



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 26 Bealtaine 2026

Tuesday, 26 May 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Freagra ar na Eascairí Corrrthoghcháin do Dháilcheantair Baile Átha Cliath Láir agus Gaillimh Thiar

Return to Writs: Dublin Central and Galway West

Comhaltaí Nua a Chur in Aithne

Introduction of New Members

The Clerk of the Dáil made the following announcement:

I gcomhlíonadh Bhuan-Ordú 239 de na Buan-Orduithe i dtaobh Gnó Phoiblí, tá orm a chraoladh go ndearnadh, sa Chorrthoghchán a bhí ann an 22ú Bealtaine 2026, de chionn an Teachta Pascal Ó Donnchú d'éirí as, agus toghchán an Teachta Caitríona Ní Chonghaile mar Uachtarán, na Comhaltaí seo a leanas a thoghadh don Dáil:

Dáilcheantar Bhaile Átha Cliath Láir: Domhnall Ó hAonguis

Dáilcheantar Gaillimh Thiar: Seán Ó Cadhain

Tá Rolla na gComhaltaí sínithe ag an dá Theachta de réir Bhuan-Ordaithe 1.

In compliance with Standing Order 239 of the Standing Orders relative to Public Business I have to announce that at the By-Elections held on 22 May 2026, consequent on the resignation of Deputy Paschal Donohoe and the election as President of Deputy Catherine Connolly, the following Members have been elected to the Dáil:

Constituency of Dublin Central: Daniel Ennis

Constituency of Galway West: Seán Kyne

The Deputies have signed the Roll of Members in accordance with Standing Order 1.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the new Members to take their seats.

The new Members have taken their seats. I think I speak on behalf of all Members in congratulating them on their election. We recognise it is a special day for them, their families and their supporters. I wish them every success and happiness in their new roles. I am sure they will both make a major contribution to the work of the House and the 34th Dáil.

Visit of Swiss Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move on, I welcome the Swiss ambassador, H. E. Jenny Piaget. It is nice to see her again.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirimid fáilte roimh an Teachta Ennis agus an Teachta Kyne sa Teach.

The Minister for foreign affairs has brought draft legislation to the Cabinet which will ban trade in goods from the occupied Palestinian territories. On the Taoiseach's way into the Cabinet this morning, he made it clear that services are to be excluded, so the Government has taken a wrecking ball to the original occupied territories Bill. The Taoiseach is aware that 70% of trade between Ireland and the occupied territories is in services and that the Bill was designed to end the shameful economic support provided to Israel's illegal settlements. Yet, the Government has hollowed out the legislation, rendering it ineffective.

The Taoiseach's argument, that including services is impossible to implement, simply does not stack up. The occupied territories Bill is in line with the ruling of the International Court of Justice, a ruling that makes no distinction between goods and services. In fact, banning services is required under international law. Spain has included services in its legislation, so it can be done.

The occupied territories Bill has a long history. It was passed in the Seanad in 2018 and in the Dáil in 2019 and it continues to enjoy overwhelming public support. The Government has paid it plenty of lip service. For eight years, it has said it will support the occupied territories Bill, but it has stalled, delayed and blocked it, and now it has gutted the Bill. This is the Government's response, its approach, after 14 Irish citizens on a humanitarian flotilla to Gaza were kidnapped, detained and brutalised by Israeli forces. This is the Government's response and approach to the slaughter and genocide in Gaza, as Palestinian men, women and children are wiped out every single day.

It is the Government's response to mass displacement, enforced starvation and the obliteration of civilian infrastructure, all at the hands of a ruthless apartheid regime - a regime gifted impunity by world leaders, including the Taoiseach. Caithfidh seirbhísí a bheith san áireamh sa reachtaíocht ionas go mbeidh sé éifeachtach. Caithfidh an Dáil an bunleagan den Bhille ina iomláine a rith. Ireland should and must be leading on this question. The Taoiseach must make clear that the theft of Palestinian land will not be rewarded with economic support; that Ireland

will stand up for human rights and international law; and that Ireland stands with Palestine. Excluding services and pushing forward with hollowed out legislation is a cop-out and a dangerous one. It cannot happen. The people of Palestine, of Gaza, slaughtered, besieged, brutalised and starved look to Ireland for support and we simply cannot turn our backs. Services along with goods must be banned. The sanction must be effective. Either the Taoiseach accepts international law or he does not. Ireland must be on the right side of history. Last week, I wrote to the Taoiseach and I urged him to work constructively with the Opposition to pass the original occupied territories Bill in full. That is what must happen.

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím leis an méid atá ráite ag an Teachta mar tá Éire agus a Rialtas chun tosaigh agus muid ag seasamh suas do na Palaistínigh. Tá sé sin ráite ag na Palaistínigh. Deir Údarás Náisiúnta na Palaistínigh i gcónaí go bhfuil ár dtír chun tosaigh maidir le tacaíocht a thabhairt do na Palaistínigh. I do not accept the Deputy's proposition in terms of how she has distorted the Irish Government's position in relation to the cause of Palestinian self-determination. From the outset, we have taken a series of measures that have been at the leading edge in terms of any Europe Union's member state's response to the genocide in Gaza, the continued violent behaviour of the settlers in the West Bank, and the continuing war in Lebanon, which is completely unjustified. We recognised the State of Palestine, along with Spain, for example, and Slovenia did so after us, in a broader move to try to get a peace accord going within the Middle East in terms of a Palestinian State. We intervened in the South African case before the-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Eventually.

The Taoiseach: -----International Court of Justice in terms of the case there in respect of genocide. We have provided very significant support to Palestinians, up to €146 million up to this year. In terms of UNRWA in particular, we took a leading role in Europe to stem the momentum at the time of taking aid away from UNRWA after Israeli allegations against UNRWA personnel. We held back that momentum and then we doubled down in terms of doubling our own provision of finance to UNRWA itself. We did this consistently in all international forums. The Attorney General has argued before the ICJ in respect of the impacts of the illegal occupation of Palestine. At the United Nations General Assembly, we, of course, sponsored resolutions in terms of seeking to implement the court's advisory opinion.

There is no justification for the assertions Deputy McDonald has made. I know her objective is to sort of attack the Government, sometimes even more than the Israeli Government. That is the objective. In terms of the occupied territories Bill, we need a bit of honesty across the House. We need absolute honesty here. Let us not overstate the impact of this either way.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Let us water it down.

The Taoiseach: My experience has been that as soon as we do something, like we did with the recognition or whatever else, Sinn Féin moves on very quickly and dismisses it.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: It is 35 years.

The Taoiseach: That has been the standard practice. First of all, the original Bill could not go through the House because it would not have been legal in terms of how it was framed. In terms of services-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is illegal to trade with occupied territories.

The Taoiseach: On goods, by whatever yardstick is used, about €200,000 worth of goods - fruit and vegetables - come in from the settlements. That is what comes in.

Services are intangible, as someone described them. It is impossible to implement. Could we have some honesty about that? There is an issue in terms of what will happen if services were included in terms of jobs in this country and potential attacks on multinationals that are based here.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: You just said it. Now you have said it.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, the leader of the Deputies' party will respond.

The Taoiseach: That is the reality. People can dismiss that all they want; I do not dismiss it. I have to protect about 250,000 jobs in this country too, and there is a real issue-----

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Scaremongering.

The Taoiseach: -----that people are turning a blind eye to in terms of this being something we can do casually to which nobody is going to pay a blind bit of notice. There have been a lot of attacks on Ireland because of the leadership stance we have taken as a Government.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: So defend against the attacks.

The Taoiseach: We have been out there with Spain more than anybody else in terms of these issues.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Irish people have always taken a principled and morally ethical stance on the question of Palestine. Of that there is no doubt. Unfortunately, the Irish Government has not followed suit. The truth and the honest position are that the Government has had to be dragged into taking any kind of positive stance, facing down the impunity of Israel and accepting that until there are consequences for Israel and the Netanyahu regime, they will continue to slaughter Palestinians, they will continue to occupy land and they will continue with their apartheid regime. The only answer is sanctions. That is why the occupied territories Bill matters. It has to include both goods and services. Spain included services, so why on earth can Ireland not? Sanctions are the only thing that will work with Israel - economic, cultural and sporting. The Irish football team should not be playing Israel under any circumstances.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Spain has not included services.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It has.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow the response.

The Taoiseach: It included the advertisement of services.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Same thing.

The Taoiseach: Different thing completely. We need accuracy here.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is the same for EU law.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the rules are that leaders speak.

The Taoiseach: Very few countries have gone down this route. Spain and Ireland are going down this route in terms of the banning of goods. We hope Belgium and the Netherlands will follow suit. It looks like Slovenia will not be in a position now because the Government has changed in Slovenia. The Government that has been elected has a completely different issue. It must be at European level if we are to have any impact on Israel. Even at European level, I am trying to be honest with people here, how does one have impact on the Israeli Government, Netanyahu and these people? The bottom line is-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Stop the bombs. Stop allowing Shannon to be used.

The Taoiseach: That is all rubbish about Shannon and all that nonsense. It has no impact on Netanyahu.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Really, how do you know? You do not check.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: It is just sloganeering. All that is happening is sloganeering and shallow rhetoric that is devoid of any substance. There are two major powers that could influence Israel. Fundamentally, the US can. Second, maybe, a unanimous European Union position on the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Those are potentially the two ways to get----

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Before I begin, I want to congratulate new the Deputies, Daniel Ennis and Sean Kyne. As a by-election veteran myself, I wish them the very best, although I was elected during Covid so I missed out on the handshakes, hugs and lovely warmth they got.

Recent lay-offs in the tech sector are causing huge stress and anxiety for those receiving redundancy notices, those seeing their colleagues being laid off and the communities affected. My constituency, Dublin Bay South, is home to many tech companies and to the workers who keep them running. Entire communities have been built on the promise of secure, well-paid tech jobs, but this news reminds us of the vulnerability of that model and of our national economy. Meta is cutting 350 jobs here. That proportion of the workforce vastly exceeds global averages. The IT sector here has shed more than 20,000 jobs in the past year alone. How are the tech oligarchs dressing this up? They refer to it as modernisation and flattening teams. That is awful language when they are talking about people's livelihoods and lives. Flattening companies really means throwing staff to the wolves to satisfy shareholders and inflate share prices. Multibillion euro corporations led by Trumpian cheerleaders in Silicon Valley are using AI as cover for years of over-hiring and ruthless cost-cutting. This is AI washing and these companies are showing contempt for the industrial relations mechanisms of the State.

We are seeing this with Covalen, which snubbed an invitation to the Workplace Relations Commission even as it looks to sack 700 people.

They can do so with impunity it seems because our labour laws are too weak.

These corporations know something else too. They know how vulnerable Ireland is. Our economy is dangerously dependent on a handful of tech giants, and they know that the Government is frightened of them and is afraid they will pull investment and move jobs elsewhere, so we are in permanent game of chicken, and the biggest losers are the people now fearing for their futures. As our enterprise spokesperson, Deputy George Lawlor, has said, we have a pool of highly skilled talent who are now being made redundant and so somebody must call the bluff of the tech giants.

What we need, and what Labour has been calling for, is a serious industrial strategy to ensure that Ireland is more than just a host for multinational profits. We need to start cultivating indigenous Irish enterprise and innovation to develop a domestic start-up boom in the AI and tech sectors. We also need stronger collective bargaining rights, stronger protections for workers facing redundancy and serious investment in education, retraining and upskilling. Above all, we need a government that will stand up to the tech billionaires. What we in the Labour Party are asking is: what is the Government's strategy in the face of these job losses to protect tech jobs and to ensure that we diversify our economy and reduce our over-reliance on multinationals?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I want to take the opportunity to welcome Deputies Daniel Ennis and Séan Kyne. I congratulate them on their election and have no doubt they are looking forward to being effective and productive legislators and, of course, diligent representatives of the people who elected them to Dáil Éireann. It is a great day for them and for their families. We hope their families, in particular, enjoy this historic day for the Deputies and for them.

In respect of employment more generally and the impact of AI and the decisions of certain tech companies, overall, we should not lose sight of the fact that our economy is continuing to grow significantly using GNI as our figure. Modified domestic demand is expected to grow by about 2.1% in 2026. It increased by 4.95% last year. Employment has been fairly consistent year on year. The payroll employee index is up 2.2% year on year, and we are close to 2.8 million workers. We have a very robust and resilient employment story made up of the SME sector as well as the multinationals but we can never look at them as an either-or. They are both inextricably bound together.

I was in Dexcom in Galway recently where a factory has been built that will accommodate 1,000 workers by 2028. At the moment, there are 300 workers there. What was interesting is that in an investment of about €300 million, Dexcom procured about €180 million of that locally through the local supply chain, although the figures might vary. In other words, there are lots of smaller companies that are able to plug into the Dexcom investment. I was at a Japanese pharmaceutical facility in Kerry recently and again it was the same story in terms of the clean room technology and laboratories. We now have companies at a calibre that can actually supply into very sophisticated operations.

While we do need to develop our SME sector, work with Enterprise Ireland on high potential start-ups and do better at scaling up companies, quite a lot of Irish companies have scaled up on the backs of having originally won contracts with a big multinational. Take, for example, all the companies that have supplied into Intel in Kildare. I visited the Intel site about two or three years ago in the midst of the next Fab being built. Nearly every Irish construction company was in there, with different companies doing incredible frontier-type solutions for Intel in terms of clean room technology and so on. We do have a healthy ecosystem but we need to invest more on the skills side as it is key to the AI issue. The skills round table, *aiready.ie* and the national skills observatory the Ministers, Deputies Lawless and Peter Burke, are putting together are a good solid response to what is happening.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I agree with the Taoiseach that it is not either-or. SMEs are certainly the backbone of our economy but what we have seen is an over-dependence on a handful of small tech companies and that is the concern. Yes, of course, there are many SMEs that are working with them and are in the supply chain but the problem, as the Taoiseach said, is the lack of scaling up of SMEs and the lack of investment in indigenous start-ups.

That is a real concern. We need to diversify the economy. It is not just the Labour Party saying this; we have heard it from every expert who has looked at our economy.

There is a particular concern about workers' rights in tech companies. Let us look at the issue of performance improvement programmes, PIPs. These spurious programmes are being used by tech companies to justify redundancies. They are squeezing those PIPs until they squeak. This is what we are seeing. They are using legal loopholes to justify making redundancies. There is an issue about workers' rights in tech companies. At a minimum, what we have called for in the Labour Party, is the introduction of stronger workers' rights protections to force big tech to play fair amid these plans to lay off workers and to expose this issue of AI washing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Tech companies are making huge profits while saying that they need to cut costs.

The Taoiseach: There are two dimensions to this. In itself, AI will change the world of work. We should not be blind to that. We need to prepare for it. There is investment in skills, in particular, and thankfully, the International Monetary Fund, IMF, has identified Ireland as one of the top countries in terms of an AI-skilled population and workforce. Equally though, I accept that because of the extraordinary investments some of the global players are making in AI, they are cutting costs in terms of human resources. It may not necessarily all be AI driven. There are certain investment decisions being taken. One of the negative consequences of that is a cutting of labour forces globally, not just in Ireland. We have to prepare for that. We have strong labour protection laws in this country and frameworks that govern any redundancies or situations pertaining to workers' rights. I would not understate the protections that are there.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: On the small business front, regulations are a big feedback from the SME sector. They are saying to us that they are over-regulated and need simplification.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We will move to Deputy Cairns.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I congratulate our new Social Democrats TD, Daniel Ennis, and Fine Gael's new Deputy, Seán Kyne. I warmly welcome them to this Chamber. Dan is going to be a fantastic addition to our parliamentary party team. We are all so excited to work with him. This is a huge day for Dan, Seán and their families. I welcome their families and supporters to the Gallery. I especially welcome Dan's mother, Jacqueline, his brother Geoff and his fiancé, Chloe. None of us would be in this Chamber today if we did not have the support of family, friends and party members. These are the people who knock on doors for us and keep us going through the hard times and families who are willing to make enormous sacrifices in order that we can be here. This essential support does not get enough recognition, so I wish to acknowledge it today. I thank our excellent candidate in Galway West, Mide Nic Fhionnlaioich, and everyone who voted for the Social Democrats on Friday.

The front page of the *Irish Daily Mail* today reveals a shocking figure. The cost of emergency homeless accommodation reached nearly €500 million last year. That is a 570% increase in spending in just ten years. While we can measure the financial cost of soaring homelessness, we cannot measure the human cost. How many babies are struggling to learn to crawl right now because of a lack of space? How many toddlers are experiencing delayed speech development? How many children have become withdrawn or have fallen behind in school? How many of their parents have developed insomnia and depression? How many relationships have broken down because of the constant stress caused by their living conditions? The full extent of the trauma being created by homelessness is something we will never truly know, but we know the negative impact can be lifelong. It affects children's development, education, mental and physical health, job prospects and relationships.

A stable, secure home is the foundation for a happy life. That basic building block is missing for 17,500 people. This is especially an issue in Dublin Central, where a disproportionate amount of emergency accommodation is located. One tenth of the homeless population of Ireland – 1,700 people – are living on just one street, namely Gardiner Street. Across the constituency, it has been estimated that there are 7,000 people living in homeless accommodation. Has any small area in the country ever had to cope with such a disproportionate level of trauma, unmet need and State failure?

These are people and an area that have been abandoned by successive Governments. They have been left to pick up the pieces of years of Government failure on housing. The response of this Government is not to help or reduce homelessness but to make the situation even worse and introduce new rent rules that have led to record rent increases. We need the Government to recognise that and change course, starting as a matter of urgency with a temporary ban on no-fault evictions and a ban on rent increases. Will the Taoiseach do that?

The Taoiseach: The population increase in the last ten years has been quite phenomenal as well and is having an impact on the housing situation. Migration - and I mean this in a general sense, not casting any aspersions - has had an impact on housing also. One only has to look at the figures now of the people who are non-European or non-Irish in emergency accommodation. It is well over 50%. That is where we are in the modern era. We have to deal with that. We have to help people who find themselves homeless. Of that there is no doubt, but we also need to understand what the drivers of homelessness have been in the past five to ten years.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Evictions.

The Taoiseach: Without question, when you analyse the figures and talk to people, population growth is a key area, but we also need to respond in terms of social housing, for example. We are building more houses in direct builds per annum now than since the foundation of the State. Last year, over 9,000 social houses alone were built. Ultimately, the provision of increased social housing is the best route to dealing with homelessness. No other way will sustainably deal with it.

In addition to that, we are building a lot of affordable homes and giving a lot of support to people in terms of starter homes. Across the board, in terms of housing assistant payment, HAP, and other things, we are giving assistance to people who need to access housing. Without question, the momentum is towards increased house provision. Some 36,000 homes were built last year. We hope to increase that figure for 2026 and probably will. What is interesting is that commencements are up by 176% this year, with about 11,000 commencement notices in the first four months. Real dwelling investment is up by 19% and construction employment is up by 33% since 2020, 10% year on year. That is because of the increased house building that is taking place. There has been a 55% year-on-year increase in terms of land for housing and deals to facilitate housing. The Home Building Finance Ireland, HBFI, loan book is up by 25%.

Whatever metric one is looking at, there are increases happening. The issue is the speed and how we can exit people from homelessness as quickly as possible, and from emergency

accommodation in particular. If we do a temporary eviction ban, we will depress supply again. We have been through this. The Housing Commission said that the existing renting situation could not continue and that we had to create a more permanent framework for the rental market to give certainty to all concerned. What the Deputy suggested towards the end of her contribution would actually make the situation worse because supply would be depressed. We need more supply and we need it as quickly as possible. It is interesting that any form of supply we have proposed in the past three months has been opposed by the Social Democrats and by others in the Opposition.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Taoiseach needs to stop and listen to himself when he comes into this Chamber week after week and tries to spin a positive message on housing when there are 17,000 people homeless, including more than 5,000 children. This is at a time when there are record budget surpluses. The only thing the Taoiseach has changed in his approach is to start blaming migrants for that failure.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is shameful. The Taoiseach talks about every metric and fails to mention the most important metric, which is the increase, month on month, and the records being broken in the number of people becoming homeless. Instead of acknowledging that the approach has failed and changing it, the Government introduced legislation that we all knew would increase evictions and rents, which is exactly what happened. Will the Taoiseach at least acknowledge the staggering increase? The only success the Government has had in terms of homelessness is to normalise it. I do not have any faith in Fianna Fáil to address this crisis and I do not think any of the electorate in either constituency where there was recently a by-election do either.

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

The Taoiseach: I do not have any faith in the Deputy's capacity or her party's capacity to deal with housing and homelessness-----

A Deputy: The electorate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: -----based on what it has produced so far, in terms of the substance of what it has put forward. Soundbites will not build houses. It is good play but it will not build houses. I do not mind having an honest debate on housing but the Deputy consistently fails to acknowledge any progress at all in terms of the social housing issue, for example. There have been 58,000 social houses built in the last five years. That is dramatically better than anything built in the previous ten years, but the Deputy cannot acknowledge that. She cannot acknowledge anything at all. I acknowledge there is a homeless crisis out there. I have said from day one that housing is the number one crisis, but we are doing something about it with concrete policies.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government is making it worse.

The Taoiseach: I have genuinely seen nothing. All I see that the Social Democrats have produced is a savings and investment scheme.

A Deputy: Not true.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach to continue.

The Taoiseach: That is all it has really come up with.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: That is not going to not solve homelessness today, next year or the year after.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Ban evictions and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: There is a lot of rhetoric but very little substance on the Deputies' side.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Where are the 40,000 homes the Government promised two years ago?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government is speaking out of both sides of its mouth on the question of sanctioning Israel. It is trying to convey to the public, who want to see sanctions imposed on this genocidal murderous regime, that it is imposing sanctions but in actuality it is doing everything to ensure that no serious sanctions are imposed on the regime. On the same day that 14 Irish people were being kidnapped on the high seas, tortured and abused last week and the Taoiseach was saying publicly that there should be no business as usual with the Israeli regime, he instructed Government TDs to go in and vote against our sanctions Bill, which would actually have imposed comprehensive sanctions on the State of Israel because of its crimes of genocide and apartheid and its systematic violation of international law, the very thing the flotilla activists had asked the Government to do.

We have headlines today saying that the Minister is going to bring forward the occupied territories Bill, something the Government has been promising for a very long time. At the same time, however, that Bill in actuality will gut the original Bill drafted by Frances Black by not including services. So, it will only prevent trade in goods, and maybe not even all goods. Reports in *The Ditch* in the last week suggest that exports from this country to the occupied territories may actually be 40 times more than are being officially acknowledged by Irish authorities because the Israeli authorities are giving much higher figures for the imports from this country.

In any event, the exclusion of services is 70% of the trade between Ireland and the occupied territories. Of course, the Bill the Government is bringing forward will not impose any sanctions whatsoever on the Israeli state itself. That is providing the support and the means for the Israeli settlers to grab Palestinian territory and annex territory. Israel was orchestrating the genocide in Gaza and is orchestrating the brutal regime of apartheid but the Government is not imposing any sanctions at all on the state that is doing it. Actually, our trade with Israel has dramatically increased over the last number of years, making Ireland the second biggest trading partner with Israel in the world. Will the Government stop the hypocrisy and actually bring forward a Bill that imposes serious sanctions on Israel for its criminal violation of international law, for genocide and for apartheid?

The Taoiseach: I again thank the Deputy for raising it and maybe to some degree with a bit more honesty than others. First of all, let us accept the distinction he has made compared with others. He is not really interested in the occupied territories Bill on its own because it just deals with the illegal settlements. He knows that. All along, he has been shouting about the occupied territories Bill but all along he wanted an Israeli boycott.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We all do.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not Deputy Coppinger's question.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What is wrong with that?

The Taoiseach: Let us be honest about what has happened here. We recognise Palestine and the Deputy moves on quickly. We intervene in the legal case by South Africa and he moves on quickly. We double down on UNRWA and he moves on quickly.

We go to the ICJ and he moves on quickly.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes.

The Taoiseach: We do the occupied territories Bill and he moves on quickly and calls for us to boycott Israel.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Government has not done it yet.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Does the Taoiseach want a medal?

An Ceann Comhairle: Follow my rules.

The Taoiseach: What is after that and after that? There has been no deep analysis,-----

Deputy Máire Devine: The Taoiseach is a great lad.

The Taoiseach: -----and that is the problem. The Deputy has now moved on very quickly.

By the way, we do not have the power, even if we wanted to, to stop trade with Israel right now. That is a European competency and Deputy Boyd Barrett knows that, but he is not interested in that because, as far as he is concerned, the EU can go to pot as well. He is not particularly interested one way or the other. It is about campaigning. It is about attacking this Government. It is not really about trying to explain to people the impacts and implications of all of this. Does the Deputy want to ban trade with Israel?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Does he want Intel to stop dealing with its sister company in Israel?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Fine. Talk to the thousands of workers in Ireland working with Intel. What happens there?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It would not-----

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, has Deputy Boyd Barrett worked through the implications of it? Has anyone in the Opposition done an assessment of what it would mean economically?

Deputies: No.

Deputy Máire Devine: The Yanks-----

The Taoiseach: Does Deputy Boyd Barrett give a continental if the US goes south because of what we might do there? It is great to be virtuous, Deputy,-----

Deputy Donna McGettigan: People's lives-----

The Taoiseach: -----but for the workers' representative, he lacks all virtuosity when it comes to protecting Irish workers. We have to take everything on board and be sensible about it.

At the same time, we have been principled.

Deputy Máire Devine: Moral.

The Taoiseach: We are one of the few European member states that has stood out there. If you talk to the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt or anyone in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, the first thing they say is, "Thank you to the Irish Government for leading on this".

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: But no, the Deputy cannot ever say anything like that because that does not suit the campaign. The campaign for him is an end in itself.

Deputy Máire Devine: This is so virtuous.

The Taoiseach: The campaign is a means to cause further undermining of the Irish Government. He has never campaigned on the same basis against Russia or Iran. He never has despite all that has happened in Iran.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, one voice.

The Taoiseach: The campaign here is a deeper issue.

Deputy Máire Devine: No, it is not.

The Taoiseach: For me, I am very clear. We have tried-----

Deputy Máire Devine: It is moral.

The Taoiseach: We all have a moral framework by the way. The Deputies do not have a monopoly on that. We have taken a lead on this. The easiest thing for politicians to do is put the chin up and be great people in sloganeering and rhetoric, but we have a deeper responsibility.

