand the portal. In addition, I have asked my Department to develop what we are calling a roadmap for technology and future skills and a statement of ambition, which will set out where we want this to go. There are all the things the Deputy has just described. In addition to the initial range of courses offered, the National Skills Council comprises a group of people, cross-sector, who are engaging with my Department and me to look at skills gaps that exist. We are holding a number of skills round-table events, where we bring sectoral employers into a room. We will host a construction event later this month, and I will host an AI-specific event then in June. The idea behind that is to look at professional services and how they are being impacted by AI, that is, legal firms, accountancy firms, professional consulting firms and many of those white-collar jobs in which we are seeing graduate recruitment being somewhat paused, perhaps, to understand the implications of that. Then that will inform part of the next planning for the next round of AI Ready and subsequent iterations of that. The National Skills Council will be very much a part of the team attending at that event and will draw from that expert evidence as to where we need to go next and what courses need to be offered.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): 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:

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss supports for children and students with dyslexia.

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

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the recruitment process for the Defence Forces.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss increasing the mandatory retirement age for firefighters from 62 to 65.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss support mechanisms for families when their childcare centre pulls out of the core funding model.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss measures to avert a proposed strike action within the ambulance services.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher - To discuss access to approved treatments for people with Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss investment in the Limerick to Ballybrophy rail line.

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

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss the delay in opening the Killarney Community Hospital.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the disruption to DART services in north Dublin.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss actions to address growing road safety risks associated with horse-drawn vehicles on public roads.

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

Deputy Keira Keogh - To discuss the transparency of the CODA process for Ladies Gaelic Football Association clubs and players.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the loss of medical card access due to age-based insurance restrictions on general practitioners.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss provision of an additional special needs class in Ballyduff.

Deputy John Lahart - To discuss the proposed move of the An Post sorting office in Edmondstown to Lucan.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the promised review of the voids return programme.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss patient safety concerns raised by the University Hospital Limerick medical board.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss breaches of the working time directive for Defence Forces staff.

The matters raised by Deputies Ellis and McAuliffe, O'Meara, Healy-Rae, Quinlivan and Lahart have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It was with great disappointment that the príomhoide, staff, pupils and parents discovered that Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin was not included in the list of prioritised projects for 2026-27. Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin, Bóthar Ghlas Naíon, Finglas East, Dublin 11, is a recognised DEIS school and has been acknowledged by the Department of Education and Youth to be in extremely poor condition. It has long been accepted that a new school building

needs to be constructed to replace the current school. Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin has been seeking a proper school building since it first opened in September 2005. The new school building will include 16 general classrooms and a two-classroom SEN unit. The school currently has 291 pupils and the new school will cater for approximately 400 pupils. The project is currently at stage 2a, architectural planning, and is being delivered under the ADAPT programme. To date, the project has stalled. According to the timeline agreed with the Department, the project should have moved on to stage 2b, that is, approval for statutory application, in August 2024. The agreed timeline, as presented to the school by the Department, is not being adhered to. Previously, in a meeting in January 2025 between the school authorities, design team and project manager, the Department requested an additional report to address issues of concern raised by the Department. The report was submitted to the Department addressing these concerns. Since then there has been no further progression of the project. The new school is urgently needed because the school is constantly firefighting as maintenance problems continually arise and a lot of money has gone into maintaining this old building.

Teastaíonn freagraí uaim maidir leis an bhfáth ar tháinig deireadh leis an tionscadal seo.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Is mian liom labhairt faoi Ghaelscoil Uí Earcáin i bhFionnghlas. Rinne mé staidéar sa teach scoile seo 40 bliain ó shin. Bhí mo sheanathair ar choiste tógála na scoile 70 bliain ó shin, agus tá an teach scoile ag éirí an-sean anois. Tá teach scoile nua ag teastáil ón scoil agus tá gá leis go han-luath. Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin is a school I studied in 40 years ago. My grandfather was on the building committee nearly 70 years ago, yet the building still remains in desperate need of improvement. Over recent years, thanks to the tireless work of the principal - I give her great credit; she lets none of us off the hook - we have invested in the school in the form of new windows and other improvements. As she says, however, we are throwing good money after bad because we know that there is a plan for an exciting new school building, and the principal, the students and the school community want to get on with that being built. It is at stage 2a. There are documents, I understand, with the Department that have to be reviewed. There was certainly some back-and-forth over different elements of the design, but we find that it has come to a halt. The school was particularly disappointed when it was not included in the recent list, particularly when an adjoining school, St. Canice's Girls' National School, actually had a letter of intent issued today.