Deputy Máire Devine: Oh my God, give over.

The Taoiseach: We have to protect our national interests and people at the same time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: And do what Trump says. Is that the moral thing?

Deputy Máire Devine: Give over.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach. Deputy Boyd Barrett to respond.

The Taoiseach: That is the problem. As far as I am concerned, and I said it the last time, it is about finding the most effective way to do this.

Deputy Máire Devine: The Taoiseach is a great lad altogether.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, your time is up.

The Taoiseach: We either do it in unanimity with the European Union-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

The Taoiseach: -----or we get the United States to change tack in terms of its relationship with Israel. Those are the fundamental ways we can change tack.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett will now respond. One voice, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As it was so obvious to the world that a genocidal slaughter was taking place in Gaza and that Israel was inflicting genocide, the Taoiseach was eventually forced to say that he thought a genocide was taking place. I ask the Taoiseach a simple question: do we continue to trade with regimes that are doing genocide and treat them as normal states? Do we just treat them like any other trading or business partner? Do we continue to increase the amount of trade we do with states that are doing genocide and apartheid? Do we, in 2024 in the middle of a genocide, approve €20 million of licences to the IDF, the military force that is committing the genocide in Gaza? That is what the Government did. I say that we do not treat states guilty of genocide as normal states and that we impose sanctions on them.

The Taoiseach is absolutely right; what I want is a complete boycott, divestment and sanctions. At the least, the Government should pass Frances Black's occupied territories Bill as he promised he would do in the programme for Government. The Government even passed a motion in the Dáil in November last year to that effect.

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

The Taoiseach: We are implementing what we said in the programme for Government. Read the programme for Government. That is exactly what we are now doing. The way to deal with Israel effectively is through the European Union. There is no other way. We have not been able to get agreement across Europe because some countries historically have a position of supporting Israel come what may. The Deputy and I know that.

The Commission is the competent authority in terms of trade with Israel. We have sought to get a suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Ireland and Spain have been the two countries for well over two years now-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach is saying the Government is going to do it unilaterally. What is he talking about?

The Taoiseach: I am sorry, but the Deputy is interrupting again. For over two and a half years, we have been seeking to suspend that association agreement, but we have not been able to get any support. Only last week, because of Hungary's change of government, we were able to get sanctions on violent Israeli settlers at a European level. We are now trying to get at least a common European position on the occupied territories, but it is still difficult because the Slovenian Government has now changed with a completely different approach and response.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move on, I welcome Mary Fitzgerald from the Woodlands House Hotel in Adare and her cousin Shaunna Flynn Black who is back from Texas. They are here as guests of Deputy Richard O'Donoghue.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Appointment of Ordinary Members of An Coimisiún Toghcháin (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion *re* Twelfth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (*without debate*)
- Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn at the end of the first speaking round*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Cost of Disability, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Ensuring our Skills, Training and Innovation systems keep pace in a changing world (*not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes*)
- Motion *re* Extension of Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 (*to commence no earlier than 5 p.m. and to conclude within 1 hour; any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)
- Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)
- Motion *re* Leave to Introduce Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2026 [Votes 30 and 31] (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Fiscal Planning Framework for Economic Certainty, selected by Independent Technical Group).

Thursday's business shall be:

- Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn at the end of the first speaking round*)

Thursday evening business shall be the Public Health (Alcohol) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage), sponsored by Deputy Pádraig Rice.

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 Dáil shall waive its instruction that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day in the case of the proposed meetings of the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Sector Reform, Digitalisation, and Taoiseach, and the Select Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport, to consider the following three Bills, respectively: National Treasury Management (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 and the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025; and the Media Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026;

(b) 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

(c) private members' business shall be taken following proceedings on the Second Stage of the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Appointment of Ordinary members of An Coimisiún Toghcháin shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Twelfth Report of the Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate; and

4. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) 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 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, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; and

(c) members may share time.

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

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) in the event proceedings on the Motion re Extension of Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 concludes before 5 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 5 p.m., when the order of business shall resume with the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026;

(c) the Order of the Dáil of 14th January 2026 referring the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 to the Select Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy is hereby discharged and Third Stage of the Bill shall be taken in Committee of the whole Dáil;

(d) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024; and

(e) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate;

2. the Statements on Ensuring our Skills, Training and Innovation systems keep pace in a changing world 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;

		SF		Gov	
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Extension of Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;
- speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and
- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time

4. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall commence no earlier than 5 p.m. and 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

5. the proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages of the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment;

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the *Údarás na Gaeltachta* (Amendment) Bill 2024 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 Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht; and

7. The proceedings on the Motion re Leave to Introduce Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2026 [Votes 30 and 31] 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:

(a) topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

(b) the Dáil on its rising shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Tuesday 9th June, 2026; and

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Broadcasting (Amendment) 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.

		SF		Gov	
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	SD	Gov	SF	ITG	
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

An Ceann Comhairle: Are those arrangements agreed? Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I remember when Niall Collins and Billy Kelleher toured the country with Senator Black around the occupied territories Bill. Does the Taoiseach remember that?

The Taoiseach: I do.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It was back in 2019. Fianna Fáil then went into government with Fine Gael and that Bill was scrapped. Here we are now and the Government has gutted the Bill. Will it publish the Attorney General's advice? Will the Minister come urgently before the Dáil and take questions from the Opposition about why the Government has gutted this Bill after years of abandonment?

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Taoiseach is making a charge of some kind of economic illiteracy in opposition in terms of the implications of the occupied territories Bill when he knows that during pre-legislative scrutiny last summer we had a number of chapters interrogating the economic impact of the occupied territories Bill. Still, there was cross-party Government and Opposition consensus on that committee to bring forward the occupied territories Bill with goods and services yet the Government is bringing forward this watered-down, unacceptable Bill.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is absolutely not shallow rhetoric or sloganeering to say the Irish State should adhere to our obligations under the prevention of genocide Act, which we signed willingly. If you recognise a genocide is happening to the people of Gaza inflicted by the State of Israel, why are we still debating whether it is just services or goods? It should be everything in our power to prevent that but if this is what we have in our possession, let us do it to the maximum. We need a debate on that in this House this week.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not only is the Taoiseach gutting the occupied territories Bill but, according to *The Currency*, which put in an FOI about the investigation into overflights as to whether weapons are going across our airspace to help Israel commit its crimes, that investigation has effectively ground to a halt. The Government is not serious about ending the potential complicity of this country with the genocidal horror being imposed on the Palestinians.

Deputy Michael Collins: The summer programme or July provision is essential for children with special educational needs. This year, schools were given just one week to apply with late notice from the Department. Many schools missed the deadline through no fault of their own. I call for a debate on this issue and for an extension to ensure no child loses out.

Deputy Mary Butler: The occupied territories Bill passed Cabinet this morning. It will be published this week. It will be included in the next Order of Business, which will be finalised on Thursday. There will be a full debate on the Bill with the Minister present.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about the Attorney General's advice?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Attorney General's advice.

Deputy Mary Butler: In relation to the Deputy's issue, we can discuss that on Thursday. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 68; 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.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Collins, Michael.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Cahill, Michael.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cronin, Réada.	
Canney, Seán.	Crowe, Seán.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Daly, Pa.	
Chambers, Jack.	Devine, Máire.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Clendennen, John.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Collins, Niall.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Connolly, John.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Cooney, Joe.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Currie, Emer.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Daly, Martin.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Graves, Ann.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kenny, Martin.	
Grealish, Noel.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Keogh, Keira.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Lahart, John.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	

McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihán, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihán, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihán, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connor, James.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am struck by the Taoiseach's boastful approach regarding the so-called metrics on housing. Those metrics are record and skyrocketing rents, record evictions and record homelessness. Last year, the State spent almost €500 million on emergency accommodation. Over the past decade, almost €5 billion has been spent on managing homelessness. All the while, homelessness continues to rise. Families are in hotel rooms, single people have nowhere to go, pensioners are facing homelessness, children are growing up without homes and taxpayers are footing an extraordinary bill for the Government's failure. When is the Taoiseach going to be honest? Where is this honesty he is bragging about?

When will he honestly accept that his approach to housing is driving crisis after crisis? When will he have the honesty and integrity to accept that and change course?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: The solution to the housing issue is supply. We need far more supply than we are getting, notwithstanding the fact we are building more social houses than we ever have per annum. We will continue to build social houses over the next ten years because the investment is being made. There is massive State investment in housing, and there is additional, discrete ring-fenced funding for emergency housing but also to deal with those on the emergency housing lists and provide them with homes. In the budget, the Minister secured ring-fenced funding to enable him to do that. We will continue our work on supply. We will not be out there objecting, as the Deputy is doing in respect of apartment after apartment in her constituency.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is so glib about people who have no homes.

The Taoiseach: She talks about being honest but she is objecting left, right and centre.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is so glib.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Just an hour ago, the special advocate for survivors of institutional abuse, Ms Patricia Carey, strongly condemned what she describes as State failures in providing redress to victims of institutional abuse. She has recounted the negative experiences of survivors engaging with the Government's statutory schemes, including retraumatisation and exclusionary terms of reference. Survivors have spoken of a pattern of exclusion. I urge the Taoiseach to engage with Ms Carey at the earliest opportunity to see that survivors are treated right by the State.

I also ask the Taoiseach to engage on another matter, namely the treatment of survivors by the religious orders, which even now are evading justice by moving their assets to lay-run trusts. Clearly, we cannot appeal to religious orders to ensure, on the basis of their moral duty, that survivors receive justice and redress. I have spoken to the Taoiseach before about the need to have a statutory scheme or some provision in law to enable survivors to access redress from religious orders. On 25 June, the Dáil will debate my Private Member's Bill to provide a clear pathway to justice for survivors. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with me on that also.

The Taoiseach: Over the past 25 years, or from any historical perspective, the State has done more on redress than has ever been done before. That needs to be acknowledged. Very substantial funds have been allocated for redress. It is taxpayers' money. It is not our money; it belongs to the people, but I would not be as dismissive of what the State has done so far.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am not, but-----

The Taoiseach: Sorry, but I did not interrupt the Deputy. Redress is more than just financial. Many supports, from those of the National Counselling Service to educational supports, have been provided for survivors.

Trauma brought about by abuse is lifelong, and there has to be continuous and consistent engagement with survivors in respect of both that trauma and the most effective way of responding to it on a continuing basis. The Government has engaged substantially right across the board and has allocated very substantial resources to address it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is not often I find myself aligned with the Pope. Yesterday, the leader of the Catholic Church released an encyclical, his first, called *Magnifica Humanitas*, calling for greater guardrails on the use of AI and greater ethical consideration and dialogue around its implementation. One of his key points relates to the culture of power, which means the control of the AI tools, which are having such a far-reaching impact on each of our lives, is in the hands of a few private actors. The way to resolve this is through dialogue, but, mostly, it is through regulation. The Government has proved that it supports a very light-touch response to regulation. We have seen that through the failure to regulate online social media platforms. Will the Government please commit to supporting the AI Act in full and not the digital omnibus package that is currently being pushed through, which essentially guts the approach and brings it back to self-regulation? Will it support a greater regulatory framework and the enforcement of the existing framework in order that we can feel safer about the implementation of these tools?

The Taoiseach: I commend the Pope on the publication of his encyclical, which is a very important document in the context of how he sees the dehumanisation of people as one of the significant potential consequences of AI. We have not engaged in any light-touch regulation. We have adopted the AI Act. We have also adopted the Single Market Act and the Digital Markets Act. Why is the Deputy talking about light-touch regulation? European legislation has been strong. We have strong domestic and European legislation in respect of online platforms. In fact, a big criticism of Europe, including Ireland, is that it has over-regulated. That is a debate in terms of technology more generally. I do not accept the criticism that we have a light touch.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have asked the Taoiseach repeatedly about the social housing income thresholds, which have not been increased since 2023. Every year - indeed every month and every week - working people who have got a pay increase and who in some cases just get the working family payment are pushed over the limit. They might have been five, ten or 15 years on a housing list, and it is all gone. They are left in limbo. Most of the time when they go just over the threshold, their income is not sufficient to qualify for cost rental accommodation, so they are left nowhere.

It is completely unfair. It is a stealth cut by the Government when there is real housing need in this country. It is massaging the figures. The situation is perverse because if you actually get a social home, or indeed if you are in a housing assistance payment, HAP, tenancy, when your income goes up, you do not get evicted, you just pay more rent. People who are homeless are now getting thrown off-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. I ask the Deputy to be fair to his colleagues.

The Taoiseach: I said to the Deputy last week that the Minister for housing was considering this and would be coming back to the Government with proposals to increase the threshold. Three years ago, we did it. In 2023, it went up by approximately €5,000. I would support the increase in the threshold at which people would be entitled to social housing.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The run-up to the Residential Tenancies Act 2026 was overshadowed, as we debated, by a massive increase in evictions. We will see if the Act delivers stronger protections going forward. In the meantime, I will highlight again a loophole that becomes more attractive now. It concerns overcrowding and refurbishment. Overcrowding complaints still fall under the Housing Act 1966 and the 2019 housing standard regulations, and not the new legislation. The definition of "unsuitable for habitation" is quite broad. In a tight rental market, tenants currently stay silent about poor conditions. With landlords able to reset rents after refurbishment, there is a real risk that some will seek out inspections and use any issue as grounds for substantial renovation, such as extra rooms, and then hike the rents once the original tenants have moved on. I know those tenants have first refusal but the landlord can offset the cost of the works by resetting the rent and refilling the property. Will the Government enact legislation to defeat this loophole?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a potential loophole. I will talk to the Minister for housing in respect of it. There are significant protections in the legislation the Minister introduced, particularly the six-year rule, which have probably had some short-term consequences but in the overall provide good protection. The legislation provides probably the strongest protection yet given in terms of security of tenure. I will follow up with the Minister in respect of the issue raised by the Deputy.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Paddy Fagan is a gentleman who came to my clinic yesterday evening. He is a retired Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, worker. He has been coming to my clinic for many years. Those retired workers have not received an increase since 2007 because the scheme has effectively been frozen. It was worth 82% of the minimum wage in 2007. They are now on only half of the minimum wage as retired people. The real value of their pensions has decreased. They hoped that the Bill introduced by former Deputy Bríd Smith, the Industrial Relations (Provisions in Respect of Pension Entitlements of Retired Workers) Bill, might have helped. There were valid reasons the Government moved a money message on that legislation. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Social Protection, who has responsibility for the Pensions Authority, to meet those retired workers? The money message indicated that was the Department with responsibility for the Pensions Authority and for representing retired workers in pension schemes.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising an important issue for the DAA pension scheme and workers. I hear what he is saying and will ask the Minister for Social Protection if he will meet the workers. Perhaps the Deputy could liaise with the Minister, too, but I will raise the issue. I understand the negative impact on the workers concerned if its value has gone down to 50% of what the wage was.

Deputy David Maxwell: "This Budget builds up our resilience and will help us to adapt at a time of historic challenge for our economy." That was what the then Minister for Finance, Pascal Donohoe, told the House last October. That budget still raised day-to-day spending in 2026 by over 6%. That is lower than the 8% to 9% increase in the past few years, with a slower increase intended to protect the foreign investment-focused economy from US trade policies. Last year's budget, with its business and job focus, was needed. What we have heard since, however, is that it does relatively little for low-income earners and other workers, including those who earn too much to qualify for welfare payments but too little to significantly benefit from the higher 40% tax bracket. These workers feel that these adjustments fail to help with them housing and living costs. Can we argue for wider tax credits and perhaps the creation of a middle tax band, rather than just pushing up the 40% entry point, year on year? These people who get up every day to go out and better their lives and those of their families need to feel they are getting reward for their work and not feel that staying at home and claiming benefits is worth more. Can we work over the summer months to bring forward a progressive budget for workers in 2027?

The Taoiseach: Last year's budget was one of five budgets and people need to realise that. We were strong on infrastructure in the first year, which was the right thing to do because if we do not invest in infrastructure now, it does not get completed any time soon. That was why we had to do that. Of course, disability featured strongly, as did supports for children and housing, which is the number one priority. We will be examining the full range of supports we can give to families in what is a very pressurised environment in terms of the cost-of-living pressures. Obviously, part of that is the tax framework and I have no doubt but that the various Deputies and political parties that make up the three pillars of the Government will bring forward proposals following consultation with their members and consider the most effective way of giving workers a break.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I have just attended a press conference held by my colleague, Kathleen Funchion MEP, Patricia Carey, the special advocate for survivors, and two survivors who spoke at the conference and who are excluded from the mother and baby institutions payment scheme. It is hard to look at a survivor in his 70s who recounted the abuse that he faced when bordered out and that he lived with for so many years of his childhood. The other survivor was from Temple Hill, one of the institutions excluded and an institution that I have referenced in this House many times. We have a pot of €800 million for this institutional payment scheme. Some €78 million has been spent and we are two and a half years into a five-year scheme. Can the scheme now be expanded, as the special advocate has looked for, to include those survivors who have been excluded? One of the survivors said today they feel that from the State, it is a case of, "We're sorry, but not that sorry." There are so many survivors excluded from the scheme. Can we please look to expand it?

The Taoiseach: I was not at the press conference, which the Deputy said was attended by Kathleen Funchion and Patricia Carey. As I said earlier, it is not that there is a pot. There is no pot anywhere.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Some €800 million was set aside.

The Taoiseach: A scheme was outlined and there were estimates as to what it would cost. It is not as if there is a pot of money over there. We have, over the years, supported different categories of people in terms of redress relating to specific areas. Industrial schools were the most significant and over €1 billion was allocated at that time. That was just the financial support but there was much more to it, including counselling, educational support and housing support. We continue to keep issues under review.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: These people got nothing.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Trolley figures at University Hospital Limerick, UHL, to this point of the year in 2025 were 9,446. To date in 2026, the figure is 9,341, including today's figures. The figures are down 1% on last year, and with the new bed block having little impact. We and the Taoiseach know that more must be done in the mid-west, and in Clare, in particular.

Talking of the new block, I will bring up the Johnston family. As the Taoiseach knows, Aoife Johnston lost her life in UHL after waiting for 13 hours for sepsis treatment. There was a proposal that the new 96-bed block at UHL would be memorialised in Aoife's memory. Letters were exchanged with Aoife's family and the family had selected photos and poems to be incorporated in the memorial. There was then radio silence. Much to the hurt and distress of the family, the new block was then opened without consultation with the family. This was even more distressing for Aoife's dad, James, who was in the final months of his life. The family has been disrespected in every way, and they want to know when or if there will be a statutory inquiry into Aoife's death, as requested by the family. Unfortunately, that will come too late for Aoife's dad.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I met the Johnston family. What happened to Aoife was extremely and profoundly difficult and traumatic for the family. It should not have happened and the HSE has apologised. The Minister has met the family. There was an investigation and examination of it, which yielded a lot in terms of what went wrong. I will speak to the Minister. I did not realise there were issues around the naming of that new block. I will talk to the Minister about that to see if we can get that rectified.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I acknowledge the devastating tragedy on Burrow Beach in north Dublin at the weekend when a 15-year-old teenager sadly lost her life. My thoughts are with her parents, family and friends and the wider community. I want to respect the family's wish for privacy as they grieve their daughter. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam dílis.

This tragedy raises a serious public concern that we cannot ignore which is affecting areas in north Dublin and across Ireland. Summer is arriving earlier and lasting longer each year. In that context, the current seasonal pattern on the basis of which lifeguards are provided by councils is not acceptable. The reality is that weather patterns are changing. Beaches are now packed as early as March and as late as October during hot spells. Will the Government examine a national protocol for weather-triggered beach safety responses in conjunction with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Coast Guard and all the hardworking men and women of our emergency services? If a proactive approach can save even one life, surely we have a responsibility to act.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very sad situation. It is devastating for the family to lose such a beautiful young daughter in circumstances that no one can comprehend. It was a wonderful day. Everyone headed to the beach and the unthinkable happened.

In terms of the emergency preparedness group, risk assessments and the idea of a national protocol that could be triggered in anticipation of a change in weather of the kind we have experienced this week, which has been relatively sudden and quite dramatic in its impact. The Deputy makes a fair point. I will ask the emergency group to consider it. I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government introduced the Re-Turn scheme. Since 2024, that scheme has made €103 million on unredeemed deposits. That is €103 million of citizens' money resting in the scheme's account, most of it permanently. The operator of the Re-Turn scheme also made money through the sale of aluminium cans that we collected for it. It also gets money from the producers of the drinks, but still refuses to pay the shops that handle those cans in the first instance. This is like a tax, except that it does not go towards paying for hospitals, education and housing. Instead, the money goes to the company involved and to its CEO's salary, details of which that company refuses to publish.

The Government's scheme has given rise to another mess and a new phenomenon, namely bin-raiding or bin-scavenging. In the name of cleaning up the country, the Government has incentivised people to dump the contents of bins onto the streets. This is costing Dublin City Council €500,000 per year.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That is incredible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Government look to reform or end this shambolic scheme?

The Taoiseach: In many respects, the scheme, which was introduced by the then Minister, Eamon Ryan, has had a strong impact in the context of recycling and so on. There have been positives to the scheme. There is no doubt about that. We keep all schemes under review. Bin-scavenging needs to be examined more in terms of scale, prevalence and how we deal with it.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: We have a problem. I am deeply concerned that our health service is falling behind when it comes to access to advanced cancer treatments, modern medicine and orphan drugs. Science innovation, as the Taoiseach knows, is moving at an extraordinary pace. New oncology medicines are helping people to live longer and survive cancer. In the context of diseases that once involved devastating outcomes, people now retain a far better quality of life after treatment. However, in Ireland, access depends far too often on whether people have private health insurance. This is not the health system we want. It is not the health system Sláintecare envisioned either. We are increasingly seeing a two-tier system

in cancer care. If people have private cover, they can often access new treatments earlier. On the other hand, those who rely on the public system may face delays and fewer options. I accept that more money is going into access to drugs than ever before. However, the next cancer strategy has to keep pace with science. The reimbursement schemes have to improve.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a pertinent and important issue. There is no question but that medicines are advancing at a rapid pace. In the context of therapeutics and more generally in the area of oncology, there are new drugs, perhaps every five years in some instances. Health systems all over the world are struggling to keep pace with the rapidity of change. Thankfully, survival rates relating to cancer are increasing all round because of the advances that have been made.

I have engaged in discussions with the Minister on this matter. Working with the national cancer control programme, we need to look at how we can deal with the rapidity and volume of new drugs coming on stream. Orphan drugs, which may not relate to cancer alone and which may be used to treat a range of other conditions, are going through similar technology assessments. The process is taking a long time. We need the co-operation of the companies involved in terms of dealing sensibly and practically with this, but there is no doubt that it is a growing issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Sherlock.

The Taoiseach: Our public cancer centres are good. The Deputy is making a point about private access to medicine and new drugs. That is where the differential happens.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: What exactly did the Taoiseach mean when he said migration has hugely impacted homelessness? When people hear that, they think the Taoiseach is in some way trying to minimise or dismiss the problem that is affecting more than 12,500 people in Dublin and thousands more who are couch-surfing, who are suffering and who do not have homes at this time. The people coming to my clinic are both Irish born and individuals who have made their lives here. Their stories are harrowing. The family of a Dublin Bus driver are being forced to live in emergency accommodation. A customs officer - someone who came here from another country many years ago and who wants to get citizenship - has received a notice to quit. These are real people with real jobs. We need to hear that the Taoiseach's sympathy and understanding are as much with Irish people who are homeless as it is with those who come to this country to make their lives here, and that action will be taken accordingly.

The Taoiseach: That is a fair point except, but we all need to be honest about it. We need to understand the problem and the challenge. When I refer to migration, I am not blaming anyone. I am simply stating the fact that more than 50% - it is even higher in the Dublin area - are non-Irish citizens. That is just the reality. The composition of homelessness has changed. That is all I am saying. That realisation then informs different responses. When, for example, we came forward with the exemptions for developments in gardens and so on, our proposal was lampooned. However, that proposal could provide a solution for a certain group of people. Everything that increases supply will help us to deal with this matter. Some Europeans who

have come here have an entitlement to emergency homes without being entitled to local authority houses or social housing. There are issues here.

The Deputy can attack us for even mentioning what I referred to. She cannot attack us just for mentioning the unmentionable.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We need to understand the composition of homelessness.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Aird.

The Taoiseach: It is much different from what it was ten years ago-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach

The Taoiseach: -----but we still have to support those in emergency accommodation. That is what I am saying.

Deputy William Aird: The fuel allowance scheme is a critical support for many pensioners who are on limited incomes. I acknowledge that must be clear eligibility criteria in respect of payments of this nature. However, an inconsistency in the current system has been brought to my attention. In the case of a pensioner whose adult child has moved back into the family home, if that child is not dependent and is working, the pensioner is deemed ineligible for the fuel allowance under the current rules. At the same time, an eligible person can rent a room to a stranger and earn up to €14,000 per year under the rent-a-room scheme without it affecting their eligibility for the fuel allowance. In the context of the housing crisis, the Taoiseach and I know of many cases where adult children have had to move back in with their elderly parents. It is unfair that these families are being penalised. I ask that this matter be reviewed in order to ensure pensioners will not be disadvantaged because they are providing accommodation to their children.

The Taoiseach: This is a complex matter, particular as it relates to those who are dependent. Where would the Deputy draw the line in devising a scheme for fuel allowance? It could be broadened exponentially. We have already expanded it to those on the working family payment. Approximately 470,000 people are now entitled to the fuel allowance. We have expanded it significantly from where it was.

I will raise the point the Deputy made with the Minister for Social Protection, but it is not easy. The Deputy is introducing the idea that people working in a house would be entitled to the fuel allowance.

Deputy William Aird: No, I am talking about a person who had to come home. The individual involved is a nurse.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: I know, but that person would be working.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, we do not allow back and forth.

The Taoiseach: How can we differentiate between-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not allow it.

Deputy William Aird: Two thousand euro a month for a house in Portlaoise.

The Taoiseach: I hear the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the rules are the rules.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I again wish to raise the issue of the shortage of GPs again, particularly in the context of Laois. There is a shortage of GPs in the main towns across the county. There is a problem for medical card and non-medical card patients, including families with children.

In the past few days two families tried to get a GP in Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Mountmellick. One parent had to take time off work to go to a practice in Dublin. People are going to the accident and emergency unit with common illnesses for treatment. That is what is happening. There is a public health issue here. We have had a huge population increase. A HSE reply of one sentence stated that the HSE was not in a position to advise on the number of private GP practices providing primary care in County Laois. I am not blaming the HSE but because of the system, we rely solely on the private ones and that kind of an answer does not suffice. It cannot be a hands-off approach.

I am aware a strategic review is under way. That review is supposed to be considering directly employed GPs. Where there are areas of serious population growth such as County Laois, I ask that the Government employ a few directly employed GPs to provide care.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister was down last week. We had the opening of the accident and emergency unit but it is getting clogged with people who should be getting treated in primary care.

The Taoiseach: Basically, we are spending about €1 billion annually in general practice to support patients. Some 43% of the population now has access to free GP care and Government investment has significantly increased. There is a strategic review of general practice currently under way, and I presume it will take on board some of the issues the Deputy has raised in terms of growth areas in population and the need for greater access to GPs more generally. There has also been increased access to pharmacy capacities in respect of some conditions. There are about eight conditions pharmacists can now diagnose and prescribe treatment for.

We have to become more flexible in how we enable people to access primary care services. We have invested significantly in general practice. Under the 2019 GP agreement, an extra €211 million was put in and a further €130 million under the 2023 GP agreement.

Appointment of Ordinary Members of An Coimisiún Toghcháin: Motion

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, noting that on 21st April, 2026, the Government nominated Mr. Lee Komito and Mr. Ross Frenett for appointment by the President to be Ordinary members of *An Coimisiún Toghcháin*, recommends that, pursuant to section 9(9) of the Electoral Reform Act 2022, Mr. Lee Komito and Mr. Ross Frenett be appointed by the President to be Ordinary members of *An Coimisiún Toghcháin*.

Question put and agreed to.

Twelfth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 27th May, 2026, approves the Twelfth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd May, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [12360/26]

2. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [12362/26]

3. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [12363/26]

4. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [12364/26]

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [26722/26]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [34876/26]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [34879/26]

8. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [36507/26]

9. **Deputy Liam Quaid** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [36951/26]

10. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [36953/26]

11. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [36988/26]

12. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [37494/26]

13. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [37534/26]

14. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [37563/26]

15. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [38893/26]

16. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [38895/26]

17. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39179/26]

18. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39343/26]

19. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39395/26]

20. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39587/26]

21. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39588/26]

22. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next [39593/26]

23. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39716/26]

24. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [39719/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Question Nos. 1 to 24, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on infrastructure met last week on Monday, 18 May. The Cabinet committee works to drive infrastructure delivery and implementation of the national development plan. From the start, we have set out our ambition to deliver a step change in Ireland's infrastructure. The revised national development plan sets out unprecedented investment of over €275 billion for critical infrastructure across the country to 2035, including an overall investment of €112 billion up to 2030. This includes funding for major infrastructural projects in transport, water and energy, which will support our continued development, notably in enabling the delivery of much needed housing at scale, but also to improve competitiveness and sustainability. In the coming years, we will see over €24 billion NDP funding invested in key transport programmes across our country, along with €12.2 billion for the water sector to support water quality, rural water services, unlock housing and upgrade water and wastewater infrastructure. In energy, the landmark investment of up to €18.9 billion approved by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities in its price review 6, supported by Government investment of €3.5 billion equity, will allow us to upgrade Ireland's existing electricity infrastructure and deliver critical new infrastructure to meet future demand. This is the largest single investment in the country's electricity network in its history.

Large, once-in-a-generation projects, such as MetroLink and the greater Dublin drainage scheme, are advancing at pace having secured planning, and they are now moving with momentum to enable construction to commence in the next few years. To ensure we get maximum value out of the investment we are making, we are reforming our delivery mechanisms so that these critical programmes are brought to fruition as efficiently and as quickly as possible.

The Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan sets out 30 high-impact reforms to speed and scale up delivery of homes, roads, public transport, water and wastewater plants and energy infrastructure. It includes legislative reforms to balance individual rights with the public interest, measures to simplify regulation and consenting systems, and to cut administrative burdens and red tape. Strong progress is being made and impacts are becoming clear. Twenty-six weeks were saved on the Waterford wastewater treatment plant due to measures implemented to accelerate projects through consenting processes. System changes have also resulted in Uisce Éireann changing the project commissioning of the greater Dublin drainage scheme, resulting in a saving of 12 months. Timelines for marine area consents are now

reduced by 30% for bodies classified as "fit and proper". Further progress will be made over the current quarter.

The Critical Infrastructure Bill will fast-track the approval processes for strategically important projects and the scale of fees for environmental judicial reviews will give a clearer cost framework for applicants and the taxpayer. A large number of measures are being implemented to continue our reform agenda.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Our economy is strong and our population is growing, and we are building a robust infrastructural backbone to support this. We are seizing the opportunity now to invest for the benefit of current and future generations.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Taoiseach. I raise the issue of Cork BusConnects project. As the Taoiseach knows, Cork is a growing city but every day people are facing long commutes, unreliable journey times, whether that is in a private car or on public transport, and we have roads that simply cannot take additional capacity. BusConnects offers a real choice but unfortunately it is almost stagnant in terms of its delivery and implementation. If it is moving, it is at a glacial pace. It was first mooted in July 2021 with the first concept consultation. It is now almost five years later and the process has been extremely frustrating. I seriously question the use of the €75 million the NTA has spent on BusConnects to date. It needs to be driven towards delivery and I ask the Taoiseach to please take this matter up.

Deputy Tony McCormack: From my work on the infrastructure committee, it is clear that Government is putting major investment and the right frameworks in place, particularly through the work the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has done on infrastructure legislation; the work the Minister, Deputy Browne, is doing in housing delivery; and that of the Taoiseach himself and his Department. The Government is now providing a huge amount of money to the likes of Uisce Éireann over the next five years, which is a very significant level of investment. However, concerns continue to arise around whether the organisation currently has the operational capacity, technical expertise and the management structures needed to deliver these projects. Will the Taoiseach outline what further steps are being taken to strengthen delivery?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: We have raised on the floor of the House previously the importance attached to DART+ South West for my constituency. I am pleased that in the interactions I have had with the Minister for Transport on the floor of the Dáil that he has indicated a willingness to try to bring this forward for delivery ahead of the expected timeframe. I ask again for the Taoiseach's support in ensuring that does happen. It is pivotal that it happens for my constituency and the rapidly growing communities in Lucan, Clondalkin, Adamstown and Clonburris, and that in the interim sufficient bus services are put in place to make sure we give people the option so they do not have to rely on the private car.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I brought up the issue before of Scoil Bhríde in Shelagh. It is a national school that needs further accommodation. Many parents have been on to me and I

have spoken to the school principal and many staff members. The Taoiseach has corresponded but we still do not have the timelines that are necessary and the promises from the planning and building unit, so I request that that would happen. It is a school that would have had to close today. I am requesting that the Taoiseach would add to my voice on the need for Uisce Éireann to deal with the issue of water supply outages in that area and the significant issues that exist. A meeting is needed with Uisce Éireann.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On 13 May, the *Irish Independent* reported that DLR Properties Ltd., a wholly owned subsidiary of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, but which, incredibly, councillors have no control over and no say in whatsoever, put up for sale on the private market land in Cherrywood, which is zoned for more than 1,000 units of housing. It is shocking that the State - the only political representation on it is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - is selling off land that could be used for housing in the midst of a housing crisis.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is hard to think of community infrastructure more important than our postal services. It, therefore, makes no sense whatsoever that the sorting office for Dublin 16 is being moved out of Dublin 16, from Edmondstown to Lucan. It will be a disaster for workers who have built their lives around the fact that they live near where they work, and it will result in massively worsened postal services because the letters and packets will get stuck on the M50.

The routes will not get finished and, potentially, people will have to go all the way to Lucan to pick up their packages. Will the Taoiseach join me in urging An Post to sit down and meet representatives of the community and reverse this disastrous decision?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: A short drive from here is the Poolbeg area. The Irish Glass Bottle site is expected to have about 10,000 residents at peak when it is completed but there is a major traffic congestion problem. If the Taoiseach tried to go there this afternoon, he would experience it. We are waiting on the Poolbeg Luas. There was a report saying it could be delivered by 2030 and I want to understand why it will not be. Why is it not in the national development plan? What will the Government do to accelerate infrastructure in this area, which badly needs it?

Deputy James Geoghegan: That is two for Poolbeg because I will also raise the extension of the Luas to Poolbeg. I can tell Deputy Hayes that I have had engagement with the NTA and the project is progressing at pace. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, hopes to go to public consultation early in the new year. I re-emphasise the need for that project. It is not a very large project - a couple of kilometres - but it would make a difference to an area where there will be 10,000 people living and potentially an additional 10,000 people working. TII has confirmed that there is a demand for the extension.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Geoghegan might communicate with Deputy Hayes on that one.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I did.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: A woman attended a public meeting I held last week and she spoke about her son being out of school for two years. He is at home and is smashing things up. She has had to give up her job, as is often the case with people whose children have additional needs. We need a second special school in Dublin 15 and in Dublin West. Cork, Limerick and Blanchardstown have comparable populations, yet we have one special school whereas Limerick and Cork have numerous. This is a recommendation of the task force. How will this infrastructure be provided?

Deputy Mark Ward: DART+ South West will bring DART services through Clondalkin, Lucan and Adamstown. Construction was expected to start in 2025, but it has been delayed to 2030 at the earliest. This project would enable 20,000 passengers from Clondalkin, Lucan and Adamstown to go each way every hour. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said the delay was interlinked with another project. I do not believe that is the case. It is ultimately down to funding from central government to the NTA. Will the Taoiseach confirm this? Will the Government prioritise the construction of DART+ South West?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Government is spending €5 million on building a temporary platform at Adare for the Ryder Cup, yet there is a €35 million missing link between that temporary platform and Limerick Colbert Station. As a result, the Government is spending €5 million on a temporary platform that will only be able to go from Adare to Limerick Junction, bypassing Limerick city, which is a 15-minute drive away. Should the link not be funded - the €35 million Kerry curve - to allow services into Limerick city?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This week, Knock airport will celebrate its 40th anniversary. It is a huge milestone for Mayo and the wider western region. I congratulate Joe Gilmore and all the staff and board of Knock airport. At a time when many thought it was impossible, Monsignor James Horan showed extraordinary vision and determination to make Knock airport a reality. He took the "Build it and they will come" approach and history has proven him right. Thousands of jobs, tourism opportunities and vital international connectivity have come to the region. Will the Government improve connectivity around the airport? The western rail corridor----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy left out the main supporters, the people who made it happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, we do not have time. I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I raise the unscheduled water outages in Ashbourne, County Meath. They are hugely frustrating and increasingly common. People who have lived in the area for decades say it has never been worse. There is a variety of issues: interruptions at the treatment plant, reduced levels in the reservoirs and problems with pumps. However, the main issue is the large and ageing network that has not been invested in. To add insult to injury, Uisce Éireann's communication is a disgrace. What is the Taoiseach doing to address these outages in Ashbourne? Will he advance Sinn Féin's Water Services (Amendment) Bill 2025 to hold Uisce Éireann to account?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Will the Government establish new designated parking bays at motorway junctions to support car-pooling and curtail rising costs for commuters? The basic infrastructure to support car-pooling does not exist in many parts of the country. Motorists are already using motorway junctions as informal meeting points. They pull in on hard shoulders in Paulstown, Mullinavat, Castledermot, Knocktopher and Danesfort. Provision of spaces with safe access, lighting and basic security would immediately reduce dangerous stopping practices and lower commuting costs and congestion. The solution would play into existing Government policy aimed at reducing emissions, tackling congestion and supporting more sustainable travel.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Iarnród Éireann cannot organise a cup of tea to be sold on its commuter trains from Galway or Sligo but it can incinerate €50 million on a failed IT system. This is another disgusting waste of money in our country. You might as well have loaded that €50 million onto a bonfire and set it alight. Does the Taoiseach understand the time it took for those workers to earn the income to pay the tax that has been frittered away? This would not be tolerated in any other walk of life. Will the Taoiseach make sure that the individual responsible for this is removed from their job?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The new battery electric DART to Wicklow town was first promised in 2019 by then Minister, Shane Ross. His expectation was that Wicklow would see that electric DART by 2023. In 2021, a local Government backbencher stated that the carriages would be operational by 2025. In 2022, the former Minister, Stephen Donnelly, announced that the electric DART would be operational by 2026. In February 2025, the date was pushed back to 2028. Last year, it was pushed back again to 2029. It was announced last month that Irish Rail had gone out to tender for this battery electric DART extension. Will the Taoiseach confirm that it is still the case that the DART will be operational by 2029?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raise Carrabane National School in County Galway. Two weeks ago, I visited the school. The conditions are shocking. There are prefab buildings quite literally falling apart. People have been waiting 20 years for their new school building but it has been delayed again and again by the Department. It is on the priority list but people still do not have clarity as to when it will go to construction. Local families and children should not have to put up with this. They deserve an awful lot better. Will the Taoiseach ensure that this project gets the go-ahead and is prioritised?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It is no surprise that I am discussing energy costs again. The frustration I have today is that the Climate Change Advisory Council again warned the climate and energy committee that Ireland remained exposed to global fossil fuel shocks because of renewable roll-out. At the same time, I have been contacted regarding a proposed infrastructure crossing charge from an already built solar farm being applied by a semi-State body - an unpublished charging structure of €20,000 per megawatt. It is a ridiculous amount to be giving to a renewable project that goes up to €465,000. That end cost will go to the Irish public. CIÉ needs to be investigated.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has 21 Members to respond to, please. He has 21 answers to give, believe it or not.

The Taoiseach: Did 21 speak? I thank them all.

Deputy McGrath began on Cork BusConnects. I am familiar with it and may have been responsible for some of the delays in terms of the consultation required with residents and communities. The initial preferred routes that the NTA produced created huge anxiety and stress for many families across the board and we all had to intervene to try to get common sense. Then, lo and behold, there were changed routes. There is an issue with how BusConnects does that. I have had that issue with BusConnects. Very often in the beginning of the process, you get the worst case scenario put out there. People get really stressed and then, lo and behold, a new solution is arrived at. One wonders whether the new solution was in the bottom drawer all along. I do not want to be too unreasonable but as public representatives, I think we have all experienced that. Sometimes, there is no need to create all that stress.

Legislative capacity has now been given to the NTA to be the body with overall responsibility for the roll-out of BusConnects in Cork. It is making progress, at long last. To be fair, there was a lot of consultation and many residents' organisations and communities had issues with residential amenities, potential CPOs, all of that. There is an evaluation to be done and lessons to be learned from how that happened. However, I take the Deputy's point. It was 2021 and it is now 2026.

Deputy McCormack spoke of Uisce Éireann, accountability and so on. There is an issue there and many public representatives are not happy with the level of accountability of Uisce Éireann.

It is neither a semi-State in terms of Dáil questions and so on, but there needs to be a quicker response to public representatives, particularly Members of Dáil Éireann, who are elected by the people, vote money in respect of Uisce Éireann and need a more simplified and straightforward avenue of communication on various projects and issues, and also on the acceleration of projects. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, has spoken to the Deputy. There has been a lot of progress made on some of the big projects, but we need to get more on the towns-based ones in terms of wastewater treatment solutions, and even more than that.

In response to Deputy Shane Moynihan, I am fully behind DART+ South West. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I got very positive feedback that it would be accelerated beyond what was originally given, and I am confident that funding will be found. My view is that the funding will be there to enable DART+ South West to happen because a lot of housing will depend on it as well. All of the development plans along that route envisage very substantial housing projects but they cannot happen if DART+ South West does not happen, so I think it will happen. In the interim, I hear what the Deputy is saying in respect of bus services being advanced.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú on Scoil Bhríde, he is persistent. I will talk to the Minister for education. There is a broader issue around capital, but I will raise specific schools with the Minister. The Deputy has raised that school with me and I will talk to the Minister for education in respect of that.

The Deputy said there was an Uisce Éireann connection to it-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The water is out. There are a huge number of issues, including with pumps. If the Taoiseach could follow up on this, a meeting is needed.

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not have time for these things. We have to be fair to other Members.

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, I presume that the 1,000 housing units are being sold on with a view to development for housing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why sell it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Taoiseach. This is Taoiseach's Questions; there is no back and forth.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is publicly owned.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It was a rhetorical question.

The Taoiseach: I asked that rhetorically.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know, but rhetorical or not, will the Taoiseach get on with it, please?

The Taoiseach: I cannot help the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, I can, so keep going.

The Taoiseach: ----- energetic responses from Deputy Boyd Barrett. He is engaged anyway. He is on every word I am saying, which is important, too. I am not being facetious about the matter, but I presume and hope that is the case and I will engage with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council to make sure that it will go for housing and that the 1,000 houses will be built because we need those 1,000 houses as well.

In response to Deputy Paul Murphy, there are various reforms in An Post. I have talked to An Post. The Deputy has raised the issue. It probably has its reasons it is doing what it is doing, and it remains to be seen whether that will be as disastrous as the Deputy suggests, but I will engage with An Post on the issue.

Deputy Hayes raised the issue of 10,000 homes in Poolbeg and that he needed a Poolbeg Luas. That was followed quickly by Deputy Geoghegan, who said that it was happening.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: That would be an update. It is not in the national development plan, NDP.

The Taoiseach: It is happening anyway, but Deputy Hayes said that it was not happening at all and the Deputy Geoghegan said it was. The Taoiseach now believes that it may be

happening. It is important. It is a huge housing development, and we obviously need public transport to service it and the Luas would be an outstanding facilitation of that.

In response to Deputy Coppinger, I will talk to the Minister. If it is recommended by the task force that we need a second special school in the area, I would support of that. I will see whether the Minister can advance that or not.

In response to Deputy Ward, I think I have dealt comprehensively with DART+ South West. I am supportive of it and we are making good progress on it. The funding is there and will be there for it.

In response to Deputy Sheehan, he should acknowledge the extraordinary funding that is going into Adare on all fronts because of the Ryder Cup. There is a lot of investment across the board in lots of services, roads-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We need the train to connect to Limerick.

The Taoiseach: -----transport, rail. I do not know if the Deputy would be playing golf there, but Adare is doing well, and that is no harm for that region either.

In response to the Deputy Conway-Walsh, I was very disappointed that she never mentioned Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I just could not bring myself to do it.

The Taoiseach: Fianna Fáil built Knock airport - everybody knows that - with Monsignor Horan, and she could not mention Fianna Fáil. She could not mention Charles Haughey. Monsignor Horan embraced him when he went there to dig the old sod. Everyone said we were stupid, all of the media and the Opposition. They all said that it was nonsense and asked how bad and stupid could we get.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Taoiseach is turning into Bertie with these answers.

The Taoiseach: Lo and behold, 40 years later, it is still doing very well and the Deputy could not mention Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I only had 30 seconds.

The Taoiseach: Deputy O'Rourke asked about Ashbourne and the treatment plant.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It was water.

The Taoiseach: We have put huge investment into Uisce Éireann. It is up to Uisce Éireann to get on with it and start delivering. It has no issue with funding now and that is clear.

In response to Deputy Cleere, it is an interesting proposal and idea. I will talk to TII. It would be responsible for that, but I hear what he is saying. Car-pooling is something that we are encouraging. We need to give capacity to enable that to happen.

In response to Deputy Tóibín-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some €50 million was wasted.

The Taoiseach: Yes. I will talk to the Minister to get behind that to get the full details around that IT system and what the issue has been, as well for full accountability in respect of that project.

Deputy Whitmore asked about the DART to Wicklow town. She gave a long timeline and then she said at the end that it had gone out for tender. If it has gone out for tender, we are in business, and I think it will progress. The precise timeline depends on the tender process and so on, but I think it is going to happen, notwithstanding the long lead-in time that the Deputy outlined there.

In response to Deputy O'Hara, I will raise the national school in Carrabane with the Minister.

In response to Deputy Heneghan, I need the background to the issue from him, but I hear what he is saying. We should not be exacerbating the costs for what are practical and important solutions to our energy crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it.

Northern Ireland

25. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [14895/26]

26. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [14896/26]

27. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [14897/26]

28. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [26723/26]

29. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [38775/26]

30. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [38894/26]

31. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [38896/26]

32. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [38899/26]

33. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [39180/26]

34. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [39344/26]

35. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [39589/26]

36. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department [39717/26]

37. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [37321/26]

An Ceann Comhairle: We will cut the Taoiseach's reply to a minute and a half to stay on time.

The Taoiseach: I have so much to say.

An Ceann Comhairle: The remainder will be read into the record.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 25 to 37, inclusive, together.

Our programme for Government sets out an ambitious agenda for building our shared island backed by our €2 billion commitment to the shared island fund out to 2035. We are forging ahead with the investment and co-operation agenda across all sectors.

In November, the Government made a funding commitment of over €50 million from the shared island fund to resource ten new island-wide programmes over the next five years, including on media, heritage, emergency management, greenways and air transport.

In December, the Minister for enterprise and employment and I announced six projects under the €20 million shared island sustainability capital grant scheme, supporting six firms across the island and leveraging over €60 million in private capital investment for decarbonisation.

Some €2 million was announced by the Minister for foreign affairs under the shared island civic society fund for 64 cross-Border community projects and a further call for applications opened in April.

In January, the Minister for Education and Youth and her Northern Ireland counterpart announced the shared island teachers research exchange, providing educators with a digital community platform for professional learning and collaboration, and in April announced the expansion of the shared island creative connections programme to additional schools.

In February, we announced over €2.5 million for 13 projects that enhance visitor experiences along the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coastal Route as part of the shared island tourism brand project.

Also in February, the Minister for agriculture, food, fisheries and the marine and his Northern Ireland counterpart launched the shared island cross-Border co-operation programme on tackling bovine TB on a regional basis.

In March, the Minister for justice convened a conference in Drogheda, with policing, education and social care representatives from North and South, in co-operation with Northern Ireland partners, on tackling domestic and gender-based violence.

Also in March, the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht announced capital funding of €6.2 million for shared island projects to support the Irish language and Ulster Scots culture, heritage and language.

In addition, five new shared island funding calls have opened since the start of the year: the Shared Home Place: Diaspora Voices initiative to bring together Irish people abroad, from all traditions, to explore shared heritage and place-based connections; Culture Ireland's new shared island touring, production and platforms fund to support showcasing, international touring and co-productions by artists from across the island; the Arts Council's shared island touring scheme to support cross-Border productions and island-wide creative partnerships; a fourth programme on female entrepreneurship under the shared island enterprise scheme; and a new call as part of the creative climate action fund.

Additionally, the shared island research programme continues to provide high-quality evidence and analysis. In December, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance launched a new annual ESRI report series, entitled "Assessing economic trends in Ireland and Northern Ireland". On 2 April, an ESRI shared island report was published on disability rates across the island of Ireland, the first such analysis. ESRI shared island reports on health inequalities, gender-based violence, regional productivity and regional income disparities are in preparation for publication in the second half of the year.

Through the shared island initiative, the Government is investing in strategic all-island co-operation, developing our partnerships with the Executive, including through the North-South Ministerial Council, and with the UK Government.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

We are fostering deeper connections and mutual understanding across all communities and traditions of this island.

4 o'clock

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. The progressive shared island initiative is bringing to fruition many cross-Border and all-Ireland projects that many of us

thought would never be realised. The National Economic and Social Council, the ESRI and some universities have been enabled to carry out very substantial comprehensive studies through shared island funding. Through the office of An Taoiseach and in various parliamentary questions, I have asked if the National Economic and Social Council will undertake a study of the challenges facing the central Border region, North and South, and also identify the opportunities for further economic development. I have been a representative in the southern Ulster counties for some time. I saw the challenges with the currency fluctuations and the movement of trade that devastated our local economy over many years. We should be prepared for turbulence in the economy that may arise but that nobody can readily predict. The current geopolitical uncertainty clearly shows the economic challenges that can arise from such turbulence.