We are very grateful for that but it is all the more reason the Gaelscoil beside it should also get the go-ahead. There is demand for school places in our area. Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin needs a new building.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Táim fíorbhuíoch de na Teachtaí Ellis agus McAuliffe as an ábhar seo a ardú sa Teach. Táim ag caint thar ceann an Aire Oideachais. Tá brón uirthi nach bhfuil sí anseo chun labhairt faoi Ghaelscoil Uí Earcáin. Bhí an Teachta McAuliffe mar dhalta san fhoirgneamh 40 bliain ó shin. Bheadh a sheanathair bródúil as. Molaim dó as an obair atá á déanamh aige ar son na scoile.

The important point that both Deputy Ellis and Deputy McAuliffe have raised is that the project is to provide a new replacement 16-classroom primary school and accommodation for pupils with special educational needs at the existing site. As the Members know, the current

school building will remain in operation until the replacement school is delivered and will be demolished thereafter.

I am taking this Topical Issue tonight on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. I know Deputy McAuliffe has been in contact with her. As has been said, the project is currently at stage 2a, architectural planning - developed design. At this stage, the preferred design option is developed to a point at which the project can be fully cost planned and prepared to lodge for statutory approvals.

This major programme is being delivered under the Department's ADAPT programme. Tá an clár tógála scoile ag méadú. We are increasing the programme. The programme uses a professional external project manager to co-ordinate and drive the design team to achieve the best possible timeframe for the project through the stages of architectural planning and on to tender and construction. As both Deputies have said, the Department of Education and Youth has reviewed the stage 2a submission. The stage 2a stakeholders' meeting between the school authorities, the design team, the project manager and the Department was held in January last year. The meeting concluded with a request for the design team to submit a stage 2a addendum report addressing issues raised by the Department at the meeting. The Department has received this report. Upon review of the report, the Department will advise all stakeholders regarding the progression of the project.

I have been informed by the Minister that she has published a €7.55 billion NDP sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors. This plan places a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and the prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will be a strong emphasis on special education throughout project roll-out. Of the €7.55 billion, it is envisaged that around €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings across the large-scale, additional accommodation, modular and annual September accommodation needs programmes.

I am told the Department will continue to build on the progress made with the continued roll-out of these projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. The Minister has informed me that she has published a list of 105 school building projects to proceed to construction or tender this year or next year. This includes 80 large-scale and additional school accommodation scheme projects. There is a strong focus on maximising existing capacity and prioritising project roll-out to meet the most urgent needs and particularly to support special education needs provision. Those projects that are at tender stage, stage 3, will be facilitated to progress to construction over the course of this year and next year. Some 35 projects that currently have planning permission and that are at pre-tender stage will also be facilitated.

I will take the views and remarks of both Deputies back to the Minister. I know the reply I have given is not what they wanted to hear as regards where we are going and the provision of additional capacity to cater for the demographics they have described clearly. On foot of what we have heard tonight, I will bring their remarks and views back to the Minister.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Tá díomá orm an rud atá ráite ag an Aire Stáit a chloisteáil. Níl sé soiléir go bhfuil aon dul chun cinn á dhéanamh. Tá sé scannalach nach bhfuil aon rud le tabhairt ar ais don scoil mar gheall ar an bhfoirgneamh nua a thógáil. Tá sé de dhualgas ar an Rialtas

fás ár dteanga a chur chun cinn. Níl ach scoil Ghaeilge amháin i bhFionnghlas cé go bhfuil líon mór scoileanna Béarla ann. There are lots of English schools all around Finglas. We see seem to be the second class. We do not seem to be taken seriously. This has been hard work. The principal, the pupils and the people in the area have done huge work to get this school running. There is massive demand in our area. This is a kick in the teeth to people trying to get their children into Irish schools and trying to put our language first. That should be the priority of the Government and of the Minister. I am so disappointed in the response.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I have to agree. The fact that both Deputy Ellis and I are putting this Topical Issue down together should show the Minister for education how important public representatives in our area consider this issue. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a fhreagra. Tá na páistí, na múinteoirí agus an príomhoide ag obair go dian. Is pobal scoile iontach iad. Tá teach scoile maith tuillte acu. Impím ar an Aire Stáit gach gur féidir leis a dhéanamh chun an scoil nua a thógáil go luath. We have to press ahead with this. The Minister of State has spoken about €7.5 billion and 108 schools. Previous Ministers were often accused of talking about millions and billions. All of that means nothing to people if they do not have a new school building in their own area. I again ask the Minister of State to communicate to the Minister the joint determination of the public representatives in this constituency to support Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin. I ask him to do everything in his power to deliver it within the capital budget.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Táim ag éisteacht leis na Teachtaí McAuliffe agus Ellis. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil díomá orthu leis an bhfreagra. Táim ag tógáil an t-ábhar seo thar ceann an Aire. Mar a dúirt mé, tabharfaidh mé freagraí na beirte don Roinn agus don Aire. I will disagree with Deputy Ellis on one thing. This Government is committed to the Irish language. Táimid ag méadú an líon scoileanna, buiséad Roinn na Gaeltachta agus úsáid na Gaeilge sna scoileanna agus sa phobal. I understand the frustration and the depth of disappointment of the Deputies. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister. I will relay the concerns the Deputies have expressed tonight to her. As a former teacher and someone who understands the need for scoil nua a thógáil do Ghaelscoil Uí Earcáin, tá a fhios agam go bhfuil fuinneamh ag na Teachtaí i leith an chláir seo. I recognise that the school building project is important to the Deputies. It is an important part of what we do in expending the education budget. I recognise that the reply tonight is not what the Deputies want to hear. I will certainly bring their remarks back. I will definitely relay their concerns as to the advancement of the school building programme to the Department and the Minister. I thank them for their courtesy to me tonight.