As the Taoiseach will know, I see at first hand the value and importance of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement as a representative of southern Ulster counties. Thankfully, we have one economy now - the all-Ireland economy. However, the central Border region of Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh is vulnerable because it is highly dependent on a small number of particular sectors, such as food, farming, construction products and tourism. We should undertake comprehensive studies to identify the challenges but also the opportunities to ensure our central Border region is not disadvantaged.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Funding for the shared island initiative - an initiative brought in by the Taoiseach in 2020 - increased by €1 billion in the last budget, which is very welcome. It has supported a wide range of projects, cultural and community groups and infrastructural projects, which the Taoiseach outlined in his reply. As Chair of the Good Friday Agreement committee, I have seen first hand the benefit and improvements it has made and, indeed, the popularity of the funding itself. Some €100 million of the shared island fund is for a new multi-annual programme that deepens co-operation and connections across the island. The Taoiseach mentioned sustainable tourism, nature restoration, the important Dublin-Derry airlink service and the shared island media fund. Thirteen new tourism projects were approved under the shared island coast to coast capital investment scheme worth €2.7 million. In sport, about which I have spoken to the Taoiseach previously, there is €1.9 million in funding under the shared island civic society fund. The sport element is so important to communities, reconciliation and a greater understanding across the island. It is something that we should be looking to fund further. Hopefully, in the Taoiseach's response, he might outline how best it can be done under the shared island funding.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The shared island unit has been a major success under the Taoiseach's stewardship. A lot of money, co-operation and good initiatives have taken place. I wish to raise an issue that I hope the Taoiseach will discuss with his counterparts at some point. At the moment, there are 6,445 Irish artefacts held in the British Museum. I know the Taoiseach is very interested in history, as am I. I would not have a major problem if those items were on display. History is a global commodity. I would like to think if I was in London with my kids that they could go into the British Museum and see Irish artefacts. Likewise, we should be able to see artefacts from all over the world. However, most of these are held in archive boxes never to be seen. Some of them at least could be repatriated to Ireland. There could be maybe some dialogue on that. Some of them could be brought to local museums. Some of them have been bought, acquired or looted over the years. It would be good to have dialogue

at this point. The Egyptian Government has ongoing dialogue with the British Museum about the Rosetta Stone. I would love to see some dialogue about some of these artefacts. We cannot paint them all with the one brush. From an Irish perspective, I would like some artefacts to be seen globally.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to raise the murder of Seamus Ludlow on 2 May 1976. We are beyond 50 years. We are talking about a family that has been failed. The initial Garda investigation shut up shop within three weeks. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, RUC, provided the names of those believed to be involved back in 1979. We are talking about loyalists and some of them were members of the British Army. They were questioned in 1998 by the RUC. Admissions were made in relation to a number of them being there when the murder happened. We have seen no action over the years. The family have had to go to court. They have been to Europe. The family have not been sufficiently supported. They had a moment of hope with a new investigation but what they discovered was a new witness, who was not even questioned during that investigation, had seen suspicious activity in a car the morning Seamus was found that turned out to be connected to SAS incursion that happened soon after in Omeath. This is not acceptable in any way, shape or form. There is a need for the Minister for justice and Garda Commissioner to meet the family who have been failed for far too long.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The moniker for the Fianna Fáil Party is the Republican Party. What is the Taoiseach's plan to end partition? There is a huge set of tricky issues here. How do we integrate a health service? How do we think about housing? Property prices are about a half or third in Northern Ireland. How do we think about public transport? How do we think about constitutional changes? It does not seem like there is any planning happening in the Taoiseach's Department. That is a real challenge for many people who believe that should be something that we aim towards. In fact, it is an aim in the Good Friday Agreement with the consent of the communities, North and South. Without a plan, it is almost impossible to convince anyone that will happen, either North or South. How is the Government going to plan for all these public bodies and public services to be integrated in a future united Ireland?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Nine days ago, hundreds of people marched to Lough Neagh to protest the ecocide of our largest lake. Last year, the EPA published research on 35 lakes in the South. Two thirds are classed as at risk under the water framework directive. Seven important Irish lakes are found to be at high risk of Lough Neagh-type toxic algae blooms, including loughs Derg, Ramor, Sheelin, Sillan, Muckno and Naglack. Lady's Island in Wexford where toxic blue-green algae have all but killed the lake was not included in the research. The EPA said that agricultural diffused pollution is the most important pressure on most Irish water bodies. It said that phosphorus run-off from pasture-based farming is the most important land-based factor behind algae blooms significantly impacting three quarters of our lakes. The EPA report mentions limiting phosphorus application by farmers, controlling livestock access and safely storing slurry and manure. It recommended creating a harmful algae bloom action plan for Irish lakes. Where is the plan? What is the Government going to do to stop pollution from agriculture devastating more of our lakes like what has happened in Lough Neagh and Lady's Island?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Stormont is in big trouble. Stormont is in a mess. It is limping on day to day currently. In most of the human indicators in terms of quality of life, the people in the North of Ireland are falling currently. In terms of investment in education, hospital services, children's services and disabilities, money is being reduced on an annual basis. Public services are starting to grind to a halt. There is no doubt that the Sinn Féin, DUP and Alliance Executive is not delivering for the people but Stormont cannot even agree on budget at the moment it is in such trouble. A large part of this problem is because Stormont cannot raise its own funds. It can only raise about 5% of its own income. Wales can raise 10% and Scotland can raise 20%. I asked the Taoiseach a question a number of years ago in relation to the reform of Stormont. At that stage, the Taoiseach agreed with me that it needs to be reformed but he said it was too close to the next Stormont election to do so. Here we are, one year out from the next Stormont election and no work has been done on reform. This is serious. What can we do to reform so that Stormont functions properly and that it can raise its own funds like the other devolved administrations?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The North-South interconnector is now delayed until 2031. By Government estimates, it will cost up to €100 million. To tie back into what I was saying earlier, the semi-State company's own decarbonising strategy is dependent on 80% of renewables. The Taoiseach is aware of CIÉ. I did not get to the end of my contribution. On the North-South interconnector and private wires, these two were complementary to each other. The main thing is about taking the stress and strain off the grid while these interconnectors are waiting for connection. I welcome the developments in the Celtic interconnector. There have been some hurdles but there always are going to be with infrastructure. It is moving a lot quicker than the North-South interconnector.

I heard the Taoiseach mention in the House that we need to stop using infrastructure as a political football, worrying about election cycle thinking. If we are going to reduce the entire project cost by using a different method, politicians need to give the real impact of that to their communities. At the end of the day, it is the public and those local households that are going to be paying higher energy costs by these projects being delayed.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for their commentary. Deputy Brendan Smith raised the studies that have been under way by the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, and the ESRI under shared island. There is a range of studies. Never before in the history of the State have we had such a body of research commissioned and completed on the differences between systems in Northern Ireland, be it the health service, education and right across the board, and those in the Republic. There is a very good body of research. The Deputy made a very good suggestion that we would task the NESC with doing a more fundamental economic and social study around the central Border economic corridor. I will bring that idea to the shared island unit and NESC and I will come back to the Deputy on it. It is a positive and constructive idea. There are specific challenges in the area in respect of the regional economic make-up, in terms of farming, food, construction and other areas. We could perhaps design a study for NESC to do on that issue and in that area.

I thank Deputy Cormac Devlin for his role as Chair of the Good Friday committee. He is very much engaged in all of these issues and very much informed about them. It is interesting that, if you take those tourism projects, we have increased passenger traffic on the Dublin-

Belfast rail line by 40%. The shops and retailers in the North are doing much better now than they would have been doing if the shared island initiative had not invested in the rail service. This investment has made it an hourly service and, *vice versa*, people are coming to the Republic more and there are greater connections between people, which is very important. Recently, under the shared island initiative I met people from the west of Ireland involved in knitting and other crafts and there were also people from loyalist east Belfast. Some people from both groups had never been to the other part of the island. For some, it was their first time being in Belfast and for others it was their first time being in Dublin. People talk about unity and all of that, but if we do not increase that level of interaction between people so that they can get to know each other a bit better and understand each other, then we are at nothing.

The Dublin-Derry PSO air service will be funded by the shared island initiative. The Minister of Transport will bring in that public service obligation air service in October of this year. This will be of great value to Derry in particular because the north west has lacked connectivity. The A5 has been snarled in planning and so on. We will have some more announcements under the shared island initiative for a rail service to the north west but it is not as comprehensive as the Dublin-Belfast line, for example. We have done a lot on tourism. The Narrow Water Bridge will transform Carlingford Lough and the Mourne Mountains. That will be completed late next year and it will be a major, iconic manifestation of the investment from the shared island project and initiative.

Deputy Crowe proposed a very interesting idea. He articulated it in a very measured way, unlike other times, but I think he is on to something. I was in France last week and we agreed a project with the French authorities to digitise some Irish archives in France. For example, in Vincennes, there are original letters from Wolfe Tone, including his last letter to the French authorities, asking them to look after his wife and family because he had served the French army in the cause of Ireland. There are also documents relating to Samuel Beckett's role in the French resistance. All of that is in documentation, in French, and sometimes our historians and other interested people do not get access to it. We are going to digitise it and make it available to the public more generally. In terms of Britain, I will follow up on what the Deputy said because he made a very good point. Some of it is artefacts and some of it is archival material. Some of it is online and a lot of people can access it but we could do better in terms of an east-west relationship. Under the UK-Ireland annual summits we now have agreed cultural exchanges. There will be theatrical performances by the Abbey Theatre and others in the UK and *vice versa*. I take the Deputy's point that there is a lot of stuff buried in archives or storerooms that has not seen the light of day. The real issue is that the Deputy wants access to these artefacts and materials for everybody on the island of Ireland if they are held in Britain. That would be a good first step and then material could be exchanged and sent on loan to various museums and libraries. It is a very good idea and I will pursue it.

I assure Deputy Ó Murchú that again I will talk to the authorities about the murder of Seamus Ludlow. I do not have the latest details the Deputy has regarding new witnesses and so forth.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will send them on.

The Taoiseach: Whether it falls within the legacy framework or not, that is perhaps the best avenue to pursue it. If we can get the legislation completed in Westminster and here, we will.

That is an important aspect of it. Even though it happened in 1976 the trauma goes on for the second generation - the grandchildren, cousins and nieces - and the need for closure continues with each succeeding generation.

To Deputy Hayes I would say that the most fundamental prerequisite for the unity of the Irish people is reconciliation. We need to build on relationships and really develop them. We also need reform of the Good Friday Agreement in respect of strand 1, which is about how Stormont works. I said this about three years ago at the Alliance Party's annual dinner. The SDLP announced reform plans. Sinn Féin is saying it will announce reform plans. The one party that is opposed to reform plans at the moment or does not believe in the need for it is the DUP. That is an important evolution that we would make politics a bit more normal in terms of where we are now in the configuration of parties and a wider spectrum of views at the moment than may have been there at the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, so there has been a significant degree of evolution. Fianna Fáil was very much involved in the Good Friday Agreement and the Downing Street Declaration. It is a passion for the party and something we are deeply committed to. We have left our mark, along with others, in respect of the major milestones. The shared island initiative is probably one of the most significant initiatives since the Good Friday Agreement that is dealing with the practical connections between people North and South. It is having an impact on people but we do need reconciliation in the Wolfe Tone tradition.

Deputy Murphy raised the issue of Lough Neagh and the destruction of many lakes. The nitrates directive will deal with regional plans for water quality across the country. Through the shared island initiative we have supported projects that are trying to deal with Lough Neagh. We have met with the Ministers in the North. They are very frustrated and worried about their capacity to deal with it because of how far the destruction of the habitat and the water quality of the lake has gone. We contributed to trying to help them to deal with the issue. More broadly in terms of lakes across the country and the EPA's work, the Minister for agriculture and the Minister for housing, in the context of the derogation, over the next three years will be implementing significant action plans on water quality throughout the country. There is an agricultural dimension to it, of that there is no doubt.

I think I half answered Deputy Tóibín's question with my response to Deputy Hayes. I do believe we need to reform strand 1. The British Government was reluctant to do so for quite some time. However, the Northern Ireland Secretary has now invited parties to make submissions. I have outlined which parties are prepared to make submissions. They can raise some funding themselves but choose not to, as the Deputy knows. There was a recent report in that regard. They are, perhaps, politically unpalatable but they do have that capacity. It does need reform and I hope some reforms will emerge in the next year.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The Taoiseach left me out.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Heneghan feels left out. The Taoiseach did not answer him.

The Taoiseach: I apologise. The response to the Deputy's question was on the next page and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle was looking at me intently.

I could not agree more with the Deputy on the North-South interconnector but there have been a lot of political challenges with it. As I said last week, we all need to pause a bit and say what our priorities are. We need the North-South interconnector in terms of the energy needs of those regions and the country at large. The relevant Minister is present now. On the Deputy's private wires legislation, he has been consistent in his advocacy for private wires. I appreciate that we should not turn infrastructure into political football. We will continue to engage with the Deputy. I think we are making progress on some of these issues and I hope we can bring people along with us. The agencies have some responsibility in that regard as well. I thank the Deputy and I apologise again.

Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 for the consideration of the House. As Deputies will be aware, the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008, as originally enacted, provided for the establishment of the Dublin Transport Authority, DTA, and set out its role and functions to ensure the provision of an integrated transport system in the greater Dublin area, GDA, including the procurement of public transport infrastructure and services.

The Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 expanded the powers of the authority nationally in a number of areas and renamed it as the National Transport Authority, NTA, to reflect its expanded role. A number of the NTA's other powers under the Act were also extended nationally by the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009, the Taxi Regulation Act 2013 and the Public Transport Act 2016.

The Bill I am introducing today is a further amendment to that legislation. The purpose of it is to provide a clear legislative framework to enable the National Transport Authority to undertake the construction of public transport infrastructure projects, such as BusConnects, in the State, as it currently does in the greater Dublin area.

This is in alignment with the national planning framework, the national sustainable mobility policy and the climate action plan which all commit to extend the statutory transport planning remit of the NTA to the metropolitan areas of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The national sustainable mobility policy, which was published in 2022, noted that national planning framework commitment. Action 75 of the policy also commits to extend the statutory transport planning remit of the NTA to the metropolitan areas I mentioned to strengthen the levels of integration between spatial planning and transport planning. The moving together strategy of 2026, which Cabinet approved recently, also notes and reiterates these commitments.

Project Ireland 2040's revised national planning framework published in April 2025, supports ambitious growth targets to enable the four cities of Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford to each grow by at least 50% over 2016 levels by 2040. The national development plan review 2025 outlines Ireland's largest-ever public investment plan to transform infrastructure, housing, transport, energy and public services through to 2035. As committed

to in the programme for Government, this national development plan provides extra funding for the improvement of transport networks across the country.

The sectoral plan for transport under the NDP review, which was approved by Government in November 2025 commits €22.3 billion to a diverse range of transport options, including public transport, active travel, roads, maritime and aviation, over the next five years. An additional allocation of €2 billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund will support the development of MetroLink, which will start next August, bringing the total NDP Exchequer investment in transport to €24.3 billion between up to 2030. That is about €1 in every €4 we will be investing between now and the end of the decade. In tandem with this commitment, the appropriate legislation needs to be in place and hence this Bill.

The programme for Government commits to expand bus services in cities and to ensure BusConnects delivers promised benefits for public transport users. BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system, with the aim to provide better bus services across five cities. It is the largest investment in the bus system ever and is managed by the NTA. It will connect people and places through an enhanced bus system together with improved cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. It is a key part of the Government's approach to improve public transport, address climate change and reduce congestion in our cities.

Currently for BusConnects Dublin, the NTA uses a provision under section 44 of the DTA Act which enables the NTA to assume responsibility for the delivery of public transport infrastructure where it considers it more convenient, expeditious, effective or economical to do so. However, this legislative provision is currently limited to the greater Dublin area only. A legislative amendment to section 44 is required to the DTA Act to enable the NTA to undertake the construction of public transport projects such as BusConnects and similar projects in the other cities outside the GDA.

I am pleased to say that the first two BusConnects contracts have been signed. Liffey Valley to the city centre is under construction. Ballymun-Finglas to the city centre will enter into construction later this year.

The NTA launched its new design for the Cork metropolitan bus network in June 2022. The new network, part of BusConnects Cork, is intended to transform the public transport network across the Cork metropolitan area. The new network will involve the creation of new bus routes and improved bus frequencies to help transform the public transport network to meet anticipated growth and future demand in the region.

The amendment to section 44 of the Dublin Transport Authority Act in this Bill is timely. Subject to the enactment of the legislation, the NTA intends to submit planning applications to An Coimisiún Pleanála this year in respect of the infrastructure elements of BusConnects Cork.

On 29 October 2025 the Government issued gate 1 approval in line with the infrastructure guidelines, allowing the sustainable transport corridors of the BusConnects Cork programme to enter the planning system.

It is important to note that under section 44(2)(c) of the DTA Act 2008, the NTA is required to "consult with and consider the views of the relevant public transport authority or other statutory body", being local authorities, before providing public transport infrastructure.

Again, subject to the enactment of the legislation, the NTA will have to do this before submitting any application to An Coimisiún Pleanála.

The Bill is a technical one. Amending the provisions of section 44(1) of the DTA Act by the substitution of "in the State" for "GDA" and amending the definition of "road authority" in section 2 is needed if BusConnects is to be progressed by the NTA, outside of the greater Dublin area, specifically into the metropolitan areas of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford in collaboration with the local authorities. This will provide the NTA with the same statutory powers it currently exercises in the greater Dublin area.

The NTA has the capacity and experience in progressing megaprojects having successfully secured planning consents for all 12 of its core bus corridor schemes in Dublin. As I mentioned, two of those have either begun or will enter into construction shortly. This Bill will ensure that the delivery of vital infrastructure is underpinned by a robust and appropriate legislative framework. I commend the Bill to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call on Deputy Daly, I extend a warm welcome to the Japanese ambassador and his officials, who are guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan.

Deputy Pa Daly: The ambassador is very welcome. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation but I do so with a clear warning. Expanding the remit of the NTA cannot mean exporting the same mistakes we have seen in Dublin to the rest of the country. BusConnects promised badly needed transformation, better routes, more frequent services and a modern system but in many cases, this is a far cry from what was actually delivered. Like most projects delivered by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, it was marked by delays, spiralling costs and community frustration. Originally envisaged at about €1 billion, costs ballooned to as much as €4.2 billion. Time deadlines slipped, often local communities felt ignored and in some cases people were left facing longer journey times with fewer services and some uncertainty.

The transformation of Ireland’s public transport infrastructure is badly needed. There is no doubt about that, but what occurred during parts of the roll-out of BusConnects does not reflect how to build public confidence in public transport. What happened is part of a wider pattern of announcements without delivery, ambition without execution and spending without control. We have seen massive overruns across project after project. Nearly €500 million has been spent on MetroLink before a shovel has gone into the ground and €50 million was written off in the context of a failed rail IT system. The cost for contactless payments has already spiralled to €269 million. There are 130 electric buses worth over €40 million that have been sitting idle for years because they were purchased before the necessary charging infrastructure was put in place. That is bad planning. The Government has consistently been unable to deliver.

These failures are not just in Dublin; they are felt all over the country. I asked some of our local councillors in rural Ireland about the deficits in public transport infrastructure. I discovered that there are still no bus shelters in Lixnaw or near the old Tralee town council building on Princes Quay. There is still no bus stop on the Bracker O’Regan Road either. There seems to be an inconsistency of delivery across various local authorities. For some reason, it appears that some areas are able to erect bus stops without an awful lot of bureaucracy, but that is not the case in every area.

The OECD agrees that some systems were structurally designed primarily to accommodate cars. A total of 76% of people rely primarily on cars, which is one of the highest rates in the EU. Some 58% of short journeys of less than 2 km are still made by car because there is no viable alternative. The OECD said that Ireland's transport system is structurally designed to primarily accommodate cars. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have treated public transport as an afterthought. Throughout the country, there are patchy and infrequent services, limited rail connectivity and entire communities effectively cut off from reliable public transport. None of this is a coincidence.

I listened earlier to the debate about the temporary rail platform being constructed in Adare. Nothing permanent is being put in place in Adare in order to expand the rail system on the newly completed track to Foynes.

There have been decades of underinvestment and neglect. Rail accounts for less than 3% of Ireland's transport infrastructure, far below the European average of 8%. Only 3% of the rail lines are electrified compared with the majority in EU systems, and no high-speed rail infrastructure exists. A total of 77% of lines are single track, limiting frequency and capacity. Despite all of the money spent – including sums of €269 million, €40 million and €50 million – people still cannot get a cup of coffee on the Tralee to Dublin train on the direct line.

While the Government talks about balanced regional development, the reality is that the situation regarding infrastructure has left places in certain areas of the country, including Kerry, at serious disadvantage when it comes to jobs, infrastructure and quality of life. This Bill matters, but it also involves risk. We need more public transport infrastructure, but expanding into Cork, Limerick and Galway must not mean repeating the same errors on a wider scale.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Decades of underinvestment in our transport infrastructure have resulted in this State being a laggard when it comes to public transport. Too many people face delays and a lack of services, especially when it comes to bus and rail. Many areas across the State, particularly in the west of Ireland, simply do not have the infrastructure in place to deal with the level of demand that exists. This Bill will expand the remit of the NTA to allow it to construct public transport infrastructure across the entire State. In order to do this, the NTA must be properly resourced.

On the issue of funding for the NTA, I have raised with the Minister on a number of times the current public transport issues that people in Athenry are facing. Today, I am presenting the Minister with a petition signed by 1,665 people in Athenry to save the 6.50 a.m. train and to fund a bus service for Athenry. People in Athenry are sick and tired of their transport needs being neglected. We have trains that are literally overflowing. It has been two years since we had the cancellation of the bus service. Despite repeated promises, we still do not have a bus service and, to make matters worse, we are now being told we are going to lose the 6.50 a.m. at the end of July due to a lack of funding. It is not good enough. It is not going to be accepted by people in Athenry. The NTA has requested the funding for these services from the Department, and the Minister must provide it. He needs to get the bus service up and running, save the 6.50 a.m. train and listen to the people of Athenry who signed this petition. They want to be able to rely on public transport but they cannot do so at the moment because of this lack of action. I will be sending that petition to the Minister today.

The Bill before us has the aim of expanding the NTA's remit in providing public transport infrastructure beyond the greater Dublin area. I refer to the Gluas project in this regard. We have been waiting years for an emerging route for this much-needed project. This is critical to address the traffic issues for people commuting in and out of Galway city. At the same time, we see a lack of basic infrastructure, such as shelters at bus stops. If the Government wants to encourage people to use public transport, it must ensure that it gets these basic things right.

While this Bill is welcome, the NTA must be adequately resourced and funded in order to allow it to meet its expanded role. There is a significant amount of work that must be done to address the decades of underinvestment in Ireland's transport infrastructure. I call on the Minister to step up to the plate and address the deficits that exist.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am glad that the Minister is here for this debate. I want to bring to him a message from my constituents in north County Dublin with regard to the BusConnects north coastal project. As the Minister will know - I understand he has engaged with the local group - the 33 bus is the main bus serving the towns of Rush, Lusk, Skerries and Loughshinny. The bus is frequently overcrowded. We have all heard many times about people left standing on the side of the road while the bus goes past because it is a single-decker when it should be a double-decker, or the double-decker is already full. There is a desperate need for a functioning public transport system for north County Dublin. Not everyone lives near the train station. While it is great for those who do, there are people who do not live near the train and are dependent on the bus. The proposals for BusConnects are causing a lot of angst among my constituents because they see that those proposals are not responsive to the needs of the community. In many instances, they represent a backwards step.

We are not just giving out about it, however. A well-thought-out proposal has been made to the NTA. The NTA responded and we have sent a response back to it. My understanding is that the Minister was due to meet with this group in April. I am hopeful that meeting will be reinstated because it wants a chance to show the Minister the work it has put in to ensure that whatever changes are made work. We all want BusConnects to work, but it will not work unless the people who are going to use the service are listened to. These people are not making observations for the sake of it. They have made them and have put forward a well-thought-out proposal because they desperately want it to work. We need it to work. The bus service we depend on in north County Dublin is not sufficient for the needs of the population. BusConnects will only deliver if it is done in consultation with the people who will ultimately use the service.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am going to keep this local as well. I want to talk about the 13 bus route. It is planned to be replaced with the D3 route under BusConnects. After Watery Lane, the D3 route will now go down the New Nangor Road and up the Long Mile Road towards Cork Street. Clondalkin, and Bawnoges in particular, will now lose a valuable connection to Bluebell, Inchicore, St. James's Hospital and the Liberties. There is a strong historical, cultural and familial connection between Clondalkin, Inchicore and Bluebell. Many families moved from Inchicore and Bluebell up to Clondalkin over the years. They still go back to visit families and friends on a regular basis. The 13 bus route is vital in this regard.

I also want to put on my St. Patrick's Athletic FC hat and say that many people who use the 13 bus route go to Inchicore to cheer on St. Pat's. I use the bus to go to matches. I see the

same people on the bus going to and from matches. It is vital that this cultural link is kept in place for people who cheer on St. Pat's in Richmond Park. There is also the vital link to St. James's Hospital that has to be taken into consideration, as well as the many people who still travel to the Liberties to socialise and do their shopping.

Another issue with the D3 route is that it will not serve Woodford or the Monastery Road. People living along Woodford and Monastery Road will lose a bus to town and to Clondalkin village. I am asking the NTA to take all these factors into consideration before it makes any decision to replace the 13 bus with the D3.

A particular issue we have in my area relates to the provision of car parking spaces. We have a number of developments in the area that do not have the appropriate number of car parking spaces. I get the idea behind this whereby the Government wants to see people out of cars and onto public transport.

That is all well and good in theory but in practice it is a different story. An infrequent and often unreliable bus service means the car is still a necessity. We have seen tensions rising in the likes of Kilcarbery, Seven Mills, Citywest and Adamstown because of a lack of parking in these new builds. The Government needs to get its act together and provide proper parking and also reliable public transport. Earlier, I raised DART+ South West with the Taoiseach. The Minister relayed to me before that the delay to DART+ South West is because of an interconnection with another project. My understanding is it is lack of money going to the NTA. Will the Minister confirm that?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is not. I answered the Deputy in a parliamentary question recently.

Deputy Mark Wall: I am asking again. I have had more information since.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not the case.

Deputy Ann Graves: Public transport is vital for families and communities. A decent, reliable and sustainable transport system connects people with each other, work, education and recreation. The Minister will know that Fingal east faces systematic and long-standing deficits in public transport. The lack of infrastructure is now constraining economic growth and worsening climate outcomes and residential development. This has led to a dependency on car use. The OECD concluded that Ireland's transport system is structurally designed to accommodate cars. This is down to consecutive governments not prioritising public transport. Some 76% of people rely on cars. It is one of the highest rates in the EU. This has been the story in Fingal east for many years - huge residential developments with no proper infrastructure, schools, healthcare or transport and no building of communities. Some 58% of short journeys are still made by car. This is a major issue in our area where transport is not factored into planning. There are huge housing developments with no reliable or accessible transport so estates in the Minister's constituency in Knocksedan and Kinsealy are left without footpaths much less public transport. This has to be central to any future developments in Fingal east. When I first moved to Swords the MetroLink was soon to follow. It was a selling point for me in buying my home but 35 years later, almost €500 million being spent and

basically nothing has happened. It is yet another staggering failure of public spending oversight by Government. The current works on the R132 to facilitate delivery of MetroLink have caused chaos with traffic coming in and out of Swords at a standstill. It is having a huge impact on commuters. Carers are finding it impossible to get to vulnerable clients, all caused by the works on the R132 and other mismanaged works being done at the same time. There is no management in place. We need MetroLink and I support MetroLink but it has to be delivered in a planned, connected and cost-effective way. The Minister recently promised that MetroLink would not become a children's hospital mark 2, yet €103 million has been spent in the first few months of this year alone with predicted costs skyrocketing from €2.5 billion to €15.8 billion, all out of the public purse. We need a radical shift in transport policy. We need proper planning for transport to meet the needs of our growing population. I welcome the Bill and I hope it addresses the issues I have raised.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The Labour Party welcomes this Bill. A genuine success story of the previous Government was the expansion of public transport services outside of Dublin, the Local Link network in particular. It is important we build upon that progress. This Bill is largely technical but it is important in enabling us to do so. I acknowledge the progress being made but too many people are still forced to rely on their cars to get around because of inadequate public transport options in particular outside the capital. There is a real cost to that from a climate and emissions perspective but also as we have seen recently in terms of our dependence on fossil fuels, the financial impact of the skyrocketing petrol and diesel prices and the huge impact on people's quality of life that comes from sitting for hours every day on congested motorways. It is important we give people other options - cheaper, more sustainable and frankly more enjoyable, more efficient and more productive options to get around. The best way to protect people from the high cost of petrol and diesel is by reducing their dependence on private cars and making public transport a viable alternative for them. That is one reason we in the Labour Party proposed a free public transport pilot for the duration of the present fossil fuel crisis. Our public transport networks need massive upgrades and expansions to build on the good work of the previous Government.

My colleagues, Deputies Sheehan, Nash and Eoghan Kenny, will touch on the particulars of their own areas. I hope when BusConnects networks are rolled out in other cities that lessons are learned from our experience in Dublin. It has not exactly been a smooth a smooth ride so far. The roll-out is delayed in places currently due to the Department of Transport holding back funding. The scattered roll-out of the various spines has not helped public buy-in. So many parts of the new network are still missing that what we have at present is just a patchwork of routes that do not always make sense on their own. These new routes are being commenced without the reallocation of road space needed for bus lanes, bus corridors and bus gates which means buses are getting stuck in ever more congestion, journey times are increasing for many people and the core concept of BusConnects, that you hop on and hop off buses in a timely manner to traverse the city, is just not working out yet in reality. I believe it can be done but the slow roll-out and persistent delays undermine public confidence in the project and, indeed, my own confidence. The Department of Transport needs to put its money where its mouth is.

MetroLink also urgently needs to be developed. I call again on the Government to honour its commitment in the programme for Government to conduct a new feasibility study on extending the MetroLink out to Dublin south west. In many ways, what BusConnects is trying

to achieve is an underground model where people can connect to different lines but just above ground. That model crucially means that buses are given priority on our roads. We hear from the NTA and service operators all the time that congestion is the number one issue affecting reliability for buses. I welcome the work under way putting in new bus lanes and other measures I mentioned but perhaps the cart was put before the horse in rolling out a lot of the new routes before the necessary infrastructure was in place.

I see this most obviously with the new F1 route in my constituency, Dublin South-West. I have raised this with the Minister previously and with the NTA. The F1 replaced the 49 bus. It takes a slightly different route down residential roads with no priority bus lanes so it gets stuck in morning and evening traffic. The consequence is a journey into the city centre which previously might have taken 45 minutes during peak hours can now take around one hour and 15 minutes. That has a significant impact on commuters from Tallaght, Firhouse and Knocklyon who rely on the bus to get to work. When I raised this with the Minister previously, he pointed to the Kimmage corridor as a solution. That corridor has planning permission but it will be a few years before it is in operation. In any case, the environmental impact assessment says the corridor will save around seven minutes on the inbound journey in the mornings and three minutes in the evenings. Without further intervention, none of us can really argue that this new route represents an improvement for my constituents. The new route also cuts off direct public transport links with Firhouse, Templeogue and Terenure villages. My constituents do not benefit from the high frequency element because that begins and ends in Kimmage. The fact that it is a cross-city route is causing issues too with the bus frequently packed and standing room only within a couple of stops in the city centre. Deputy Sherlock tells me her constituents in Dublin Central are suffering from similar issues with this new route.

I cannot understate the strength of feeling towards the changes in this new route in much of my area. I hosted a packed and impassioned public meeting on this back in March. We have a petition to reinstate the old 49 route to run alongside the F1 to restore these vital community links and improve journey times to the city centre. We have seen really good support for that. I would appreciate if the Minister and the NTA could engage with us further on this. The demand is there.

I want to raise an issue that is seemingly becoming more and more common, which is a bit of a scandal - buses skipping stops along particular routes and the reasons this is happening. A number of people have gotten in touch with me about this over the past few months, including someone who used to work for Dublin Bus and has asked drivers about this. It would seem that when buses run behind schedule, central command instructs drivers to skip stops to get back on time and avoid paying penalties, regardless of whether anyone is waiting at the stop or not. That is egregious. I would appreciate if the Minister would respond specifically in relation to this. We all want buses to turn up on time but I think we would also agree that a bus that shows up slightly late is better than one that does not show up at all. People tell me they are frequently left stranded by buses driving past them and ignoring them at bus stops as they wait. Public transport is a public service first and foremost. Of course, bus services need to be commercially viable to some degree but the operator's primary consideration must be serving the people and not just watching its own wallet.

We have a situation now where the penalties that the NTA performance metrics - it is important that performance metrics are put in place but it is also important that they do not

have adverse impacts - are applying to operators are having the opposite effect. They are supposed to improve reliability but they are making the situation worse.

We want to see people using public transport. It is encouraging that we are seeing a greater level of provision outside of Dublin. It is important that we build on that and I reiterate my support for that. We want public transport to be people's preferred mode to the greatest extent possible but one of the biggest barriers to that in Dublin is a perception that our bus services are becoming increasingly unreliable, and we have to nip that in the bud. People need confidence in our public transport to bring about the modal shift that we need to see from an emissions reduction perspective and from a quality of life perspective and we have still plenty of work to do in that regard.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill because it affords me the chance to put on the record some concerns I have, which I believe can be addressed through amendments to the Bill in relation to sustainable transport planning in the Drogheda area, an area that the Minister is very familiar with. In his remarks, the Minister referred to the fact that this particular legislation aligned with the overall objective to ensure that the NTA managed transport initiatives into the future in Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, and that is commendable. However, there is one area missing from that ambition, and that is Drogheda. Drogheda is, as the Minister will be aware, one of the fastest growing parts of the country. It is Ireland's next city. The population of the "metropolitan", if I can describe it as such, Drogheda area is the same, if not more, than the population of Waterford at this moment in time and it is being left behind.

I will be proposing an amendment to include Louth in the greater Dublin area, GDA, for the purposes of transport planning to ensure that transport can be planned in a much more sustainable fashion than has hitherto been the case in the area that I represent. The Minister might ask what the point of that is. The point is as follows. The Minister will know that, last week, a welcome announcement was made about the establishment of two new train stations in Navan. That is required. We need to get people out of cars, onto train lines and into the city for work, and *vice versa* as well in getting people from Dublin to Navan to work. Nobody can quibble with that. However, the Minister will be aware that Drogheda has only one train station and the north side of Drogheda is one of the most rapidly growing areas of this country. The Minister will be aware that several thousand new homes are being built there as we speak, a couple of thousand have been built already, and there is a strong argument for a north Drogheda train station on the main Belfast-to-Dublin line but the Minister, the NTA and Irish Rail are playing a game of pass the parcel. The National Transport Authority says it has no responsibility for this because Drogheda is not in the greater Dublin area for the purposes of transportation strategy. The NTA has regard to the GDA plans and Drogheda's connection with Dublin from a commuter point of view but it does nothing about it that really matters. The NTA says it is the Minister's responsibility to develop a train station on the north side of Drogheda. I merely asked the National Transport Authority whether it would develop a business case because I believed in evidence-based planning for initiatives such as this, but the NTA refused to do it because it said that the area was not in the GDA and it was a matter for the Minister. As for Irish Rail, I met the CEO a couple of weeks ago. She said that she would like to see something like this happen but it was matter, of course, of funding and prioritisation in terms of Irish Rail's strategy.

We have a game of pass the parcel. Nobody is taking responsibility. The Minister is not taking responsibility for it, the NTA is not taking responsibility for it, and Irish Rail says it would like to do something about it but nobody is directing the company. This project, which is absolutely necessary for the area, is an orphan project. It is nobody's child, and a situation where we have one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country poorly serviced by rail services is not the way we should be managing the sustainable development of our transport infrastructure in this country. I have been listening to this excuse for years now from the National Transport Authority, really since the agency was set up and the Dublin Transportation Office changed, etc. It seems that, from the point of view of planning such as this, the NTA really is just the Dublin Transportation Office with a different label. The Minister knows the relationship of Louth and Dublin in terms of commuters. He knows how important that is. We need to plan that sustainably and we need to deliver the new train station. We need to find a way to do that.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I want to talk about the delays in the roll-out of BusConnects in Limerick, a city the Minister knows well and that he has said a lot of positive things about previously. We were promised this in 2025, and 2025 became 2026, then 2027, and is now 2028. From what the departmental officials have said, we know that the NTA does not have enough funding when it comes to the roll-out of new services and that is why we are seeing a deprioritisation of public transport by the Government, particularly compared with the previous Government, which had the 2:1 ratio in favour of spending on public transport, which I support.

If it is rolled out by 2028, then by that time we will have had a nine-year horizon since BusConnects was first mooted as part of the Limerick Shannon Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy. This is something that could really affect us in terms of housing, balanced regional development and attracting in foreign direct investment, FDI, because our unreliable bus network in Limerick undermines confidence and the modal shift that we all know we need in order to meet our climate targets. For example, King's Island is one of the most deprived communities in the country. King's Island has no bus service after 6 p.m. It has one of the lowest rates of car ownership in the country. It has no bus service on a Sunday. It has no bus service on a bank holiday Monday. It is waiting on BusConnects for this to be delivered. Condell Road is the only major primary road in Limerick with a bus lane but no bus service. It, too, is waiting on BusConnects. It is a 45-minute walk to the local secondary school. It is a 30-minute walk to the local primary school. We have had hundreds of houses built out there in the past couple of years, which I welcome, but there is no bloody bus. Delaying this further means that this will come in after the transport strategy and after the regional spatial and economic strategy, RSES, review and it will not be able to leverage these. Limerick Chamber has written to the Minister on this and I echo what it has said. We need to get a hell of a lot more people in Limerick out of their cars and onto public transport, and the way we do that is by implementing the entirety of BusConnects in a timely manner and making sure the funding is there for the physical interventions because the bus needs priority over private cars.

We need to pass legislation to allow Bus Éireann and other operators to use the CCTV on their buses to penalise private motorists illegally driving in bus lanes and introduce traffic cameras on every single bus lane to make sure that, if you are caught driving on a bus lane, you automatically get penalty points and a fine.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the opportunity to speak on what is important legislation. The Minister will be aware of some of the issues I will raise.

The first one is, as the Minister himself said, that this Bill is to provide a clear legislative framework for the NTA to undertake the construction of public transport infrastructure projects, such as BusConnects. Will the Minister confirm if this legislation before us will cover the legislation that is needed to allow the opening of the M4 eastbound bus priority lane, which, as he will be aware, is a project spanning from Maynooth junction 7 to Leixlip junction 5 in County Kildare? The Minister will be aware that this would allow buses to use the dedicated hard shoulder to bypass congestion. The physical infrastructure is constructed, as we all know, but it awaits legislation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is done.

Deputy Mark Wall: What is done?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The secondary legislation was signed last week.

Deputy Mark Wall: That is the best news I have got from the Minister today.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Just read my press releases.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister. He and I will pose for a photograph.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy could have saved himself three and a half minutes.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister and I will pose for a photograph after that.

I will also mention that the Minister is also - I have spoken to him and the powers that be after he mentioned the need for more buses to get me into Leinster House early in the morning - looking at the N7.

5 o'clock

I spoke to the NTA last week about this and it is examining the issue. Perhaps the Minister can give us some more good news on the N7 project because it would make a difference to the car park it is. I appreciate what the Minister said and the legislation having been signed is very good news.

In the short time I have left, I know the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will agree with me about the lack of train services from Kilkenny, Waterford and my home town of Athy to Dublin. The first train service from my home town of Athy is at 6.40 a.m. Unfortunately, a lot of people who come to Athy, and are very welcome to make their homes and families there, cannot get into work for 8 a.m., which is when they need to be there. That needs to change. We have spoken about how public transport can be a game changer for so many.

Before I came to the Chamber I received phone calls from two people who were on a train heading to Athy and Carlow and were standing because all six carriages were full. I am sure

the Leas-Cheann Comhairle would agree on the need to address this, given that the train is heading to Kilkenny as well. We need to improve train services. We need an hourly train service, something I have raised on previous occasions with the Minister. I thank the Minister for the good news he has brought to the House today. It is to be hoped the people of Athy will hear more good news in the coming weeks on hourly train services.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: A significant number of people across my county of Cork are growing increasingly frustrated by the slow progress on public transport delivery, in particular when it comes to BusConnects and next generation ticketing. I commend the Minister's Department, Irish Rail and Bus Éireann on the improvements have been made because they must be recognised. My job as a Deputy for Cork is to try to progress that even more, in particular regarding BusConnects and next generation ticketing.

BusConnects was presented as a major transformation of our bus system, promising reliable services, better connectivity, more frequent routes and infrastructure that would finally make public transport a realistic option for more and more people. Many years after these commitments were first announced, many communities right across Cork still feel they are waiting for meaningful progress on the ground. Commuters continue to experience, as my colleague has said, overcrowding, delays, unreliable timetables and long journey times. This is having an impact on workers, students and families who are spending far too much time stuck in traffic because public transport alternatives are simply not improving quickly enough.

Regarding next generation ticketing, in 2026 it should be absolutely acceptable to ask that passengers can get on a train or bus and seamlessly tap a bank card or their phone across the public transport network in a way that has become standard practice across many European cities. This technology is not revolutionary in any way; it is basic modern transport infrastructure. This is not simply about convenience. Faster boarding reduces delays, improves journey times and makes bus services more efficient overall. It also makes public transport easier and more attractive to use, in particular for occasional passengers and tourists. As I said, progress has been made in public transport right across Cork city and county, but we have a long way to go, in particular regarding next generation ticketing and BusConnects.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. It is a short and technical, but necessary, Bill. The purpose is straightforward, namely, to extend the powers the NTA exercises in the greater Dublin area to cities such as Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. It enables the NTA to deliver the infrastructural elements of BusConnects Cork and removes the statutory gap that has held up a major project for far too long. I thank the Minister and his officials for bringing the Bill forward.

We are committed to the development of a strong, modern and integrated public transport system across the State. The programme for Government commits to expanding bus services in our cities and the Bill is part of delivering on that commitment. Expanding the NTA's power is one thing; how those powers are used is another. I want to use my time to make three points about that.

First, on balance, the NTA must prioritise sensible solutions. Public transport investment is welcome. Road safety investment is welcome and necessary. However, schemes must be designed in a way that does not create excessive congestion, does not push traffic onto

residential streets and does not undermine access for older residents, people with disabilities or local businesses. In my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, communities have raised legitimate concerns about the design of specific schemes. Those concerns deserve to be heard. The NTA delivers better outcomes when it engages early, listens properly and adjusts where the evidence supports it. The same goes for local authorities.

Second, on bus reliability, while looking to expand the network we must not lose sight of reliability on existing routes. The so-called ghost bus problem in Dublin, in particular, is one I have raised on multiple occasions in the House. It impedes and undermines public confidence in public transport as buses disappear. Passengers see them on the app and screen and then they simply disappear.

In recent months, cancellation rates on some routes have reached 8%. Fines for PSOs are one thing, but the public simply require dependability. To be fair, the ghost bus phenomenon originated under a previous Minister and this Minister has said that is unacceptable, and I agree. The new Trapeze automatic vehicle location system is being rolled out, and that is welcome. The underlying causes, that is, driver and mechanic shortages and the congestion that delays buses across the city, must be addressed. The NTA's contracts with operators must be tightened. Reliability must come before expansion. We also need increased frequency on Sundays, which I have raised on previous occasions in the House, and integrated ticketing.

Third, there must be far greater urgency on rail and on Luas. The greater Dublin area transport strategy provides for the extension of the Luas green line from Bride's Glen to Bray. That extension was identified as a priority more than a decade ago. The Bray Luas would serve Cherrywood, Old Connaught, Fassaroe and Bray DART station and it would transform travel along the N11 corridor. It would relieve pressure on a road network that is at breaking point and capacity on the green line needs to increase. Yet, the most recent projections push delivery of the expansion of the green line into the 2031-36 window and that is simply not good enough. The people of north Wicklow and the area south of Dún Laoghaire have been waiting too long. The DART+ Coastal South to Wicklow, the Luas Finglas extension and the planned extension of the green line to Bray must all be advanced with urgency. We need the same focus and the same statutory drive on rail, including heavy rail, that this Bill provides for BusConnects.

I support this Bill. I ask the Minister to bring forward, as soon as possible, a clear delivery timetable for the Luas extension to Bray and a published plan to address the ghost bus problem on the Dublin bus network.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome the Bill. The expansion of the terms in the legislation is welcome. We have to recognise that those who seek to access Dublin are not just necessarily from the county of Dublin or the immediate area, but come from further away. I am not sure about the wisdom of placing two Dún Laoghaire constituency Deputies one after the other because I listened to Deputy Devlin's speech and he hit on many of the issues that are important for our area. I, too, feel very strongly about them.

One would think a place like Dún Laoghaire benefits from a fine public transport system and, in many respects, that is true. Yet, as we replace the 46A with the E spine, E2 to Dún Laoghaire and the E1 to Bray, we have not had the reliable service we would expect. I welcome the 24-hour nature of the service and it has hugely improved access to the city centre for people in my area, but unfortunately people do not have confidence that the bus stated on the timetable

will actually arrive. In fact, this morning, Conor, an intern working in my office, was on a bus that overheated at 9.30 a.m. The weather is lovely and it is great to have the sun shining, but we cannot have a situation where that is causing buses to overheat. He had to wait a long time for a replacement bus to come along.

I receive emails over and over again from people in the local area who tell me about ghost buses, something I know the Minister is aware of. We cannot have a situation whereby people try to get a bus to work, but the bus which is supposed to bring them there does not come. When a bus is on the timetable and the real-time information at the bus stop but does not arrive, that is a disaster in many respects. First, it contributes to a lack of faith in the reliability of the system. It causes people to be late. The next bus that comes is already full. The route is one bus short and it means that the capacity of the route is diminished because at rush hour in the mornings buses are full and can barely cope with what is there. If one bus does not turn up, that creates huge stress on the line as a whole and a difficulty for people getting on the next bus that comes. It is the same at the next stop and the stop after that.

You end up with lots of people being late for work, which is very unfair and also compromises their faith in the system. The DART is fantastic and is a wonderful service but it is not frequent enough. I know this is a complex problem and is not something that is easily solved. The frequency of the DART is hugely important.

Last week, I was in Paris with Granada Football Club in Blackrock as we were playing a tournament there. Getting around Paris is incredibly easy. There is an underground metro system there but it is coupled with a bus system that is much more local. It means you can reliably get to anywhere within Paris within half an hour. The same cannot be said of Dublin. I have been a long time champion of a proper underground metro system for Dublin. That has to be not just part of the plan but part of the implementation. If we had started the metro for Dublin when we started talking about it, it would be built now and we would not be relying on buses, many of which do not operate on an electric basis and are still using diesel, clogging up traffic lanes and contributing to environmental pollution. We need to move to a phase where we accept that underground metro transport is part and parcel of being a modern, European city. I know that sometimes there is an allergy in Irish public policy terms to these massive public infrastructure projects. We have had our fingers burned on some projects, although we also fail to recognise those projects that go ahead, are finished on time or ahead of time and on budget or for less than the initial budget. It happens but that does not get coverage in the newspapers. In reality, there is a fear around large infrastructure projects but the building of a metro does not have to be a massive infrastructure project.

Again, look at the example of Paris. I lived in Paris over 20 years ago and when I was there, they were building Line 14, which is known locally as the Meteor. It had a driverless train, which meant there were not the same difficulties if somebody was not available to come to work for whatever personal reason and that the system could still function. They started off with four stops in central Paris. It ran along a relatively limited area. They built four stops and that was the original infrastructural project. After that, they added a stop at either end, followed by another stop and another stop. That same Line 14 now runs from Saint-Lazare, a major train station in Paris, right the way through the centre of Paris and all the way out to Aéroport d'Orly. We have nothing comparable to that in Dublin. We are really lacking in terms of the infrastructure that needs to be provided in that regard and it is time we got going on that, even

if it is only to build a small part of it that can then be added to. In my respectful view, that is the way we have to do it. Instead of deciding we will build a 100-stop metro, let us build one line and we can then add to it. It is something that needs to be given huge priority.

BusConnects is something that made huge progress for us. I am not yet convinced by the renaming of all the routes. A cultural icon, the 46A, is gone but that is another issue entirely. The replacement of certain routes will take time for people to get used to. The bigger difficulty I have with BusConnects is the consultation with local communities. In Shankill in particular, we had a massive problem. There were 3,500-odd signatures on a petition against it or, specifically, against what it would do to Shankill village. That cannot be allowed to happen. If we are going to build large, effective public transport systems, we must couple with that a respect for the people they are supposed to serve. They cannot destroy small villages in County Dublin if they are meant to serve that community. We need to listen to people. A public consultation has to be real and informed but also something that listens to people and does not impose upon them the decision of a bureaucrat or somebody who is may be an excellent public transport designer but not somebody who has to live with the consequences of the design that ultimately comes from that.

The extension of the Luas is hugely important. The Luas does amazing work. It has been a lifeline for many communities, particularly in the south Dublin area, that were just that bit far away from the DART or might not have add access to corridors like the N11. It has worked really well but it can do so much more. I am happy to say that in Dun Laoghaire, we have very advanced cycling infrastructure that is developing all of the time. It is not without its problems. It is not without its huge inconvenience for people in the local community and I think there is a problem with the way it is being built in the same area, at the same time. A road gets done and then a road around the corner gets done, which creates consecutive inconveniencies for the same community but that is for another debate.

When the Luas was built, we had this rail corridor that was created. There was an opportunity to put in a really effective cycle corridor that would run in parallel to the Luas. That was not done. As a result, a cyclist cannot cycle along the same corridor as the Luas. What is perhaps more frustrating is that you cannot bring your bicycle onto the Luas. You are prevented from doing that. It is a real missed opportunity. For that microtransport element, the idea is you cannot get on the Luas with your bike at Cherrywood, get the Luas to Ranelagh and then cycle to somewhere that might be adjacent to the Luas but is too far away to walk. We need to do more to allow people to carry bikes on public transport. The Luas has done really good work but it could do so much more.

Public transport has to be the backbone of the function of any city. If we are not delivering a public transport system that people can have confidence in, that they can rely on and that is cost effective, we are then failing those commuters. The more people we can persuade to get on the DART, Luas or the bus, the more who are not getting into cars, often on their own, clogging up the roads, creating environmental hazards, making it more difficult for cyclists and pedestrians and generally creating more problems. Let us put in place a system that we can not just be proud of but that we want to use, we can use and we can rely on to get us to work, school or college on time.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I live in Dublin 15. It has a population of over 120,000 and it is predicted to go to 140,000 in 2029. Yet, we do not have the long promised direct bus to the airport. I can get a direct bus pretty much from anywhere in the Thirty-two Counties but if I want to head to the airport, I have to pay €50 for a taxi or get two buses. This is not an option for the hundreds who work in the airport. Can the Minister get onto the NTA and ask about it? It has been promised for every single year since 2024 but has not turned up. In Tyrrelstown, a complete review of the public transport system is needed. It is not working for the people and there is no plan to go into Kilmartin, which is a huge new estate. I ask the Minister to please ask the NTA to have a look at forward planning and get its act together.

We have the new active travel plan on the N3-M50. That is brilliant. It is a bus lane that will make it faster for residents in Littlepace to get into town. What does the NTA do? It removes the number 70 bus that will bring people directly onto the new bus lane and leaves a pointless cycle lane that goes across the N3 to a garage. Once again, the NTA needs to start listening to the people.

Metro west has been cancelled until 2042. I am pleading with the Minister to please put this back on the agenda because how long has it taken for Metro north to get to this stage? We will all be retired - actually we will probably all have shuffled off this mortal coil - by the time it is done. It will connect the DART+ to Maynooth and the newly proposed Navan rail line at metro north. We know the M50 is at capacity. If that is not a reason to get it started now, I do not know what is. It is really time for the public transport network system to be a network system that works for all. We see it in every major European country.

The DART+ will be brilliant when it comes into play but it is very disjointed. We need metro west connecting with DART+. We need BusConnects and the NTA listening to the people who are on the ground - they are the bus users and know what works. I urge the Minister to have a chat with the NTA and ask it to listen to us.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The news on the Navan rail corridor was very welcome and I encourage people to engage with the public consultation that is ongoing. I will engage with it and it is very welcome news. Until Navan rail is delivered, the vast majority of public transport in Meath is by bus and on road. There are major weaknesses with the existing services there. The 103, 105 and 109 routes are servicing busy commuter routes in Ashbourne, Rathoath, Dunshaughlin and Kells. It is not a case of whether there will be cancellations on a daily basis, there are cancellations on a daily basis. Today, ten services have been cancelled on the 103 route between 2.30 p.m. and 11.30 p.m. Six services have been cancelled on route 109 during the same time. We have to improve the buses, the fleet, drivers and mechanics. I ask the Minister to please address those issues.

There are areas that have no services at all. I raise the case of Bellewstown, County Meath. I am very supportive of the Connecting Ireland rural transport plan but there is underinvestment and it is slow in its roll-out. A 13-year-old boy, James, launched a petition which has over 450 people. He is calling for a local bus service for Bellewstown. There was a bus service in the 1930s in Bellewstown. He is a really good young lad who has taken an interest in this. He is passionate in pursuing it. The Minister might facilitate a meeting with him at some stage if he is in Meath or maybe in Leinster House, so he can raise the issues with him. I appreciate the Minister is nodding. We can arrange that.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The NTA in its current form is too distant, too rigid and too centralised. Simply put, it is not local enough. This Bill will go some way to help in this regard. The authority is not embedded in the communities it serves and it is increasingly seen as a large, unresponsive bureaucracy. Decisions are being made about towns and villages by an organisation that does not understand how they work. This is a major issue. I see it every day in my constituency of Wicklow.

In Greystones, four school principals are representing over 4,000 students and families. I asked the NTA to sit down and meet them because Greystones is very much a growing town and the needs of many of the schoolchildren who use the buses are not being met by the current bus service. We were trying to resolve that issue. The NTA said it could not meet the principals because, if it did that, it would have to meet everyone. Maybe that is the point. Maybe it should be meeting them. The principals I have referred to represent 4,000 people. It would have been worthwhile for the NTA to sit down and hear exactly what gaps were in the service and potentially what it could do. I realise it cannot address this overnight but it is important for it to hear what the gaps are.

When we have a system that is made so centrally and rigidly, it causes a lot of difficulties. I will give some examples. I have spoken many times in here about the 199 bus, a Local Link bus that was to go from Glendalough through Laragh and Roundwood to Bray. It was announced in April 2025. In May, I was told it was fully funded and that it was a priority service. In July, it went out to tender. In August, Nolan Coaches won the tender. The company hired four drivers and got a bus but that bus is now sitting in a depot in Clonsaugh and has not yet been put into operation. The service was meant to start in September but still has not started. It is now May 2026, a year since the NTA told me the bus route was a priority and had funding. It would now appear that the funding is no longer available, and the service is certainly not operating.