Rail Network

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I will raise with the Minister of State the issues my constituents are facing in relation to the Limerick to Ballybrophy rail line, which travels through north Tipperary and stops in Birdhill, Nenagh, Cloughjordan and Roscrea. I will begin by acknowledging the North Tipperary Community Rail Partnership, which has highlighted the potential of this line and the issues facing it for many years.

I will start with some of the issues facing the line. According to local media, commuters in Nenagh were recently locked out of the railway station because the gate to the station was

locked. The gate is locked when the station is not in use. The station is actually rarely in use, which is one of my biggest issues. Those trying to travel that day missed their train and their connections.

There are also other issues. No real-time information is provided. Services are cancelled and replaced by buses. Journey times are excessively long and travel times on this regional line are mind-bogglingly inconvenient. It is now 10.30 p.m. on a Tuesday night. Before I came down to the Chamber, I decided to look at what my travel times would be like if I were travelling on the rail line tomorrow. If I wanted to depart Nenagh for Dublin tomorrow, the earliest I could arrive in Dublin, if using local rail, is 9.53 a.m. That is not much use if you are commuting for work. If I wanted to depart Dublin tomorrow to get home to Nenagh, I would have two options. I could choose the 3 p.m. or 6 p.m. service.

The 6 p.m. brings me back by the Ballybrophy line but the 3 p.m. brings me from Dublin to Limerick Junction, Limerick Junction to Limerick Colbert and then Limerick Colbert back out the Ballybrophy line. If I wanted to travel from Cloughjordan or Roscrea to Limerick, the earliest I could arrive in Limerick in the morning is 10.08. Again, that is not much use if you are trying to commute for work. If I wanted to depart Limerick, the only time I could leave that is any bit convenient, but not really, is 5.10 in the evening. My other option is to leave at a quarter to six and travel from Limerick to Limerick Junction, Limerick Junction to Ballybrophy and then back out again. I say that at the risk of sounding like one of the D'Unbelievables while I give that example.

The programme for Government states many things about public transport, particularly on rail lines. One of those points is a commitment to develop additional track capacity, electrification, increased line speeds and new routes to enhance and develop rail services. We already have the track in place on the Ballybrophy line but we want increased speed times and faster journey travel across north Tipperary, and that is a very reasonable request. We do not need a new route. The route is already there. We need faster travel times, more frequent services, more reliability of services and better infrastructure at our stations. That infrastructure point is important because Nenagh could have a transport hub at Nenagh railway station if we could get the investment. It is key to all of this, to getting the station open when it should be open, getting the physical station open and so that those commuting are not facing that locked gate as we saw previously. On top of that, a transport hub in Nenagh railway station would allow the bus stops to move out of the centre of the town and up to the train station to create a real transport hub for Nenagh.

Back in January, Councillor J.P. O'Meara and I met the NTA in its headquarters in Dublin to discuss that transport hub. One of the key points to that is funding. It is a large investment, but Tipperary County Council has the plans, and we deserve that investment in north Tipperary for a key transport hub.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Transport, who sends his apologies. The Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable sustainable mobility options. Public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving all people's quality of life. As the Deputy mentioned, the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy sets out the framework for the delivery

of the transport system required to further develop that whole Limerick region. A key principle of the strategy is to reduce dependency on the car while increasing the appeal of sustainable transport options. Proposed projects such as double tracking the line from Limerick Colbert to Limerick Junction and improving the frequency of services on the Limerick-Nenagh-Ballybrophy line as demand for travel increases will help to achieve this.