Let me look to west Wicklow. I had a group of students in today, some of whom were from Blessington and some of whom were from Baltinglass. The Blessington group had to get the 65 bus from Blessington to the Dáil. It took them two and a half hours although it is a 50-minute journey by car. They were telling me about the problems. They could not get the 9.30 a.m. service because it is always late, so they had to get the 8 a.m. service. All of these small issues cause enormous problems for people.

The Baltinglass crowd just did not have transport available to them and they had to hire a minibus. There are four services on the 132 bus route every day that connect Baltinglass to Dublin via Tallaght. People tell me that at least once a day one of those services is cancelled. This is a Bus Éireann service. Many times, people are left stranded in work in Tallaght with no way of getting home. People have to be able to trust the bus service in place for them. Unfortunately, there is no reliability. Where there are problems with reliability, frequency and trust, it is important that the NTA act as a go-between. It needs to understand and hear what the problems are. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

As I have raised previously, the issues go beyond the bus services as they also affect the DART service. I want to raise again with the Minister that there have not been replacement buses or additional Luas services put in place, but there are going to be 30,000 women taking part in the VHI Women's Mini Marathon. It is the world's largest all-women 10 km race and

raises €10 million for charities every year. For the second year in a row, there is going to be no DART between Wicklow and Dublin city for the marathon. Last year, people told me there were no additional Luas or bus services and people were late to the race. I understand that sometimes the long weekends are a good opportunity for staff to carry out works, but there needs to be some recognition that there are just some weekends where the service is so needed that it should be running.

When we talk about extending the NTA's powers, we also have to talk about accountability because, at the moment, there are serious questions about the NTA's oversight. Just last week, we learned that Irish Rail effectively had to write off €50 million on a failed IT project, a traffic management system that was meant to modernise the rail network. That is €50 million down the drain. It was not a minor project. It was described as central to how the railway network would be managed but it failed. This is an Irish Rail project but the NTA is the approving and overseeing authority for Irish Rail, so we need some oversight. Why was there no intervention in this instance?

Before we extend the remit of the NTA any further, it is vital that it fix what is already broken. We need to start seeing genuine local engagement, not just tick-box consultation. We need to see clear, timely communication with communities and public representatives. We need to see faster, transparent responses to parliamentary questions. We need to see stronger oversight of project delivery and spending. Above all, we need to see accountability when things go wrong. Without those reforms, we are not expanding a service; we are expanding a system that people unfortunately do not trust despite its importance. Trust, once lost, is difficult to rebuild, but it can be rebuilt through engagement, accountability and willingness to listen to the people who rely on the services every day.

I hope the Minister takes all these suggestions on board. It is important that the NTA work with communities. That is how we put a really good public transport system in place.

Deputy Liam Quaide: In the context of today's discussion, I want to focus on bus services and their discontents, and in some cases their near-total absence, across east Cork. We hear a great deal about BusConnects, strategic corridors and the future of public transport in Cork. It is vital that the ambition extend beyond the city and the immediate suburbs. In east Cork, the current standard of bus service is utterly abysmal. I strongly believe that the Midleton-Youghal rail link is an essential part of the long-term public transport future of east Cork and that commuting misery between Youghal and the city is only going to get increasingly worse until it is restored. Rail development has to be supplemented with a quality bus service that reaches all of our settlements. What east Cork urgently needs is a frequent, reliable and efficient bus network connecting our villages, towns, schools, workplaces, healthcare services, train stations and tourism destinations.

At present, people living in villages such as Cloyne, Ballycotton, Whitegate, Aghada and Saleen are effectively stranded if they do not have access to a car. That is the reality. For many people, this is about whether they can get to college, attend a medical appointment, visit family or take part in ordinary community life. The impact is particularly severe for disabled people, older people, young people, those on low incomes and anyone who cannot drive or afford to run a car. It affects the wider public as well because, when bus services are inadequate, everyone is pushed into car dependency, even for short journeys that should be possible by

public transport. That means more cars on already overburdened roads. It means more congestion around Midleton, Lakeview, Castleredmond and Ballinacurra. It means more pressure on families and reduced independence for people who should not have to rely on lifts from relatives or neighbours to get around. This is also an embarrassment from the perspective of tourism. East Cork has extraordinary towns and villages and also an extraordinary coastline, heritage and food culture. We are inviting tourists to come here, many from countries where high-quality public transport is standard. When they arrive, they find that getting around without a car is extremely difficult. That is not acceptable in a wealthy country.

This is where the Department of public expenditure has to be challenged. The public wants better services and local communities are crying out for them. The Department of Transport understands that need. Local operators are willing to provide services but too often the cold, dead hand of the Department strangles any prospect of new services developing, as if we were living in an impoverished nation that could not afford basic regional transport. This is short-sighted in terms of our economy, social needs, tourism potential, disability considerations and, of course, carbon emissions.

A functioning bus network is a basic need. If the Government is serious about sustainable development in east Cork, it must invest in the bus services that allow people to live, work, study, visit others and age with dignity and purpose in their communities without being completely dependent on cars.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I welcome this Bill and the debate we are having because we urgently need reform when it comes to public transport. Cork needs better public transport. We currently have no Luas, too many ghost buses, and towns that are not connected. This is having a huge impact on people's day-to-day lives and their ability to get around the city and county.

It is leading to an increased car dependency and increased reliance on fossil fuels. It is constraining development and is leading to increased traffic. It urgently needs to change.

For buses in Cork, we are way behind what people have in other cities. There are currently no Leap card validators on buses in Cork, which slows down bus journeys. It also means that people in Cork cannot avail of the 90-minute flat fare that they can get in Dublin. It is not acceptable that the people in Cork pay more for public transport than those in Dublin. That needs to change fast.

Across the country, we need contactless, tap-on buses. We need to get people on and off public transport quicker to improve journey times and make it a more reliable service. There has not been urgency around this issue and that needs to change.

There are also no e-buses in Cork because the depot has not been upgraded. That has been delayed again and again. As a result, we have an older bus stock and get more breakdowns and delays. I was at the bus stop outside my house recently and of the five buses due, four were cancelled. That happens because of a lack of drivers, breakdowns and delays of buses in Cork. It needs investment and support. There needs to be prioritisation of Cork because it is so far behind. Even when it comes to the information on a bus stop, there is a lack of real-time information. There is a lack of bus shelters. Some of the basic infrastructure that you would expect for a modern public transport system is lacking across Cork city and county. It is not acceptable any more.

We also need more park-and-ride facilities. We need improvement across the system. As was mentioned earlier, we also need more local decision-making and input, and more transparency and accountability. Over two months ago, I submitted parliamentary questions around the funding of bus routes in Cork. Two months later, I still do not have a reply from the Minister of the Department. I have written to the Minister and the NTA but we have not got the substantial answers we are looking for to those parliamentary questions. There is a real lack of transparency and accountability, and it needs to change. We need better information and better engagement with local communities and public representatives to ensure that we have a better public transport system that works for everybody. It has an impact on everybody's day-to-day life. If it were serious about climate action, which I do not think the Government is, we would be radically investing in public transport. We would be improving the bus network, delivering a Luas for Cork and enhancing our bus network. What we have instead is delay after delay, one of the oldest bus fleets in the country, people waiting for ghost buses and, as I said, towns that are not connected. It is not good enough. We need urgent change and reform. Cork deserves a better public transport system and needs it now.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I welcome the roll-out of any public transport across the country. A fully functioning republic needs bus and rail services that are reliable and affordable. To reach our climate targets, we need to be moving a little quicker. However, people are not going to get out of their cars if buses do not arrive. They are not going to get out of their cars if it is dangerous to cycle. They are not going to take the bicycle. They are not going to go on public transport if it does not arrive. That is a huge difficulty in my constituency of Dublin South-Central. The Minister of State and I have spoken a lot about buses in Dublin South-Central. He probably knows quite a lot about the public transport in my constituency.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I could drive the bus nearly.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Minister of State could nearly drive the bus. Would he turn up on time? That would be fantastic.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I would try my best.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The difficulty is that since I was elected, I have held eight public meetings and a number of them were solely about public transport. Our constituency is close to the city. The focus for Bus Connects is getting people from the commuter belts into the city. That seems to have failed is when you live close to the city and the system is not functioning fully.

The community of Bluebell-Inchicore has been protesting very well since before I was elected. I pay tribute to former Deputy Joan Collins, her friends and neighbours, and the people she supports for all the work they have done on that bus route. The problem is that the new bus routes the NTA wants to bring in will not bring those people to Thomas Street, Meath Street or Francis Street, or all the surrounding areas where they go shopping and where their religious services, doctors, dentists and opticians are. This is a difficulty. Only approximately 40% of the people in that part of the constituency own cars. Very few people are driving. They are an older population. They are not all on bikes. If you have your weekly shopping, you are not

going to be bringing it on your bicycle unless you have a cargo bike. The bus service there is a disaster for those people. They are protesting all the time.

A second group of people are from Drimnagh. I had a public meeting there recently. The difficulty there is that the bus service now follows a different route, which nobody wants. This is not the only place in my constituency where this is an issue. The NTA dreams up where people want to go when, in fact, it is not where they want to go. They are cut off from coming into town. They are cut off from their doctors and all the medical things that are there. There is also the fact that there are ghost buses. The buses do not turn up on time and are not reliable.

In Chapelizod, the NTA has admitted it did not get it right for the 80 bus. It is going the wrong route. It does not turn up. It is a disaster in terms of ghosting. The ramp that was to be built by the end of the year seems to have disappeared, like half the buses.

The NTA is admitting to not getting it right. People are contacting public representatives on a regular basis. This is the challenge when the service moves to other parts of the country. My advice to any communities to which the NTA or Bus Connects is coming is to go to every single consultation, make sure they are there, make an effort and have their voices heard. I urge them to ensure they keep a record. Plenty of people who have been to those consultations are told that something did not happen and they feel they were not listened to. They feel they were absolutely ignored. For anyone thinking about going to consultations, I suggest they take a record, write down who was there and the names of the representatives. It is important for them to liaise with their public representatives, TDs and councillors, to ensure they know what they want so that we can advocate for them. I have spent so much time advocating for bus services. As a cyclist, I must say that I have never learned as much about buses as I have in the time since I was elected. The reality is that we need to do better.

It is vital that the Minister for Transport is responsible for the NTA. I cannot understand why it does not report to him. I am sure it is not called a "quango" but whatever it is called and whatever the relationship is, it must fall under the remit of the Minister for Transport. It must report to him because if it does not, I do not know who it will report to. The Minister needs to get a grip of what is going on in the NTA, particularly in Dublin South-Central and any other place it is going to.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am broadly in agreement with the Bill. The expansion of the NTA is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the NTA has serious issues. If you speak to residents of my constituency in Finglas and Glasnevin, you know there are significant issues. It is one of the biggest issues I have had to deal with since I was elected. Complaints come into my office about the NTA and bus services. There is a real issue with the lack of accountability and engagement. There is a real issue about the connection between the NTA and the Minister.

There is also the issue of privatisation and outsourcing within the bus services. The broad issue is that our public transport infrastructure is not up to scratch. It is not delivering the services that people need. In my constituency, in particular, the replacements for routes such as the 9, 83 and 13 have not provided an improved bus service for many people. People's experience is that it is now harder to use buses and public transport as a result of the changes. People say they have had to go back to the car because the new routes do not go through their communities and do not bring them where they need to go. There is a fundamental problem here. I, along with residents from Glasnevin and Finglas and other Deputies, have protested at

the NTA. I have organised public meetings on the issue. We gave a clear message to the NTA about the need for changes to address frequency, the issue of ghost buses and to replace service routes that were taken away, particularly the number 24 bus, which ran down Beneavin Road. The NTA promised that service would be brought back but there is still no clear timeline for that. It is not acceptable.

People rely on these buses. They plan their lives around them. There is a real disconnect between the Minister, the NTA and what people are experiencing on the ground in communities, whether it is children going to school, elderly people getting to hospital appointments or people getting into town. They cannot get around their communities or this city. Public transport is absolutely central to providing people with quality of life and access to the services they need.

The F spine routes are still not operating to the extent that would make them adequate replacements for the old routes. As I said, people regularly get in touch with my office about cancellations, delays and ghost buses. This service is neither suitable nor up to standard. We need action on this to ensure that people have quality public transport.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I looked at the Dáil's business for this week with interest and saw that we would be taking the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill. It is somewhat ironic that the Bill will be of far more benefit to the Minister of State's constituents than it will to mine, because many of the amendments being brought forward relate to BusConnects in Cork. This shows the development of the NTA, which was originally the Dublin Transport Authority before being renamed, and the fact that it was not initially given the clear powers now being granted to it. Like other Deputies, I welcome the standardisation of the powers the NTA will have to act as a developer of both public infrastructure and public transport across the country. The development of BusConnects in Cork, which has been long promised, will be aided by the delivery of this project.

The introduction of BusConnects in Dublin was fairly rocky. Many Deputies campaigned against what the NTA proposed because, in many cases, it went against what local communities wanted. There was not enough of an understanding at the beginning on the part of the NTA as to how people use the bus services. Clusters of people's children might attend a particular school that is some distance away, but they picked that school because there was a bus route to it from their area. It might not make logical sense on a map, but when people see that there is a bus route from A to B, they can see the logic of why families chose that particular school. Therefore, there needs to be far more engagement in Cork, at an earlier point. Many of the lessons relating to what happened in Dublin need to be taken on board.

There is no doubt that the NTA listened when it came to some services. It made significant changes and restored services because it saw the logic in doing so. This often happened in places where communities came together and where the passenger experience was outlined in documented form. I have never been a fan of signing petitions. A petition just shows how many people are against something, but showing the NTA why a service was being used in the way it was had an impact. The NTA listened. In other areas, it pushed ahead with the introduction of BusConnects. As my colleague said earlier in the context of the 23, 24, F1, F2 and F3 in Finglas, the idea is to remove a direct connection to the traditional shopping area comprising O'Connell Street and Henry Street for people from Finglas and Glasnevin and to reduce the frequency of the old 40 buses by introducing the new F1, F2 and F3. Deputies

cannot walk through this House without an usher stopping them to tell them that the F1 or F2 did not turn up on a particular morning. The ushers and people who work in the self-service and Members' restaurants, many of whom live in my constituency, will say that they go to the bus stop and sometimes wait 30, 40 or 50 minutes, whereas previously they waited 10, 15 or 20 minutes. Those lessons have to be learnt.

The NTA has a big job to do. I am concerned about extending its power and remit, but I want to see it deliver the Finglas Luas and metro projects. I also want the new designated activity company, DAC, to be established in order that those projects can proceed. I want to see work begin on one of the first core bus corridors that is being developed, namely that between Finglas and Ballymun. It was due to start in March or April, but I have not yet seen the shovel in the ground. We want to see the core bus corridors in place and logic being applied in the context of how they operate.

There will be disagreement, but it is all about communicating. We have to make sure that we have forums for local people to engage. Local people are not a nuisance. They provide information on ways to improve services and their engaging with the process represents an opportunity to communicate change.

We have to make sure that these big infrastructure projects are delivered. The Critical Infrastructure Bill is an important part of that. I will continue to make the case for Finglas Luas. It is a no-brainer. It will cost €600 million for 4 km of track, and the project will have a massive impact in the context of bringing improvement to our area. It will open up the possibility of new opportunities for people who work and live in our area. We must ensure that the railway order that was granted earlier this year is followed through on quickly with the approval gates for the business case, a procurement policy, enabling works, advance works, construction and then, "Ding, ding", the opening of the Luas line into Finglas. That is what we want to see. There are good signs that this is happening with great speed. I want to make sure that there is no slippage. I will do everything in my power in this House to make sure that project is delivered. I ask the Minister of State to support it in the way his colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Brien does.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I welcome this Bill. It underpins the investment the Government is making in public transport. There is a false narrative which seeks to divide urban and rural Ireland and which states that this Government is all about roads and that the previous Government was all about public transport. That is absolute rubbish. There is investment in MetroLink, which will be a critical project. Deputy McAuliffe mentioned the extension of the Luas to Finglas, which former Fine Gael Deputy Noel Roc, advocated for even as a councillor. It will be transformative for Dublin.

In addition to the other Luas extensions that are proposed, I want to advocate for a Luas extension to Poolbeg. The Minister of State will recall that I raised this as a Topical issue. He was here when I raised it. That was almost a year ago, and I am delighted to say that there has been a lot of progress on and support for the project thanks to the work of the Minister for Transport, the two Ministers of State in the Department, the NTA and the TII. When I raised it earlier with the Taoiseach, he acknowledged the importance of the project proceeding for the enormous village that is being built on the Glass Bottle site in Poolbeg. More than 10,000 people are due to live there and, potentially, an additional 10,000 people will work there.

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, when a study was done in 2016 about that project, the demand was not sufficient, but that all changed. Since I was elected as a TD, I have used every vehicle available to me to advocate for the project. I have met the NTA and TII. I have engaged with the Minister of State and the Minister on this issue.

A new demand survey was taken out, which proved that, with the development of the Glass Bottle site and other adjacent development in the area, there is absolutely a need for an extension to Poolbeg. We were informed as recently as a few weeks ago that the project has moved from phase 1 to phase 2 and that it is hoped that a statutory public consultation relating to the project will begin in 2027. That is a tangible example of how we are making progress in public transport, and in a different form of public transport.

It is fair to say that where we have seen major investment in the past five years is in the area of high-frequency bus routes. I heard many Deputies speak about the challenges they have had in the engagement relating to BusConnects corridors. However, in areas where high-frequency bus routes exist, they are hugely popular and successful. The only frustration people have is when buses do not show up. In other words, when there are ghost buses. That is a big issue with certain bus routes. I have had it in my constituency. In some areas, it is caused by the private operator, Go-Ahead, and, in other cases, it is Dublin Bus that operates the services. When we deliver more high-frequency bus routes, we have to ensure that they are exactly what it says on the tin, namely high-frequency routes, because that is what increases use of public transport. If people know they have to be in college at a certain hour, the bus must pass their door at a particular time. If they know they have to be at work at a certain hour, the bus must arrive to get them there.

Full or packed buses are another problem we have faced with the introduction of high-frequency bus routes. Lots of people want to use them but there is not enough space. That is where Luas and extending light rail comes in. It is blindingly obvious. Many more people can be transported on a Luas, particularly from this area, than on a high-frequency bus route. I should say that it is intended to have a high-frequency bus route to serve the area as well.

What I hope is that there will no let up in the context of the progression of this light rail project.

I hosted a public meeting not so long ago to engage with the community on where this project is at and where it is going, and to listen to people. I was genuinely overwhelmed, both by the attendance at the meeting and the level of interest among people in the issue. The Minister of State would be familiar with what happens when one holds public meetings. I did one a number of years ago on BusConnects where there was huge anguish and real fury about the proposed route through Terenure. There were hundreds of people at the door. What I was trying to do there was ensure that we got people to engage with the process. Unfortunately, that particular bus corridor is currently the subject of a judicial review in the High Court.

We need to learn from this. The way to deal with public transport projects is not to march everyone up a hill and then try to go with the least offensive option at the very end. We need to work with communities right from the beginning. That is what I have tried to do with this Luas to Poolbeg project. I have tried to take the initiative, deliver leaflets, inform people about what is going on, knock on doors and encourage people to come along to public meetings in order to hear their views. There is no question that when you put yourself out there like that as

a politician, particularly as a Government TD, people will ask why the Luas is not there already. They can see the apartments under construction. What I am focused on as a new TD in this Dáil is progress and getting this project over the line.

We know that if you start to deliver a pipeline of projects for light rail, there is no end to what you can do. We have the capital available to continue to invest in public transport. We have not extended the Luas since the cross-city project in 2017. We have to keep extending it in order to meet the demand and make provision in respect of the population growth that is taking place. I hope the Minister of State would support me in the Department in supporting the NTA and the TII as they progress their way through the project. I certainly look forward to working with all local TDs and councillors to get this project over the line.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 is a bit of a misnomer because in lots of ways the legislation is more consequential for Cork and the three regional cities. It extends significant powers of planning. It is important that those powers are used with considerable care and judiciously. It is also important that the powers being given to the NTA, which is a matter that deserves careful consideration, ensures that public consultation is still a strong feature and that points are still taken on board. I will come back to that.

An opportunity is being missed. The Minister of State might consider this and communicate it to the Department. We know that Cork cannot continue to grow in the way that it does while reliant only on cars. We need 21st century public transport. That means a Luas system delivered more quickly than is currently planned and that links north to south in order to bring in areas like Carrigaline and Douglas. There must also be a connection to the airport.

We need to ensure that BusConnects is a success. For it to be a success, we need the bus gates to work. For them to work, we have to have remote enforcement. It is a huge missed opportunity that we have a piece of transport legislation before us that does not contemplate doing that, given that it is absolutely central to the success of BusConnects. It can be a success, but it will not work if people feel there is no advantage to getting the bus and that bus gates are being abused. Unfortunately, at times, the ban on buses and cars on Patrick's Street, or "Pana", is not entirely as effective as it could be.

The other issue I want to raise is something in respect of which I am sure the Minister of State will agree. The Cork Luas has tremendous potential to be a huge success, but the NTA has to listen to the public and ensure that the right route is chosen. What it is proposing in relation to Bishopstown is a huge mistake. The Bishopstown GAA club is potentially going to lose a playing pitch on account of what is planned, and there are all the safety issues that exist. The Luas should absolutely serve Bishopstown but the NTA should return to the first option it looked at. There is no reason that it should not go on Wilton Road. In lots of ways, it will serve more people if it goes along Wilton Road and down from there as opposed to through Bishopstown GAA club and Highfield RFC. I do not agree with that. The NTA should go back to plan A.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I concur with Deputy Ó Laoghaire in the sense that all of us want to see NTA deliver transport systems that actually work for our people, but an absolutely necessary piece is public consultation, which is absolutely lacking at times. We all welcomed

the signing of the new Enterprise fleet. The Dublin to Belfast line is a brilliant service that facilitates the likes of Dundalk. There is a need for a new fleet, but I do not think we will have it until 2028. At the moment, we get complaints about the number of people who want to use the service but who cannot get seats. There is a huge issue regarding Dundalk Clarke Railway Station, where we need to see parking spaces provided. Some spaces were removed previously. I have been over and back with Iarnród Éireann on this matter, but we need to see that. Joanna Byrne would not be too happy if I did not mention the need for a north Drogheda train station but it is about organising this in a proper way.

We all know that we have huge issues in relation to infrastructure. I have asked many questions recently with regard to the N53, not very far from my house, and the particular issues in seeing delivery. However, before when some minor works were happening, they caused a number of leaks in that particular area and so I am afraid when the considerable works start about us being able to deliver it. I am seeing this on a day when people in the likes of Sheelagh and Kilkenny do not have water because of an issue with Dunbin reservoir. I do not think this is acceptable. I accept that it relates to an Uisce Éireann deficit, but I need to put it on record. The telemetry monitor failed and the water ran out as a result. The problem was only discovered when the people of Sheelagh rang me. I rang others. They went out to check the pumps at Hackballscross. This is not the first time this has happened this week. It is a huge issue. I have brought it up with the Taoiseach but I need to draw attention to the infrastructural deficits.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Many people are, understandably, using this debate as an opportunity to raise a lot of transport issues. I will do that in a second, but I would like to raise serious questions about supporting this Bill. I have a few reasons for doing so.

The NTA is requesting an expansion of its power out of Dublin to the rest of the country, but there are serious questions. People hope that there will be good public consultation. What we have seen with the NTA is great public consultation, but it does not take any of the things on board and there is no accountability. I served on a local authority for 11 years. In fairness to the local authorities, there is public consultation, councillors are held accountable by the local community and public meetings are held. Local knowledge of those councillors and TDs becomes a factor in the whole situation, but that goes out the window with the NTA, TII and all the others.

I will provide an example. A huge public meeting was held in my area a couple of weeks ago in respect of a proposal for TII, in conjunction with Fingal County Council and Meath County Council, to build a footbridge. There must have been 150 people in attendance. The footbridge was going to be erected from an open space in a quiet housing estate over the N3 dual carriageway to a service station in an industrial area. No one asked for this. There was no demonstrable need for it. There was no survey about how many people who live in the location in question work in the industrial estate. Obviously, residents were going to raise issues for safety reasons about e-scooters, e-bikes and all these things that can use a footbridge in order to get onto their estate. There was also the question of providing access to the estate that was not there before and the likelihood of antisocial behaviour. The visual and intrusive impact were also raised, as was spending millions of euro of public money on the project that could instead be spent on much-needed community projects. The irony is that the transport authorities are proposing – I have raised it with the Minister of State on many occasions – to

take away a direct bus route from that area into Dublin city. They will spend a few million euro building a bridge to get residents to go where the new bus routes are.

6 o'clock

This is absolute madness. I do not know whether there is just a rake of money in a budget and it is a case of let us see where we can spend it or what but it is nothing to do with active travel. The best active travel would be getting people into the city centre who work there, which is probably an awful lot of people, and to their schools, etc.

I am raising this genuinely because eight years ago there was a consultation on that bus route and hundreds of people wrote in. The Minister of State will have heard TDs from all parties raising this. It was just ignored. Will I vote to give more powers to an unaccountable body when local authorities should have much more of these powers, like they always used to? At least there is some accountability from local councillors answerable to their community. That needs to be considered much more.

I will raise some of the other transport things that have been ignored continually. On BusConnects, there have been public meetings all over the place, including in Chapelizod and in Dublin Bay North. Does anyone in the NTA actually listen and respond to these concerns? The big plan for BusConnects in my area is to put everybody through the busiest shopping centre in the country, Blanchardstown Centre - it is also trying to introduce car-parking charges - to route all the buses through there and make it a hub. As has been said, people do not want to have to get off one bus to get onto another. Also, not everybody has that mobility and this is incredibly ableist. Nobody has listened. That is felt across the community. I am not happy to give more powers to the NTA to go around the country taking consultation and voting out of the hands of local councillors.

I could go on all day about transport needs in Dublin West. The greater Blanchardstown area is not all of Dublin West but it is a lot of it. It is the third biggest urban area, after Cork and Limerick, but it does not have the transport we need. We do not have a Luas or a metro. There is a rail line but it is out of reach for people not in Castleknock, Clonsilla and Ashtown, which is a lot of the population. We have a huge number of multinational companies and people driving into the area every day. There should have been a Luas extension from Broombridge to Blanchardstown Centre. It is a greenfield site and would not cost as much as if it was diverted through a whole load of areas. It is needed for Blanchardstown, given the amount of industry we have as well.

I want to mention an issue that is not in my constituency but that does relate to accountability and transport projects. I did not know about this until I came across it today. It concerns the proposal for the Navan rail line. Obviously, Navan is quite near Blanchardstown. The Dunsany Nature Reserve has informed us it would be split in two under the proposed route. It would be a loss of irreplaceable ancient woodland and mature trees. There are noise issues. It would disrupt a huge number of habitats. It has eight of the nine bat species found in Ireland, for example. It is an internationally renowned rewilding project. Books have been written about it. It would also have an impact on the rivers Slane and Boyne.

People are asking if an alternative route will be considered. Everybody will write the letters but it feels like the power is more and more being taken from ordinary people. We write letters and get everybody to feed into the public consultation. Hundreds of letters go in and then the

NTA, TII or whoever it is continues with the plan. Rarely do they take these matters into account.

I would caution about this Bill being passed. I first became a councillor in 2003 and was elected in 2004. The council used to run the bins and control the water. What does it do now? All these quangos and *ad hoc* third party bodies are being created - the HSE, the NTA, etc. It takes political decisions out of the hands of elected people and hands them over to national bodies and the Government can say, "Ah look, you know, NTA took this decision independently. We have to respect it." Do not get me wrong. I am not saying that just because people oppose something, it is not the right thing. I am saying local communities and councillors who know their areas are being sidelined by the likes of this Bill, which is giving more powers to a national body to build infrastructure which, often, the councils used to propose. Then it would be a statutory public consultation, after which a vote would come back to the local council. I do not agree that we should be moving more and more in the current direction.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The central purpose of the Bill is to allow the NTA use its expertise to expand our regional cities' transport services and bring them up to a more uniform standard. The Green Party supports streamlining of services but the purpose of streamlining needs to be to make things more effective. The Government seems to be doing everything in its power to counter any such efficiency effects.

I questioned the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about this Bill in February and was told it was on the priority publication list for the spring session. Then it was moved to the priority publication list for the summer legislative programme and it was only published in mid May. I am confused as to why this was the case, particularly because at the joint Oireachtas committee I sit on, we decided to waive pre-legislative scrutiny for this legislation in October of last year. That was a decision of Opposition and Government TDs on the committee to move the Bill along in order to support the roll-out of the Cork BusConnects as quickly as possible. When you compare the published Bill to the draft available last year, it seems only 13 words have changed. The Government talks extensively about the €24.3 billion allocated to public transport as part of the national development plan. We have been told this will result in the delivery of, for example, MetroLink by 2035. How does the Government expect the public to believe it can deliver on promises like that when simply altering two sections of this Bill to help the NTA run regional bus services in Cork has taken almost a year? Managing existing public transport services is probably the least ambitious part of the list of public transport plans. If this is any indication of how the Government will proceed, things are looking pretty bleak.

During our time in government, the Green Party introduced or enhanced 180 bus routes for rural areas in just four years. At one stage, a new or enhanced bus route was being launched every single week. That progress has been stalled, the planned routes are being left unfunded and promises to communities all over this country are being broken.

The most immediate impact of this Bill will be felt in the Minister of State's city, Cork, in terms of the delivery of BusConnects. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said in April of this year that he was acutely aware of public transport concerns in Cork. The Minister of State will know from national newspaper headlines earlier this year that there were nearly 3,000 complaints made about Cork bus services in the year prior to that particular statement. Yet it

somehow took a full month for the final approval of this legislation to be provided. That had been sitting on the Minister's desk since August. Some 10% of complaints made about bus services in Cork were made about one route, namely the route serving University College Cork, MTU and Cork University Hospital. That means students, doctors, nurses, patients and family members have been impacted by inaction and by the slowness of the Government's delivery of this legislation.

I do not think that is acceptable. I am sure that as a TD for that area, the Minister of State does not think it is acceptable either. The people deserve an answer about why this particular legislation, which is essential before any of that work on Cork BusConnects can take place, has taken so long.

While I welcome the fact the Bill has finally been published, that question about why so much time has been lost is really important. The Government's Project Ireland 2040 strategy was published in 2018, and it set out that the Cork BusConnects project would be completed by 2027. The phased implementation of the different bus routes was meant to begin by 2023, so we are now three years behind that particular schedule.

In February of this year, the NTA said that if this Bill was enacted, it hoped to submit the first of three packages of strategic transport corridors in Cork - the corridor based in the north of the city - by the end of quarter 2. So, because of the delay in enacting this particular legislation, there is now less than one month left if that particular timeline is going to be met and it is not going to be met. We all know that.

The failure to meet those particular targets does not just impact the delivery of that first package, the corridor in the north of the city, it will have a knock-on impact on the implementation of the other two based in the south of Cork as the NTA's timeframe has these packages placed a further six months after the submission of the first.

I have discussed this matter with my Green Party colleague, Councillor Oliver Moran. He has told me that local representatives are simply not willing to go out and speak to the public in Cork about the timelines that the NTA is giving them because they no longer have confidence in those timelines. They say that they do not trust the NTA to deliver on schedule anymore. Those local representatives have been burned too many times. They have gone out with a timeline, and it has been completely undermined by the lack of action.

There is a lack of clarity on the funding for BusConnects Cork and that is creating a sense that the whole project is in stasis despite the fact there is palpable demand for these services among commuters and there is backing for these services among local representatives as well.

I urge that the Government stops adding to those delays in this area and allows the necessary work to be undertaken for the delivery of BusConnects. It should allow the people who are waiting for these services, those students, nurses, doctors, patients, people from all walks of life who rely on public transport to at least see the potential, a horizon within which a better bus service will be delivered across Cork. Very significant political commitments were made. Timelines were set out. It essential that those timelines are delivered on.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I welcome this Bill. While it is a short and technical Bill which we are talking about today, it is also quite significant because it indicates the seriousness with which this Government is treating the need to overhaul our transport infrastructure.

I represent Dublin Rathdown and from Stepside to Stillorgan and all the various townlands throughout my constituency, including Ballinteer, Cabinteely and Dundrum, I regularly hear from commuters struggling with cramped Luas carriages, ghost buses, disappearing cycle lanes and congested roads. I acknowledge, however, that public transport is improving. For example, more than 55 million passenger journeys were taken on Luas services alone in 2025. I also welcome the consideration of extending the green Luas line along the eastern bypass route and I look forward to seeing how that is developed.

We are on the right track, forgive the pun, but more needs to be done. For example, we need faster delivery. I appreciate that the Government's Critical Infrastructure Bill will make a real difference to these delivery times but we also need to look at other areas of transport to see how we can make a difference. For example, one of the most common issues my constituents contact me about is who they should approach when a transport problem has arisen. When I follow up with them, I also get a similar response from the various State agencies and local authorities, saying that it is not their area of responsibility.

While this Bill is trying to address a key issue of connectivity, responsibility and accountability, we also have existing issues. I ask the Minister to look at how greater administrative and organisational clarity can be provided across the various State agencies.

I hope that by expanding the remit of the NTA in this Bill, it will be a first step in providing that level of clarity because it recognises that we need that greater level of co-ordination. I ask that the Minister looks at reviewing the various transport bodies operating in the greater Dublin area. They have overlapping responsibilities, and they have challenges around co-ordination. Would the Minister consider a single authority for the greater Dublin area?

The NTA certainly partly fulfils its function but many aspects that I have encountered continue to be retained or delegated to various transport providers, oversight bodies and the local authorities. Thus, with so many bodies, co-ordinating and planning becomes harder, and I fear it ultimately risks a poor return for the taxpayer.

Other European cities, for example, operate a single or two-authority approach. In Amsterdam, which is similar-sized city to Dublin in terms of population, the GBB runs the trams, the metros, the ferry and the bus services with cycle paths and open spaces under the authority of a single city local authority. In Dublin, we have four local authorities through which investment in the development of the cycle network via active travel funding is delegated.

Since 2022, nearly €600 million has been invested in these active travel schemes across the four Dublin local authorities and this could reach €1 billion by 2030. However, these schemes have not had the impact that was hoped. The lack of co-ordination may be part of the reason because these schemes were designed to encourage a modal shift that would encourage people to leave the car at home and instead cycle to work, school, shops, friends and family. This would result in two benefits: to reduce the use of motor vehicles to free up the road; and to reduce emissions.

However, there is a distinct lack of evidence that after six years of investment this spend has resulted in either of these objectives being achieved. There are two key reasons for this. I have spoken previously in the Chamber about the complex social and economic barriers to many taking up cycling and making the shift to cycling, and in particular the barriers for

women. Women account for just one in four cyclists in Ireland. Only one in five people cycling to work are women. While these challenges can be overcome, and we can certainly encourage our girls and women to enjoy the benefits that cycling provides, as other countries that have a more equal balance between the genders have proven, it is certainly a generational change that will be required, and this will require changes in many areas of society. A recently published paper on why young girls in Ireland do not cycle is titled, *It is a Boy's Thing*, so we have a significant challenge from a very young age among our young women.

The second reason the active travel scheme has not been as successful as hoped is relevant to this legislation. There has not been an overall strategic and co-ordinated approach to the implementation of these routes. We have had a role out of closed roads, the removal of filter lanes, changed traffic lights sequences and the removal of motor vehicle lanes but never any real consideration what these changes will have on the wider transport network because the traffic does not just disappear. It is diverted, and where is it diverted to is one of the key issues.

Throughout the roll out of these schemes, there has been limited if any engagement with transport providers about how they are going to manage this additional transport. There has been limited, if any, attempt to measure the outcomes on traffic movements and patterns - the actual change in cycle, pedestrian and motor vehicle journeys.

Funding for these schemes is provided to local authorities to implement them but this is resulting in what is effectively a patchwork of cycle improvements with few, if any, connected journeys and a lack of a comprehensive cycling infrastructure within a geographic or townland locality. This results in frustrations being felt by everybody. The cyclists who continue to have broken journeys, with a mixture of safe and unsafe routes, and other road users who can visibly see underutilised cycle lanes while they sit in traffic. The congestion is increasing and, of course, from an emissions point of view, the longer a motorist sits in traffic, the greater the emissions which, again, might explain why we are not seeing a difference in those outcomes.

All of this may explain why the NTA's canal cordon survey, which measures the journeys taken by people on a daily basis, shows that the number of cycle journeys since 2019 are 3,000 fewer. In other words, there are fewer people cycling across the canals than six years ago. All other forms of transport increased. So, again, we do not have an understanding of what is actually going on because we are not really doing the in-depth research around that. Trying to make the right decisions and taking the learnings from all of the spending in the past number of years is important if we are going to ensure that we make these transitions.

We need real data. We need meaningful engagement, and we need effective co-ordination on transport planning. This is essential in order to keep the city moving and to enable people to make the journeys they need to make in our city. This Bill is a small but important step in that overall journey, and I ask the Minister to continue that journey and take on board some of the issues I have highlighted.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is a short Bill on paper, but one that carries significant consequences for how transport is planned and delivered across the country. Nobody on this side of the House is against better public transport. Far from it. For far too long, rural Ireland and regions like west Cork have been left behind when it comes to investment in transport infrastructure. People in our communities have been crying out for reliable bus services, safer networks and real connectivity for decades. In principle, any effort to improve delivery and

bring investment into the regions is to be welcomed, but - and it is a very big but - we need to be absolutely clear about what the Bill is doing. This legislation hands significant powers to a centralised body, the National Transport Authority, allowing it to step beyond the greater Dublin area and effectively act as a national infrastructure delivery agency. Up until now, the NTA has had these powers primarily in Dublin. This Bill expands that model nationwide. This means that decisions about transport infrastructure in Cork, Kerry, Donegal or anywhere else could increasingly be taken in Dublin offices rather than the local authorities in local communities. That raises serious questions. Infrastructure is not just about roads and bus corridors. It is about people, communities, businesses and local realities. One size does not fit all. What works in central Dublin with a dense population, short travel distances and existing public transport networks does not translate neatly into rural Ireland or regional towns. Will this Bill genuinely deliver balanced regional development or will it simply extend a Dublin-centric model across the country?

We are told that this about efficiency, speeding up delivery and cutting red tape. However, my experience of the NTA is completely the opposite. As a Cork man, it is something that the Minister of State needs to understand. My experience of the NTA is poor. The NTA is poor on delivery. It is poor on communication. It kind of reminds of Uisce Éireann, although I do not think it was like that at one time. It is like it is untouchable. We cannot communicate with it. We cannot make sense.

It is about small things, small improvements and common-sense improvements. I have been on the board of Local Link for 20 years. I never took a brown cent. When people hear the word "board", they think we are all on the coin. I never took a brown cent from it because it delivered. In the past two years, we are delivering nothing to the people. We are looking for a loop in Castletownshend. There is a bus service going down to Castletownshend. People are very happy with that. It is the same with the Mizen one. For the past year and a half, they have been pleading for a loop so that the service could go in one way and out another. It is as simple as that. A child could put it together for the NTA. Will it make a move, though? Will it sit down and talk to people? Not at all. It is above everybody. If we go down to Mizen Head, we are looking for another loop. The bus goes in one way and takes the bus out the same road. We are asking about going in one way and out the other. It is not one foot extra. It takes in about an extra 15 to 20 houses along the route, which would be fantastic, especially for elderly people who do not have a transport service. There was no answer and no movement.

Now, the Government wants to give that same body powers, pat it on the back and tell it to take over more responsibilities so that it can shut the people out. That is not good enough. I do not want to stand here being critical because we did get new services, and we are very glad to have them. It was more than just one or two. There is the one from the Beara. There is the one going down into Kilcrohane and Bantry. They are brilliant services. However, there needs to be a little bit of a door opened where people can talk and resolve issues.

Let us move to the next situation. When I talk about Castletownshend, I am talking about people like Councillor Daniel Sexton, who is getting it in the ear. He is our councillor down there. People are telling him that he cannot deliver, is useless or whatever. All the other councillors are hearing the same thing. It is the same with Councillor Danny Collins down in Kealkill. I cannot understand how the NTA does this. It put forward a tender for Dunmanway, Clonakilty, Grange and Timoleague. Tenders were put out and got back. Prices were got, but

it was a case of saying "Sorry" because there was no money. In the name of God, it is like going to the shop to buy a bag of spuds and having no money in your pocket. You would not go to the shop. You would stay at home. It is the very same situation in Kealkill, Bantry and Macroom. Tenders were sought and got, but then there was no money. It was like a farce. That is not the way to treat people. The people of Kealkill have no bus service. The people of Grange have no bus service. The people of Timoleague are begging for a service. The people of Castlestownshend and the Mizen want to change the service and make slight changes.

The NTA needs to sit down with the local board. It cannot sit down with everybody, and I accept that. At the very least, it could sit down with a local politician - good God Almighty, we are elected to do something for our people - and give answers. If it does not have the money now, I do not know why it put out a tender for something, but it can say that it will in two or three months. God Almighty, it a closed door because every time it does that, it will have to retender because of the way things are going with fuel and everything. Things have become much more expensive.

It comes down to the Bantry, Kealkill and Macroom councillor, Danny Collins, getting it in the neck, and myself as a public representative. Our job is to reply and to fight for those services because these people have not got an existing transport service. That is because the Government made promises beyond its reach. It should not have done that. It has to come back, and somebody has to sit down and say that a mistake was made but that they will rectify that in a month's time. At this present time, though, it is not being rectified.

I have talked to people in Mayo. I talked to Councillor Chris Maxwell. He told me that the Killeen-Killadoon section needs to be reinstated on the Westport-Louisburgh-Killeen-Killadoon bus route. That section has been discontinued. Again, it is a huge inconvenience to people. It is like giving a dog a bone and pulling it away from them. It is going to agitate people, so why does the Government do these things?

My concern is that, reading the Bill, the Government wants to give the NTA more powers. More powers to do what? To tell people that they cannot have a service? We have to look beyond the usual "No, no, no" to "Maybe". We can look at places like Drinagh, Caheragh and Kealkill. They have no service. However, there is a service coming very close to them. I said to the NTA that instead of creating a new service, it could maybe extend the service a little here and a little there and cut out costs. I can see costs. I hate to say the word "shot", but I could be for saying this. The Killarney to Skibbereen service is being used during the summer, but I sometimes wonder whether its frequency is as necessary in the winter. There can be cuts. I would not be one bit ashamed to sit down and say we should look at the numbers. However, let us deliver a proper service to people who do need it because Kealkill's is a desperate service. It has nothing. I met the residents there. People in Drinagh and Caheragh have no service. It is a terrible situation to be in that they cannot see a bus pass their doors. I have lived in that situation for long enough on the Mizen Peninsula. There were little or no services. Now, there are great services. I commend the people who delivered that. The bottom line is that more can be done, though. Unfortunately, nobody wants to sit down and talk to us. I have my councillors pleading with me to try to deliver.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I would meet the Deputy any time.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am not blaming the Minister of State. He is not the NTA. I will sit down with him, though. God Almighty, I would be delighted to do that. I appreciate his offer. I take-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy never came to me once.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am onto the NTA. I am on the board. I should not have to come to the Minister of State. I am there as a volunteer to deliver for people through the right channels, not to be running to the Minister of State's door every five minutes. I will go to the Minister of State, though. I appreciate that and anyone who offers an open door. I am not coming here to criticise. I am coming here to create solutions. There are solutions there. There is not a need to be blowing a budget here and there because we cannot get every little corner in the country serviced. I respect that. However, the corners that can be serviced with the service that is already there need to be looked into. The Minister of State said his door was open, but the problem is that the door of the NTA is rammed shut. There is something up against it because we cannot open it and cannot get a discussion open on little loops to further enhance a service that is already in existence or answers to the questions about why it tendered for Dunmanway, Clonakilty, Grange and Timoleague and could not deliver. Why did it tender for Bantry, Kealkill and Macroom if it could not deliver? That is wrong. That has to be overturned and looked at.

I plead with the Minister of State to look at the Castletownhend loop and the Mizen loop because, while I will not say I have given up, I have banged so much on that door that my knuckles are worn. The NTA is not listening and will not open that door. I want to meet with it. As I am a member, I want to bring it before the transport committee to answer questions. However, that is not the way it should happen. There should be dialogue between the public representatives and the system that we have, which is the NTA. Now, the Government wants to give it more powers. I am very concerned about giving it more liberty and power when it cannot cope with the power that it has at the moment. I ask the Minister of State to look at those areas that I spoke about. I am not trying to throw a spanner in the works and say that everything is negative, but there is certainly a lot of frustration out there about services that were promised and not delivered and others that could be issued or extended.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: There is the issue in the legislation itself, there is the bigger picture nationally and then of course there are the more parochial local issues. I am not quite sure, but I know I have been shifted around in the speaking rota so I will deal with the local issues first in case I have to cede the time later on in the discussion and, if not, I will use it to elaborate on the bigger issues. The Government is talking about widening the NTA's remit across the country. I have an issue with the NTA's remit here in Dublin that I have mentioned before. One of the questions on my Bus Connect survey of two years ago was whether or not the NTA should be managed more directly and, in a Dublin context, that would be from a directly elected mayor. This is casting no aspersions on the staff working in the NTA, who I acknowledge are dedicated, but as an institution and organisation the NTA is not fit for purpose. It is not fit for reflecting the views expressed to it by individuals collating all that information. So far with BusConnects I have found that it is discriminating against people with disabilities and older people with bus passes. They are the ones who are least able to hop on, hop off and

use the apps. Maybe the hope is that by the time the whole thing rolls out they will have died out, which I think would be quite a cynical approach. If we look at people with disabilities for example, at the moment usually only one wheelchair can fit on a bus. It is hugely discommoding for someone to have to get off a bus and try to get another wheelchair-accessible bus to get from A to B, when they were able to do that in one go originally.

Similarly with older people, I have used the app and in some cases it is faster to get from A to B by timing stuff and looking at maps and when it works, it works well. As I have said before as well, when BusConnects rolls out and if it is properly staffed, people in my survey expressed confidence that it would work quite well and when it was rolled out and properly staffed, it would be like the London Underground, but overground. However, it is not working like that at all. That is because of buses not turning up and staff shortages. Every time a new route is put on an existing route has to be robbed from. People have not faith in the process or that the spine routes will have enough capacity. On the one hand, I have people involved in Dublin Bus telling me that the company could put an auxiliary route on halfway along to catch up where buses are already full. Then the NTA comes back and says that it will allow that but if it happens two or three days on an ongoing basis, a full route will have to be provided. That is not necessarily workable because those auxiliary buses are there for specific instances, particularly with all the hybrid working right now, and when we add in concerts, school events, weekend events, etc. There needs to be the flexibility of an auxiliary service whereby if people are waiting too long, an auxiliary bus can be started halfway along a route. At the same time, there are L buses that are not turning up, so what is supposed to be a half-hourly service turns into an hourly service. In Lucan we have a number of GAA clubs, one of which is Garda Westmanstown Gaels, located between Lucan and Clonsilla. If the L52 does not turn up and people are trying to go to training, for example, they are stuck. The traffic along that route between Clonsilla and Lucan is a nightmare at the best of times, but particularly at peak time in the evenings when people are trying to get somewhere.

With another GAA club, Lucan Sarsfields, it is different in that there is not a bus route in the first place. People have no choice but to drive there. I do not want to get into mentioning specific routes that have problems but I could list some, such as the 13, about which people have expressed views. The 80 is a temporary solution and we will be back arguing what is going to happen with the 80 in a couple of months time. There are issues with the L51 and L52 not turning up. We have issues with the C spines. We have an issue in Adamstown where, because of delays, the NTA ran a route down Adamstown Boulevard for two years as a temporary route, pending finding another temporary route that is going closer to the long-term route. Meanwhile, they have built another 5,000 houses and people are wondering why they cannot have that route along the boulevard. From Adamstown Station, along Adamstown Boulevard there could be a reconstituted 25 route through the village and into town.

In essence, there is no response to the needs of users when they express their frustration at the bus service. That is what I mean when I say the NTA is not fit for purpose. A directly elected mayor for the greater Dublin area or for Dublin could look at these issues, take on board what people are saying, respond and, if a mistake is made, adjust it again. The NTA seems to be coming from a position of it knowing what is best. It does not, because if it did people would not be cheesed off constantly.

That brings me to the bigger national issue in terms of what we need to be doing for routes. I am not from a rural constituency, but in the lifetime of the previous Government we had a massive roll-out of rural Local Link services, which seems to have slowed down a little bit now. I am all for people being able to live in the rural communities they grew up in. I am also supportive of bringing some of the population from hard-pressed areas like Dublin to rural areas. I have mentioned before that in terms of policy for the software and pharmaceutical industries we could have a golden triangle between Tullamore, Mullingar and Athlone. There are lots of small towns and villages around there that could do with a few extra students for schools. West of the Shannon the same thing could apply with hybrid working or community working hubs where people should be able to get a local bus along a route and work from home some of the time and repopulate the areas where the schools are losing teachers. While the population nationally and in major urban centres is going up, it is falling in rural areas. We need to support rural Ireland with a transport system that works. In one of my first speeches during my first term as a TD I remarked on how the train network in the 1950s was massively bigger than it is now. There is no reason in the world why we should not be building that rail gauge as well and focusing on that type of investment.

I want to refer to our planning laws. In south Dublin, the Government wants to be seen to be doing something about the housing crisis. In an area of south Dublin there is zoning for 56,000 housing units, with 12,000 with planning applications *in situ*. The Government is now proposing another 9,000 units in areas such as Lucan, where we have a massive number of houses yet to be built in areas like Clonburris and Adamstown, where people cannot get basic amenities like parking spaces and where there is no solution for putting in a cable to charge an EV. People are told not to worry about it because they are right beside a train station. It is not utopia. Deputy Shane Moynihan had a go at me on "The Late Debate" for saying that in 20 years these are going to be ghettos. I did not say that because they are badly built but because if there are not amenities and infrastructure and a proper 15-minute city where people can walk and have all the facilities beside each other, it is going to create social unrest. In Adamstown we have a related policy where my proposal for a department store was turned down by South Dublin County Council because it would upset the retail hierarchy of Liffey Valley and Tallaght. Therefore, people have to get the bus to Liffey Valley to do their shopping, or a lot of the time they have to drive because they cannot rely on the bus turning up. Transport and planning are absolutely interlinked.

I have not got absolute clarity on it but I know there is a plan to upgrade the grid for the DART+ South West but I am not absolutely sure. I have put in a few parliamentary questions about when that grid capacity will be guaranteed as well as the funding for the DART+ South West. Until the Government provides that service to cater for the existing planned extra 10,000 houses between Lucan and Clondalkin it cannot talk about rezoning more land and creating more unsustainable areas. Similarly, the Luas for Lucan was originally supposed to be completed by now. Now, however, looking at the renewed emerging preferred route it will not be completed until 2036. We are living in a public transport desert where people do not have sufficient access to get around the greater Dublin area in the way that is required. People can go in and out of town and I acknowledge there have been improvements between Blanchardstown, Lucan, Clondalkin and Tallaght, but we do not have enough of the critical short-term routes that are reliable so that people will say, "You know what, I will put the kids

on the bus and we will go to the crèche that way," or, "I know I can get to work reliably, I will drop them off *en route* and get back on within the 90-minute plan."

It has not worked and we need more direct political control along with independent analysis of the services to make sure we have something that is fit for purpose.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. I had been a county councillor for 11 years back in 2010 when Government expanded the DTA to become the NTA. I may have the dates wrong but I am roughly right. This Bill provides a big opportunity. I agree with a lot of what the previous speaker said. There is a real democratic deficit when it comes to the NTA. I suspect the public view of the NTA is not hugely positive. I want to defend it by saying that very often when its schemes are completed the furore calms down and people say actually that is a good piece of work. I was at Parnell Park on Sunday to watch the Dubs in the hurling match. I went out the cycleway, the Fairview one. That road has sufficient width and there is room for everybody. It has a cycle track, a dedicated bus lane and traffic lanes with the same on the other side of the road. It is an excellent piece of work. There were a lot of eggs broken making that omelette, but it is a bespoke piece of infrastructure.