Investment in the Ballybrophy line is provided for under the infrastructure manager multi-annual contract, the contractual arrangement between the Minister for Transport and Iarnród Éireann for the protection and renewal of the rail network. The current contract runs for four years from 2026 to 2030 and will see over €2 billion invested in the rail network over this period. The funding will increase service reliability and punctuality, improve journey times and ensure continued safety of rail services across the network. As an example of the type of works funded, in 2021, an enhanced programme of track re-laying on the Ballybrophy line was supported by this programme. Iarnród Éireann invested €22.8 million between 2011 and 2020 on improvements and upgrades to the infrastructure on the Ballybrophy to Limerick rail line. The upgrades were made up of a range of infrastructural improvements across the track, bridges, signalling systems and other structures that comprise the assets on this route. Irish Rail has invested further in the line between 2020 and 2022, which has seen the route upgraded from jointed track to continuous welded rail, yielding journey time improvements of 15 minutes. Any further journey time improvements would be dependent on further investment in level crossings and other infrastructure. There are 12 staffed level crossings on the Limerick-Ballybrophy branch and there are no plans to automate these in the short to medium term. A re-signalling scheme for this branch will likely be required to facilitate the automation of these level crossings.

An estimate in 2023 suggested it would cost in the region of €58 million to re-signal the line and automate these level crossings, but further studies would be required to produce a definitive current estimate. The high number of user-operated crossings, including farm crossings, would also need to be addressed to further improve journey time. As well as addressing gatekeeper resources, one of the most significant issues currently is fleet availability. While new trains entering service from 2027 onwards as part of the DART+ programme will initially have direct benefit within the greater Dublin area, the secondary effect of these new trains will be to free up intercity and commuter trains currently operating on the northern line to be used on other routes around the network. Their deployment will be subject to review with, and the approval of, the National Transport Authority, subject to demand and infrastructure capacity at the time. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, the Minister and I look forward to working closely with the NTA and Iarnród Éireann in the coming years to increase the number of trains in operation on regional lines across the country.

Deputy O'Meara's points are well made about the commuter line, the servicing of it and the need for a uniformity of approach. I will bring his remarks back to the Minister. I thank the Deputy for meeting with the NTA and for his ongoing advocacy and the work he is doing. His points are well made and are part of what we will be the national rail framework in the coming years.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: In his answer the Minister of State touched on a number of points I had intended to raise. There are the issues concerning the amount of time it takes to travel the line or the limitations on the speed of trains in the line. The first is level crossings and the

second the signalling system, which is not out of the past century but the century before that. Some Members in the House might know but the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis is on this coming Saturday, and it will be 100 years old on 15 May. One hundred years ago, when Countess Markievicz, Eamon de Valera, Seán Lemass and others were planning the foundation of Fianna Fail, the signalling system on the Ballybrophy line was not new technology then, and yet we are still using that technology today. The answer to the issues facing the Ballybrophy line is investment. It is serious investment, but it is long-term investment with a long-term vision for north Tipperary and commuter accessibility to north Tipperary.

The argument for many years for people in Birdhill, Nenagh, Roscrea and Cloughjordan was about keeping the line open because there was so much discussion about closing it. That argument is over. It is done. The line is open and it is not going anywhere, but the argument now has to be on future investment and future viability of the line. It is only viable with major investment from the Government. We have to have ambition for our future and ambition for the future of north Tipperary. There is major potential for commuter transport in north Tipperary out of Birdhill, Nenagh, Roscrea and Cloughjordan. Nenagh is already a satellite town of Limerick. Roscrea has huge potential to be that and so much more. Birdhill is already close to Limerick and Cloughjordan, while being a rural village, has major sustainability principles with the eco-village there. However, Irish Rail has said it is going to invest massively over the coming 25 years, with billions going into the rail infrastructure across this country. In north Tipperary, Nenagh, Cloughjordan, Roscrea and Birdhill deserve their fair share of investment in our regional line.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I share the Deputy's point that the Department and the Minister and Minister of State are fully supportive of investment in rail. The Deputy's ambition for north Tipperary and the areas he has mentioned is correct. The All-Island Strategic Rail Review will be the pillar on which we will outline our approach, that is, the Department's approach, to sequencing and optimising the recommendations in the coming years. The important point is that, in the short term to 2030, the prioritisation strategy specifies a number of early interventions to be delivered in the coming years, which include a new platform at Limerick Junction, which will support through services between Cork and Galway via Limerick and more movements from Cork to Limerick. It also includes a passing loop at Clonmel, which will achieve that two hourly service between Limerick and Waterford. In addition, there are the pieces around electrification and line speed on the Dublin-Cork, Dublin-Belfast and Belfast-Limerick Junction lines. Under the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, in the context of Limerick-Ballybrophy, the ambition is to increase the service frequency to a two hourly service in each direction on that line. It should also be noted that projects referred to in the rail review and prioritising strategy will be advanced by Government in the context of the infrastructure guidelines.

Again, the points made by the Deputy are pertinent.

The ambition the Deputy speaks about is one that we have as a Department. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I look forward to the progression of the recommendations of the rail review over the coming years in the Limerick region. I certainly hope that our successors here, whether they are celebrating 200 years of Fianna Fáil or whatever, will not have to have this conversation about the important point the Deputy makes. The argument has been won. He is right, and I thank him for his contribution. It is our

job to make sure that we make improvements on the line, for increased travel and shorter times, so that the next generation and this generation can have commuter rail, which is what we all badly need.

Nursing Homes

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State the proposed opening of the new Killarney community nursing home, which has been completed for over 12 months. There is a lot of frustration in the region, the town and all around it with the delay in opening it. As I said, it has been completed for over 12 months. The lights were on there every night through the winter. The heating has been on and everything, and people are wondering. Councillor Maura Healy-Rae brought a motion to the area meeting some days ago and she was supported by her fellow councillors. Each of them has often asked why there is a delay, what is happening and why it is not opening. There is a conflict in relation to the proposed staffing of the hospital. It will require a lot of extra staffing. The INMO said recently that the HSE has not engaged with it regarding the staffing issues. In recent days, a senior HSE official said the HSE is engaging with the INMO every week. Someone is right and someone is wrong, or maybe both are wrong, or maybe both are right, but at the same time, the hospital has not been opened.

So much is contingent on this hospital opening. The present district hospital in Killarney and St. Columbanus home are practically together. The long-stay patients in St. Columbanus home are to be moved to the new hospital to make way for a primary care clinic. The old district hospital is to make way for respite for elderly people and, as I understand it, elderly people in care are entitled to four weeks of respite. Many people did not get that in our area last year. We also have a minor injuries clinic. That is to be in St. Columbanus home, the respite is to be in the district hospital, and we do not yet know where the primary care clinic is going to be. They are all contingent on each other.

Does the Minister of State know when the hospital will open? Does he know if there is engagement between the nurses' union and the HSE? God almighty, the amount of money that the HSE has got in this year's budget alone. The worry is that it has come out in recent days to say there is an embargo on hiring staff in the south west. We are in the south west and I hope this is not going to hit or hurt our hospital opening. As I said to the Minister of State, there is ambivalence about who meets whom, but they certainly need to meet each other and we need to get the hospital open. I am asking the Minister of State to give me an answer about what is happening, if he can.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for raising this important matter. Long-term residential care is a crucial part of the overall continuum of care and, across the country, our HSE community nursing units, CNU's, and community hospitals play a vital role in the provision of long-term care and other services. The Government is committed to continued investment in healthcare infrastructure that supports the highest quality care for our older population. This investment includes the community nursing home capital programme, which was launched to ensure that up to 90 of our public community nursing units and community hospitals would be refurbished or replaced to ensure the best quality environments for our older people.

The public private partnership aspect of the community nursing unit programme continues to progress and will deliver 528 beds in seven facilities across the country. The new community nursing unit in Killarney is part of the public private partnership project and will have a complement of 130 beds providing 50 long-stay beds, 30 dementia-specific beds and 50-short stay beds. The CNU will provide a high-quality living environment that will be in line with all regulatory requirements. I advise the Deputy that the new facility was handed over to the HSE by the contractor in December 2025. I accept that is over four or five months ago.

HSE South West has advised me that preparations for Killarney CNU to welcome residents are now at an advanced stage. The application for the registration of Killarney CNU has been submitted to HIQA and an opening date for the new CNU will be fully finalised once HIQA registration has been achieved, and this will allow for the opening over the coming weeks. Once HIQA registration is secured, the new unit will open on a phased basis, with a planned transfer of residents from St. Columbanus and the district hospital, as the Deputy already referenced, to the new building. HSE South West has assured me that there is ongoing engagement with residents and their families ahead of the transfer. I have taken a particular personal interest in the opening of this CNU. I have met the HSE on a number of occasions with Department officials to ensure that Killarney CNU is opened as quickly as possible. There is a process, and part of the process is that it has to be taken over by the HSE, which happened in December, and then there is an application to HIQA, which has happened. I have requested that engagement with residents and their families take place.

All current staff will transfer to the new facility, and I have been advised that the recruitment campaigns for the additional staff required are well under way to allow for the opening of the additional beds in Killarney CNU. The current two nursing homes have 101 patients. Those staff will transfer to the new CNU. There will be an additional 29 patients to bring it up to a full complement of 130.

Engagement with union representatives at a local level is also ongoing and I thank the staff representatives for their continued engagement. That is taking place. I have spoken directly to the HSE about it and have been assured that it is taking place. I thank the staff representative bodies for their continued engagement.

I advise the Deputy that HSE South West will continue to engage with residents, families, staff and the wider community on all updates in relation to the opening of the new Killarney community nursing unit. HSE South West advises that it does not envisage that the current delay in opening the new Killarney community nursing unit will have any impact on services or new developments. HSE South West is planning to set up an injury unit in the vacated St. Columbanus building to support the existing emergency department in University Hospital Kerry in Tralee and does not foresee any delay in these planned services. A process to appoint a design team to progress the proposal is under way and is expected to conclude in the quarter 2 of this year. The opening of the new community nursing unit in Killarney is an absolute priority for me, the Department of Health and the HSE, and indeed the Government. This state-of-the-art CNU will enhance the lives of older people in Killarney and the surrounding areas for many years to come by providing the highest quality health and social care services, and I look forward to seeing it fully operational.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I have worries and questions about how this will be opened on a phased basis.

Is the Minister of State saying to me that 101 beds will open at the start? When will the other 29 beds open? I can see right away that there will be a requirement for new staff if we are moving the staff out of the St. Columbanus home and then out of the district hospital. I do not know where the differences in the statements from the INMO and the senior official in the HSE came from but the Minister of State seems to be adamant that they have been talking.

It would be remiss of me if I did not mention this tonight but I want to thank the staff in the district hospital and who are in the St. Columbanus home at the minute for the great care and attention that they have given to patients in both places back over the years, including all the different members of staff who served there and did so well. I thank each and every one of them.

However, I am looking forward because, like I said to the Minister of State, there is deep frustration in the area as to what is wrong and why it is not open. It has been added to by the story from the HSE that there is an embargo in hiring staff in the south west for the rest of this year. It is true that it has come out and said that. I hope that it will not hurt us in Killarney in any way because we have waited long enough. We have waited for the minor injuries clinic. We have been asking for it for over ten years, as well as the primary care clinic and the respite that so many carers deserve. People could not go on a week's holiday last summer because they had no place to get their parent, or in some cases a brother and a sister, into. I am asking for special attention for Killarney because we have waited long enough.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Healy-Rae. I join with him in commending all the staff in both St. Columbanus and the district hospital in Killarney who provide such a great service to the patients who are there. As I said, the 101 patients will transfer over to the new community nursing home unit. All current staff will transfer to the new facility and I have been advised that the recruitment campaigns for additional staff are well under way to allow for the opening of the additional beds in Killarney.

I want to see the new community nursing home unit open in Killarney. That is a process. There is an application before HIQA and the way that will work is that the existing residents in St. Columbanus and the district hospital will transfer to the new nursing home when it is registered. I want to see the additional capacity of 29 beds in the CNU to bring it up to 130 beds to be in place as quickly as possible. As I said, it will provide 50 long-stay beds, 30 dementia-specific beds and 50 short-stay beds. It is hugely important and is a priority for me as the Minister of State with responsibility for older people. It is a priority for the Department of Health, the HSE and the Government. We will get the new, state-of-the-art community nursing home unit in Killarney open as quickly as possible. Everyone is working actively on that goal for Killarney. I will continue to meet the HSE, along with the Department of Health officials, to ensure that it continues to get the priority it deserves.

I again state that the opening of the new community nursing home unit in Killarney is an absolute priority for myself, the Department of Health and the HSE. I am committed to ensuring that the residents can move into their new homes without delay. It is their home and that is something that is very important.

I once again thank the staff representatives for their engagement. This is a collaborative effort and we all want to work to ensure that we get this new 130-bed state-of-the-art nursing home unit in Killarney open as quickly as possible.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State. I was asked to ask him if some official from the HSE could meet with the councillors from the Killarney electoral area?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will follow up on that request.

Hospital Overcrowding

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The medical board at University Hospital Limerick has, as the Minister of State is aware, warned that the risks to patient care at the hospital remain intolerable and unacceptable. I have spoken countless times in this Chamber over the past decade of the challenges faced by patients and staff at University Hospital Limerick, UHL, and I welcome the intervention of Prof. Devlin of the UHL medical board.

Dr. Alan Watts, a consultant in emergency medicine and a member of the board as well, said on the Live 95 FM radio station in Limerick, "There are people on a trolley in the emergency department who should not be there." He said that they should be in a bed and that corridor care is not adequate healthcare. Today, there were 101 people being treated on trolleys and in hospital corridors at UHL. This strips them of their privacy and dignity, yet despite this and despite UHL consistently having the highest number of patients on trolleys in the State, there seems to be no immediate actions being taken to address this crisis.

Those who read about the trolley crisis may believe that it only pertains to those in the emergency department. It does not. A walk through the hospital's zones is a walk past numerous trolleys scattered across wards. I have seen this myself. Professor Devlin also has stated that "there are trolleys in corridors all around the hospital". This is a crisis, and it requires a crisis intervention.

I am sure the Minister of State will talk about some of the investments and additions that have been made in the last number of years at UHL and the wider mid-west region. There are commitments to open additional beds in Ennis, St John's Hospital and in Nenagh hospital by 2030 or 2031 but we need immediate intervention to tackle the ongoing risk to patient safety caused by the overcrowding at UHL. Put simply, recent Governments have failed to curb the crisis in healthcare at University Hospital Limerick.

The new bed unit opened in October last year. While very welcome, it has only reduced the numbers being treated on trolleys by approximately 2%. While any reduction is welcome, this leaves on average 94 people on trolleys every single day in UHL to date this year.

The new surgical hubs that could alleviate some of the pressure at UHL will now open at the end of the year and not this month as originally planned. Not only that but the HSE has advised me that it will receive only 50% of the funding needed and that level of funding will struggle to achieve half of the planned 20,000 annual procedures. Will the Minister of State intervene in this issue and speak directly to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill to make sure that we get the 100% funding that we need?

I have been advised by staff and patients at UHL that the MRI machines are often not working, which leaves patients taking up beds for longer than is necessary as they wait for their slot for MRIs that work. It is really appalling that in a modern hospital already plagued with overcrowding that such necessary equipment is often broken.

The next additional 96-bed unit at UHL is scheduled to open at the end of 2029. It was announced years ago and yet there has been no urgency to swiftly progress it. UHL is not receiving the support that it needs. For instance, if we compare UHL with University Hospital Waterford, despite UHL having double the number of people presenting at the emergency department, University Hospital Waterford has more consultants than UHL. This is a clear demonstration of years of underfunding for the mid-west region.

We have a commitment from the Minister that the three recommendations in the HIQA report will be implemented and yet no board of management has been established to deliver this commitment. The HIQA report, which was published on 30 September 2025, stated the mid-west needs 500 acute additional beds. Some 224 days later, the delays in progressing these recommendations is systematic of the lack of urgency, as usual, where UHL is concerned. A project board needs to be established swiftly to deliver these projects. The challenges at UHL stem from bad decisions taken in the 2000s that ignored the concerns raised at the time about capacity. The board at UHL has called for a suspension of staff ceilings and other staffing restrictions in the mid-west. This call needs the Minister of State's support, and we need to ensure that all resources requested are made available to contribute to the ending of the disgraceful situation at UHL.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Quinlivan for the opportunity to discuss the challenges and the ongoing developments to support University Hospital Limerick and our health services across the mid- west region. I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

I acknowledge that there are significant challenges at the UHL site, which are having an impact on patients, staff and families in Limerick and the mid-west region. I also recognise the dedicated and hardworking staff at UHL and throughout the health services in the region and I accept that the numbers on trolleys are too high.

The Government is working and is committed to addressing the challenges facing acute care across the mid-west.

11 o'clock

Investment in the hospitals in the region has increased from €370 million in 2019 to €763 million in 2025. The budget for UHL has increased from €265 million to €569 million in the same period. Staffing at the university hospital has grown by 57% to 4,422 whole-time equivalents, WTEs, since December 2019, which is an increase of 1,608 WTEs from 2,814. This includes 319 more whole-time equivalent doctors, including consultants, 616 more nurses and midwives, as well as 199 more health and social care professionals. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has been advised by the HSE that recruitment of clinical front-line staff at UHL and throughout the region can continue as normal. Baseline implementation of the safe staffing framework has been funded in UHL. The framework was

implemented on a phased basis between 2022 and 2024 in the emergency department and all 22 medical and surgical wards.

More must and will be done. The Government is fully committed to delivering the highest quality care in the mid-west. We have carefully considered all of HIQA's recommendations following its review of urgent and emergency care in the region. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has listened carefully to the determined advocacy of people, healthcare professionals and public representatives across the mid-west. She has visited the region on a number of occasions and will continue to listen. The Minister remains focused on ensuring the recommendations arising from HIQA's assessment are implemented in a timely and co-ordinated manner and that people in the mid-west have access to safe, high-quality and reliable care.

HIQA's review identified three potential options for the region, namely, option A, expand capacity at the UHL site in Dooradoyle; option B, extend the UHL campus to include an additional adjacent site; and option C, develop a model 3 hospital in the mid-west to provide a second emergency department. In December, the Minister for Health received Government support to progress a blend of all three options. Work to progress option A is being rapidly advanced, including the delivery of a new 96-bed block at Dooradoyle in October 2025. There is also ongoing work to deliver a second 96-bed block and planning is under way for additional 16- and 66-bed blocks.

The ESRI projected that between 299 and 503 additional beds will be required across the mid-west by 2040 compared to 2023 levels. Under existing plans, we will deliver 420 additional beds by 2031, with 128 of these hospital beds already delivered at UHL. The second 96-bed block is getting under way, along with an additional 82 beds to be delivered. Furthermore, the 420 beds include 48 additional beds planned for delivery in Ennis Hospital, 42 for St. John's Hospital and 24 for Nenagh Hospital.

To progress option B, the HSE has acquired a 44-acre site in Raheen, just 2 km from UHL. This site provides a significant opportunity to provide meaningful additional capacity and health services to the people of the mid-west.

The Minister visited Clare in the mid-west yesterday and met the public, patient advocates, healthcare professionals and public representatives from the region. The Minister has requested the HSE to deliver additional health services locally at Ennis, Nenagh and St. John's hospitals where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The next step is to establish a project board to progress options B and C and develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the organisation of services and investment in the mid-west to ensure a balanced, sustainable and region-wide model of care. The Minister for Health is committed to advancing the establishment of the project board before the summer Dáil recess.

I assure the Deputy, the people of the mid-west and all public representatives that the Government will continue to pursue all measures to increase capacity and improve service delivery at UHL and across the entire region. I will bring to the attention of the Minister the two points the Deputy brought up about the surgical hub and the MRIs.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am deeply concerned by a part of the Minister of State's response. He said that, "Under existing plans, we will deliver 420 additional beds by 2031".

He also said that 128 of those beds have already been delivered at UHL but HIQA said in September, when it knew these beds were there, that 500 beds were needed. That is what it said. I spoke to senior officials in the hospital before I came here tonight. I am deeply concerned about that.

I am deeply concerned that the mid-west has been left behind for years. We do not just need a small plan to go forward but an intervention. We must realise the mistakes we made in the past. People have been abandoned for years. As I said, Waterford has more consultants than UHL, but we have double the number of people presenting. The staff have been left in an impossible situation where presentations in January and February of this year have increased by 14%. The Government is not planning an extra 14% in its plans. It is actually talking about 300 beds when HIQA says 500 beds are needed. That is a concern.

People deserve to be treated properly. When people come to a hospital, they need to be seen, including those presenting at UHL. The people I talk about on trolleys are people who are deemed to be in need of a bed, but no bed is available for them. At UHL, since 2022, we have had 93,000 people on trolleys. I have been at the hospital recently. I am sure the Minister of State has been there as well with relatives and friends. As Professor Joe Devlin said, there are trolleys everywhere. They are all over the place. People are being treated in corridors. Unfortunately, I overheard people's diagnoses and people in stress. I heard people talking to doctors and nurses, who are doing their very best in an overcrowded situation.

The answer is very disappointing. The Minister needs to get involved as a matter of urgency to appoint and get that board up and running. It is 224 days since the HIQA report was published. We need to get that board up and running. We need all three recommendations implemented. We must end the scandal of people in Limerick and the mid-west on trolleys.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and the concerns raised by the UHL medical board. Like the Deputy, I am local TD in Limerick and I am fully aware of the concerns raised. The Government is fully committed to driving significant improvements to the health service at UHL and across the mid-west. As the Deputy stated, UHL is one of the busiest emergency departments in Ireland. Increasing levels of activity in 2026 have attendance up 11% in January to March compared to the same period in 2025. Despite these attendances and a related rise in waiting times, we have seen some improvement in compliance but there are too many instances of prolonged patient waiting times. There are too many people on trolleys. I accept that. It is a capacity issue, as the HIQA report stated.

The Minister for Health and the Government are focused on increasing bed capacity. Staff numbers in UHL have grown by 50% since December 2019. As I stated, the Minister of Health has been advised by the HSE that recruitment of clinical front-line staff at UHL and throughout the region can continue as normal. That is an important point to make people aware of.

More than 53,000 patients attended the three mid-west injury clinics - St. John's, Ennis and Nenagh hospitals - during 2025. Those clinics do great work. The acute virtual ward went live in UHL in July 2024. This has been scaled up to now provide 40 virtual beds, assisting in freeing up hospital capacity. The surgical hub is expected to be in operation by the end of the year, as the Deputy referenced. This will increase theatre capacity and reduce day cases and the low-complexity surgical waiting list in the region. It will make an enormous difference.

The purchase of the 44-acre site at Raheen represents a significant milestone and provides an opportunity to plan for delivery of healthcare in Limerick and the region for current and future generations.

Obviously, the Minister is committed to advancing the establishment of the project board before the summer recess. That project board will look at all aspects, including capacity and everything else that is required in the region. It will look at all aspects when it comes to options B and C. Option B is to look at additional capacity and the expansion of the UHL campus to include an additional adjacent site. Option C is to develop a model 3 hospital in the mid-west to provide a second emergency department.

I concur with the Deputy that it is very difficult for patients coming to UHL with the waiting times and trolleys. I join with him in expressing gratitude to the staff in UHL and the entire region for the fantastic work they do. The Government and the Minister for Health are absolutely committed to ensure that we continue to provide further investment in required staff to meet capacity requirements for UHL, Limerick and the entire mid-west region in delivering health services.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.10 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 13 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.10 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 May 2026.