Back in 2010 the Dublin transportation office was all about bus rapid transit. Those are the bendy buses as the Dubs called them. They are to be seen everywhere in Europe. They are in Belfast and Derry. I remember putting around a leaflet in the 2009 local election campaign, proud as punch that this was the next piece of infrastructure that was going to come in. Then the DTA became the NTA. God knows how much money was spent on the bus rapid transit. Bendy buses disappeared because people would be standing too long in them. The people in the NTA then came back to the double decker buses without the central door - they previously had the double decker buses with the centre door. Then they bought a fleet of buses without the centre door. A few years later they decided they liked the centre door and they did away with the buses without the centre door. Then they had the bus pull-ins at bus stops. Then they decided they did not want the bus pull-ins at bus stops and did away with the bus pull-ins. They cannot make up their minds. It leads to an impression that they do not know what they are doing sometimes. That is terribly disparaging for the really good engineers who work there, men and women, and there are some fine people.

They also engage in a lot of desktop stuff which wastes a colossal amount of public money. What Deputy Gogarty said is right. They come before a transport committee. Time is limited to five or six minutes for those on the committee - I am not on the transport committee. Then they come to do a public session in Buswells and we get to have a few minutes from an official. A senior official in the NTA said to me with a wry smile, "You're the Deputy who writes all the letters." I was really taken aback and said, "Actually it's my job to do it. Let it pass." There is not an adequate mechanism for public representatives to liaise with the NTA. Whose fault is that? It is Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's fault because we created the legislation. It was also the fault of the Green Party the last time. The Minister has an opportunity to do something to rectify this now and build in something really democratic.

We have all experienced what happens. When a scheme comes in, county councillors on the ground say it is not down to them because it is Government policy. TDs say that actually the council designed it. Everybody is fobbing off responsibility. The public wake up and the first they hear about a scheme is when they see the diggers in the road and they want to know

who decided it, who voted for it, who is responsible for it and who they can talk to about it. Everybody is running a mile from it because there is not an identifiable structure. I do not know who is responsible for the schemes. I know the council designed it. When I was a councillor, I know they all had to go out to full Part 8. There is this section 156 which seems to replace that so there is only minor consultation about it. The public consultation of local authorities is just not comprehensive enough. There need to be genuine public meetings properly set up and properly advertised.

I will give one example. I have said this to the NTA. I could speak for an hour on this, as most of my colleagues could. The active travel scheme involves walking and cycling. My area has a number of active travel schemes that are really good but they have resulted in impeding the movement of public transport. I remember having a conversation with an engineer and asked what side of the NTA they were talking to and they said it was active travel. I asked if they had spoken to the BusConnects side. They said they had not because their budget was coming from active travel. It is still the same road space.

I will finish with this. Way back in the day there was a road that we, as councillors, called the green route because it was drawn in green on a map. It connected the N81, which is the Tallaght bypass, all the way out parallel to the M50 to Leopardstown. There was sufficient road width and public realm space for 95% of that route to actually create a connection between the red Luas line and the green Luas line. In the absence of funding for that, there was still sufficient road width to put cycle lanes on either side of the road, proper bus corridors and actually landscape them really nicely. The bus corridor could have been behind trees and not just purely on the road. On some stretches of it there is a double cycle track, then it meets a cycle track on one side of the road and a cycle track on the other side of the road. All I know is this: they have gobbled up the space that could be used for a dedicated bus corridor from the Tallaght bypass to Leopardstown at a time when the M50 is saturated with traffic - a parallel public transport route. It makes no sense to me and I do not understand it.

Here is probably our one opportunity in this term to give public representatives and the public a real voice in how the NTA does its business.

Deputy John Connolly: I cannot say that I did not have concerns about this Bill when I noted it on the summer legislative agenda. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding of its intention. As I had read it, my concept was that this was a further centralising of the decision-making process on transport policy by the NTA at the expense of local authority members. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has assured me that is not the intention of the change and that will not be its impact, which I welcome. However, I have to speak from a regional perspective. In Galway when we debate transport policy and transport infrastructure projects, I cannot help feeling at times that Galway is an afterthought for the NTA. Maybe people from other regional cities think similarly. Maybe people from Dublin think that too much of the NTA time focuses on the regional cities. I have often thought that it might be an idea to have two separate authorities, one transport authority for the greater Dublin region and one for the regional cities.

I share some of the concerns that I have heard expressed by other Members, including Deputy Lahart before me. We only have this opportunity to get this right and we should use it to make sure that we do that. One of the things that is notable about the existing 2008 legislation creating the Dublin Transport Authority, subsequently the National Transport

Authority, is that one of the members of the NTA board is the CEO of Dublin City Council. While that is probably appropriate, the same opportunity is not presented to the CEO of Cork City Council, Galway City Council or Limerick City and County Council. While that may not have any significant meaning, the inference could be that Dublin gets greater priority from the NTA than the regional cities. We should do everything we can to ensure that is not the case and that it is not even inferred by the operation of the NTA.

I got some good news yesterday regarding transport planning in Galway, that the NTA has commenced the development of the Galway metropolitan area transport strategy. It is the only city that has not had its transport strategy reviewed since 2016. That decision was made based on the fact that a central part of the transport strategy, the Galway city ring road, had not been decided upon - the planning process had not been completed. That was completed last night and now we are moving on to develop a transport strategy in Galway with that as a focus or a central part of it.

I think it will start with a review of the existing Galway transport strategy. Unfortunately, the reality is that review will show that much of what was planned in the 2016 strategy has been unfulfilled. Other than the redevelopment of Ceannt Station with the development of the five platforms there and a number of active travel measures across the city, we have not seen significant development of transport or public transport infrastructure in Galway city.

I will provide an example of how frustrating this can be for members of a local authority when they feel they have some input into the transport policy of the local authority. In October 2022, which is coming up on four years ago, when I was as a member of the local authority, I first received a presentation from the Galway park and ride strategy team. It was done via Zoom because the team was based in Dublin. It presented us with what the park and ride strategy for Galway city would be. It included the development of park and ride facilities on the N83, north of Claregalway; on the N6, which is the Galway-Dublin road; and at Oranmore train station. They were seen as the sites that would be prioritised. Four years later, however, we have yet to see land purchased for the facilities on the N83 or the N6. We are also yet to see the planning application being made to extend the car parking provision at Oranmore train station. It is deeply frustrating.

We have since seen the policy changed somewhat, which I welcome. There is now a proposal to develop a park and ride facility on the western side of the city on the end of the Western Distributor Road. That is welcome. However, to highlight something Deputy Lahart spoke about, there is a lack of co-ordination with regard to the relationship between the NTA and the local authority, and even within the NTA itself. There is no bus priority measure from that park and ride site on the west of the city. The bus will leave the park and ride facility and join regular traffic. I cannot see the public accepting or using that. The most bizarre part of the story is that the NTA brought forward and completed a Part 8 planning process for active travel cycle lanes on that same road. It should and could have developed bus priority measures along the same road to ensure that the park and ride facility would be used by the public. I cannot understand how the Part 8 was brought forward for cycle lanes but not for bus priority. It is not that I oppose the cycle lanes - I welcome them - but, as Deputy Lahart said, there seems to be a lack of co-ordination between active travel and public transport within the NTA.

There is one part of the city I must mention in the context of Galway's bus strategy, namely, the Upper Ballymoneen Road. It needs a bus turning bay, which is a simple provision. I ask the Minister of State to look at that.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Government has failed consistently in the delivery of transport infrastructure. Projects experience delays, costs mount and progress occurs at a snail's pace. I am proud to have been representing the people of Limerick in this House for over a decade. It has been the honour of my life. I tend to travel to Dublin by public transport, most regularly by train. Upon arriving in Dublin, I mostly use public transport to get to Leinster House. What I notice most – I am sure other Deputies will concur – is the contrast in provision of public transport in Dublin compared to Limerick. In Limerick, like many other counties, public transport provision is inadequate and forces people to depend on their car to commute. In Limerick, one will find buses serving roads with no bus infrastructure or no buses serving an area with bus infrastructure. One such area of Limerick is the Condell Road. There are approximately 400 houses and apartments and all the infrastructure for bus services along this road. The bus lane was put in when I was on the council, which is over ten years ago. It has bus lanes and bus shelters, but there is still no local bus service in the area, which is a farcical situation for those living there. Many of those people do not have cars. Not everyone has the luxury of having their own personal vehicle. Hundreds of people live in this urban area with no functioning public transport route.

The Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy, LSMATS, was published in December 2022, an ambitious 20-year strategy to deliver sustainable public transport infrastructure for the region. It had great promise. Initial drafts included a commitment to the delivery of the long sought-after northern distributor road, which has been acknowledged as being crucial for the development of the entire region. Indeed, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, a Fine Gael party colleague of the Minister of State and my constituency colleague, said in 2021:

The Northern Distributor Road is a key piece of road infrastructure for Limerick and is vital for balanced connectivity and development across our city, including the provision of public bus transportation links.

Yet, when the strategy was published, the northern distributor road was a glaring omission from the document, as it was from the national development plan.

Recently, the Coonagh to Knockalisheen Distributor Road, which some consider the first section of a northern distributor road, was opened. It is only partially built. The first two sections are done and they have had a huge positive impact already on the traffic on the north side of Limerick city. I was on that road yesterday, as was Deputy Toole, whom I see sitting in the Chamber. It allowed us to get from Moyross to Dooradoyle in under ten minutes, which would have been inconceivable years ago. It is ridiculous, however, that some who live on the north side of such a small city must get two buses if they are studying at the University of Limerick or working in the adjacent technology park. If this Bill is passed, I hope this project can be considered and implemented.

That is only one of a list of problems with public transport in Limerick, however. Perhaps the next most important issue is the delivery of BusConnects. We are already seeing a four-year delay in the delivery of BusConnects. It is impacting the economic development and

liveability of Limerick. Every time we look for an improvement in bus services, we are told we have to wait for BusConnects to be done. Many times in this Chamber I have raised issues about University Hospital Limerick and the growing population in Limerick and the wider mid-west region. The growth in population also makes the delivery of a functional, affordable and reliable public transport system critical. Limerick BusConnects has the potential to transform connectivity within the city and its suburbs, improving access to employment and education while reducing congestion and delivering on commitments to sustainability. Yet, we see no desire to provide the urgently needed funding for BusConnects in Limerick. If we have to wait for BusConnects, I ask the Minister of State and others to intervene to ensure that we have a bus on the Condell Road. People living there must have some sort of access to public transport because, at the moment, their nearest public transport option is approximately 30 minutes walk away. Many of them have small children and do not own cars.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I preface my remarks about public transport in Meath East and my reservations about the extension of the remit of the National Transport Authority by commending the individual staff members across all ranks within the National Transport Authority, Bus Éireann and Irish Rail, as applicable to County Meath. However, I will list off the following reservations. I could probably echo everything that Deputies Gogarty and Lahart said.

As County Meath is a rural county, albeit one under strong urban influence, I will provide some rural context to the debate. Last week, Oireachtas Members received a briefing from the senior management team of Meath County Council. Our population, as per the 2022 census, stood at 220,000 people. A total of 60,834 drove to work, while 4,959 went to work by bus and a further 1,241 travelled to work by train. I do not have the exact figures for 2026 but we know that the county's growth was 13%. In my municipal district of Ratoath, coupled with Ashbourne, the population growth has been closer to 30%, hence why I said the area is under strong urban influence. If we also take into account decarbonisation zones, of which there are nine in Meath, the top contributor to carbon emissions across the board is transport. It would, therefore, strike one as being a no-brainer to optimise our public transport offering in County Meath, particularly in the areas of increasing population and those closest to the city.

I welcome the announcement last week of the preferred option route for the Navan rail line. There are plenty of opportunities in that regard, even through the public consultation. I know, having met some of the currently impacted landowners, that there will be some constructive solutions coming forward in that regard. We absolutely have to aim for the best offering to reach the widest number of residents in the county, particularly for those who commute out of the county and, more importantly, for that increasing number of people commuting into our relatively new FDI companies that have located in the county.

I will provide some context as to where I am going with this. Primarily, I have a major concern about the expansion of the remit of the NTA because we have some legacy issues where the public transport offering is not keeping pace with the growth of the county and the needs of residents. Even on social media as it stands, we have residents raising their concerns about their commute and whether they will relocate. I try to be solution-focused. Since 2016, I started the process of meetings with Bus Éireann.

7 o'clock

In 2018, we added the NTA to those meetings. Everybody was courteous, lots of solutions were put forward and there was listening and hearing to some degree, but what need now in County Meath is action.

We are very aware of Bus Éireann and the recruitment issues that beleaguered the organisation up to quite recently. It informed me a couple of months ago that drivers and mechanics have been recruited but that a fleet is now required. I am concerned that the NTA focus tends to be myopic. I get off the bus on O'Connell Street and walk up to Leinster House at the beginning of the day and do the reverse in the evening. I have to say that I seriously envy this city in the context of the fleet of very young vehicles that traverse it. I might get on to a groaning, creaking 171 or 161 to get back home to County Meath. There is definitely room for improvement in that regard.

We welcome the extension of the bus corridor to the M3 Parkway and the announcement of the increase in rail services. That will be a game-changer. On the bus in the morning, I might take a photo of the traffic backed up along by Kepak. At that stage, I am usually sitting on the bridge in Clonee wondering if I will make the disability matters committee meeting at 9.30 a.m. on a Wednesday morning. I might frantically send a text ahead, run a bit and walk a bit along O'Connell Street in order to get in here on time. The reason is the traffic jams and the fact that certain buses do not show up. A simple example is USB faults on some buses, some of which were off the road for two days as a result of the turnaround time and the knock-on effects.

My concerns are well founded. Before going out to the other urban conurbations, can we please get County Meath up to scratch? About three years ago, I carried out a survey. We are looking for a link bus to the M3 Parkway. We received 1,200 signatures of known persons within 36 hours, so there is massive need for that service. Park-and-ride facilities fall under the remit of the NTA. A great deal of work is being done in that regard, but I caution as to whether we could have park-and-ride facilities to the north of Ashbourne, Ratoath and Dunshaughlin in particular, because the traffic through Meath is funnelled from Cavan, south Monaghan and parts of Louth.

It is no longer the spoke effect of travel directly to the city centre. We have travel east and west to workplaces in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and Fingal. Transport options need to reflect that movement of people. The 109A service to Dublin Airport and, very importantly, Dublin City University has been seriously curtailed. Students under pressure to make exams or lectures are having to get off buses in Phibsboro and switch over if the 109 or the 103 are running late, as they invariably are through no fault of the drivers involved. The delays are caused by traffic congestion. It is a chicken-and-egg situation. If the service is provided to and from Meath, commuters will use it. It will take more vehicles off the road and the congestion, air quality and all of the other issues will be alleviated.

In the area of complaints and customer feedback, Liz who works with me suggested to the NTA something which we see in other jurisdictions, namely a simple QR code at a bus stop that can be scanned. Otherwise, people have to log on to the TFI website, which is cumbersome. People are worried at that point as to whether they should run for the train at the M3 Parkway or hitch a lift. I have often gone with two or three people when we have been left behind, put them into my car and told them to text their parents to say they were with me and

that we were heading for the train. If there was a QR code at the bus stop and on the buses, that would seriously improve the real time situation and feed into the app we all use.

On tap on, tap off, are we seriously talking about tit being three years away? If you visit the UK or France and do not have an Oyster card or a Lignes d'Azur card, you can take out your bank card and tap on. I know there are limitations to importing Leap information but all of these simple things will encourage customer buy-in.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, it would be completely remiss of me not to flag the most serious issue. I refer here, and I stand to be corrected, to the breach of Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to live well within their communities. That is not really feasible if they have to give 24 hours of advanced notice to order their seat on the bus. A bus may come along that does not have the dropped floor or the bus stop - which I know is the remit of the local authority - is not sufficient to equalise the levels for them to alight the bus. There are simple solutions on offer in this regard.

For active and sustainable travel, funding is required for Ratoath and Dunshaughlin to ensure pedestrian safety and to slow vehicles. Walkability audits were carried out two or three years ago. Funding for that would be very welcome. I implore the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to ensure that Meath's public transport options are expanded and optimised before the remit of the NTA is expanded.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím le go leor rudaí is a bhí an Teachta Toole ag rá, go háirithe maidir le daoine faoi mhíchumas. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbíonn muid ag smaoineamh faoi na daoine sin. The Minister of State is aware of the work of Ciarán Delaney in Cork. In Dublin, bíonn go leor daoine faoi mhíchumas ag cur glaoch ar m'oifig. Is é an rud is uafásaí ná a bheith ag éisteacht leis na scéalta sin, go háirithe nuair a mhíníonn siad go raibh siad ag iarraidh dul chun na hoibre an lá sin, but the bus came and there was already someone on it with a pram. As a result, I could not get on. They are working. There are times people should move or when there is already one person on board. I welcome the announcement that there will be two or three spots for people with disabilities. As my colleague mentioned, it is very important.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Before I begin criticising the NTA, I want to compliment a member of Dublin Bus. I recently submitted a query. I had response back within 12 hours that I was able to give it to a very happy constituent. I compliment the CEO of Dublin Bus for that response and for coming out to the area behind Clontarf bus depot. It has been the site of absolute destruction for the past number of years. There was an issue as to whether Dublin City Council or Bus Éireann owned the land. It is now confirmed Dublin City Council owns it, so I look forward to getting the area dealt with.

On the Bill, BusConnects has been changing a lot of parts of this city and other cities. I support the extension of the NTA but there are limitations to how much I support it in the sense of how many imperfections there are currently. We need to deliver for those people.

To go back to what I said at the start, it is not acceptable that we do not have a transport system that is fully accessible. A lot of great work has been done but to give people with disabilities complete support, we have to have a public transport system they can trust. I was

in Switzerland recently and I saw how accessible public transport can and should be. On the broader issue of accessibility, if the Bill is going to mean anything, it has to not only be for people who are able bodied but also for people who cannot access every single aspect of our society that is private. We should provide them with a public service they can access; a public transport system for everyone.

Another issue I find with the NTA, which has been mentioned by multiple Deputies, is the Leap card system. I know money has been invested in the current plan, but I urge the Minister of State to re-examine it. I am a mechanical engineer, not an electronic engineer, but I have asked my friends if a system could be used for the phone to mimic the ETF from the Leap card. Such a system would be much quicker. The officials from the Department are looking at me. They probably have a good answer in respect of that matter. I tabled a few parliamentary questions in respect of it.

I asked if the National Transport Authority determined that the existing Leap card validator and ticketing infrastructure could not support direct contactless payment by bank card or mobile phone simulations, if any technical or operational assessment had been carried out in this regard, and if the Minister would make a statement on the matter. I received a response but it did not really address the question that I asked, so I have submitted another one.

What is most frustrating for members of the public - it happens to me when I am going to get the bus home - is that none of us has cash anymore. If you do not have one, or if you forget your Leap card, you have to go and get cash out. I do not carry a wallet. Where are you going to go? You are nearly forced to go into the pub to get cash back. It is not good for the Irish people. We need to look into this, especially because of where the 130 stop is.

We need to look at making it accessible not only for those with disabilities but also for everyone to encourage them to use public transport. People are like water. They go the fastest route. If you are on the way home, and you see that you can get on the bus, use your phone, tap it and get on, why would you not do it? It would be a lot simpler.

The Leap card system needs to be examined. When I was starting school, it was revolutionary, that is, you did not have to have 65 cent for the bus. The fare has gone up a good bit since then. What is the timeline for the full contactless integration across the network and what is the plan to ensure that every bus stop and every route will enable contactless payment because if we are to extend this NTA framework to Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Meath, Westmeath and all those places outside the M50 the free travel scheme is another area that we need to examine? People are constantly asking me this on the doorstep so I would like if the Department could issue a statement on it. I understand that there has been money invested in another alternative but I would ask that we stop and re-examine alternatives that other countries have done. The Minister of State will be aware I always want to be constructive and to offer solutions so I would like that to be examined.

I want to highlight the BusConnects issues that have been brought to my attention by residents in Marino whose bus route was recently changed, particularly by the elderly, children and young adults with disabilities who have a set routine. They have learnt that set routine and without any consultation with them, their bus route terminal changed. If a person has learned that set routine of getting into town every day and does not like changes in their routine, that specific small change could really affect that person. Also, the elderly people are now going

down an unfamiliar route. Anyone is vulnerable and is not used to the end and I would like that to be examined. I understand there are huge changes on St. Stephen's Green and the NTA will have to reroute some of these routes, but I would like it to be examined.

Another issue I would like to highlight is the recent maritime festival in Howth in north Dublin. We knew there would be thousands of people there. Every year there are thousands of people there but it was like people were going for a meet and greet in the DART - going to see Santa outside. There were four lines of people waiting to get the only DART out of Binn Éadair. If we have a causation and clear data that people will be in the area, can we not make the DART more frequent or offer a more frequent shuttle bus out?

The Bill has the potential - I am a cautious optimist - to be a step forward for the whole country but I also believe we need to hold the NTA and all of the transport authorities to account to ensure that what is promised is delivered. I welcome the recent statements. The response back from the Oireachtas NTA-line has definitely got faster but public representatives, councillors and TDs need to have more of a say on the changes to their constituency.

On transport, I would appreciate an update on the toll bridge crossing between the northside and the southside. Can it be made contactless? Are there plans for that? It is one of the biggest bottlenecks in the city, particularly for my constituents in north Dublin who are trying to cross the Liffey. They still have to wait and pay a toll that has paid the bridge off multiple times. I know I am starting to sound like a man who normally sits here but it makes sense. We need to look into contactless payments. Clearly there is a bottleneck over the Liffey, from the northside to the southside. If we could remove that toll on that bridge, it would really speed up things in the city.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank all the Members for their contributions. It is incumbent on all of us that we would encourage people to use public transport. Based on the debate tonight, some of the suggestions and solutions from the contributions are ways in which we can enhance our public transport offering but also attract more people to partake in public transport. I found the debate interesting and invigorating. A bit like the coffee, it was frank and honest, and we got the good and the bad. It was without the milk and without the sugar at times but it was important to hear it. Those of us who have been on public transport will understand the frustrations of many, and the articulation of the frustrations of the travelling public by many in the Chamber tonight, based on their experiences. It is something we must reflect upon. I am sure the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, and others in the Department, will parse through the contributions.

I reassure Members that Government is committed to investing in public transport outside of Dublin. As somebody who lives outside Dublin, like the Ceann Comhairle, there is life beyond the M50, as Deputy Pa Daly will know well. It is important that we have, under the national transport development plan, balanced investment in the regions but also in a variety of modes of transport. We saw the report today about jobs and AI. If we are to be serious about economic competitiveness and our population growth, we need to have investment in public transport. To remind Members in the House, because sometimes they might not hear this articulated, the national development plan and the sectoral investment plan for transport has €24 billion in funding of projects nationwide.

I reiterate that I accept the frustrations articulated and spoken about in the Chamber tonight. We have a four-year plan for transport investment. It is an ambitious programme of investment in infrastructure and services that reflects Government's determination to build a transport system which is efficient and low-carbon but also responsive to the evolving needs of the travelling public, and also based on our economic needs.

In listening to some of the contributions, I take the point in terms of accountability. There is a real need for accountability around the NTA, which does very good work. Deputy Lahart made a very good point that when you take away the beginning, the middle and the end of the schemes we all refer to, some of the outcomes are quite good and we see a huge improvement. What we all, as politicians and public representatives, share is that democratic deficit that perhaps sometimes we feel we are not being listened to by the NTA. That is why the communication piece is so important. That is why the clear and cogent articulation of the plan, where we are going and how we are going to get there is important. I cannot remember who said that the good engineers with the desktop and modelling sometimes drive us all to the point of distraction. All of us, who have been members of local authorities, recognise the importance of the Part 8 - that transparent piece. With the NTA, that public consultation cannot just be a box-ticking exercise. It has to be meaningful and real. The overarching theme I got tonight was the importance of listening.

There is another point I would make as a practising politician. I was smiling at Deputy Ó Laoghaire, who made reference to Bishopstown and Highfield. As a former chairman of Bishopstown GAA club, I will come back to that. Deputy Pa Daly is smiling at me. The first iteration of the plan for the Luas for Cork did not go through public open space in terms of green areas or the much-cherished sporting recreation grounds of Bishopstown, Highfield and our local schools. Those of us who are long-time politicians will ask why there was a change in the first iteration when to all of us there was no demonstrative need to change it at all. That is why public consultation is important. Notwithstanding the events in Killarney at the weekend, Government is committed.

Part of the Bill deals with Cork, the fastest growing urban area. Population growth of between 50% and 60% is envisaged there by 2040. This is not just about funding being allocated for transport projects; it is also about real delivery in the context of the national development plan for transport, including projects such as the Cork to Limerick motorway, the Castlemartyr and Killeagh bypasses, the M28 to Ringaskiddy and Great Island connectivity. It will also require the Luas and BusConnects for Cork to be developed. The Bill will help to deliver better bus services and improved public transport for Cork.

I say genuinely that Bus Éireann must improve in terms of its provision of public transport in the city and the suburbs of Cork. People want BusConnects to succeed. The people of Cork want a bus system that delivers in terms of frequency of service and better reliability, safer walking and cycling routes and improved connectivity with the airport and the suburbs. We are entering a critical phase of delivery. That is why the next four years will be transformative.

I hear the frustration of many people who speak to me every week, including Members of the House, regarding BusConnects and other issues relating to Dublin. We heard about that from various Deputies during the debate, and is understandable and fair in the context of the Bill. People want to use public transport and are seeking reliability. Investment by the Government is one part of that. Cork commuter rail is an example of something being used

when it is provided. The Cork to Mallow, Middleton or Cobh line shows people voting with their feet. That is an example of the management of A.J. Cronin and others. It also shows that if a plan is put together and backed up by resources people will use a service.

One of the comments I constantly hear, including last Sunday at the Douglas Young at Heart event for the late Phil Goodman, is about bus services. People tell me they want to use buses, but they want to know what happens if a bus does not come and they are left waiting.

Members mentioned change during the debate. Older people in particular do not like change or do not necessarily want their route numbers or timetables to change. Punctuality and reliability are important.

Accountability was also mentioned. It was stated that the NTA not accountable. It is accountable to the Minister. Fines to the tune of €735,000 last year were levied on Bus Éireann due to a lack of reliability. I am not immune to what is going on. There needs to be accountability. Deputies Daly and Quinlivan made reference to that in their contributions. They are correct. People on smaller routes need to be looked after.

Given that I am from Bishopstown, it would be remiss of me not to mention the Bishopstown section of BusConnects not coming into play. That is short-sighted on the part of the NTA. In the case of Cork, let us plan for BusConnects to operate in tandem with and to complement the Luas. At its core, BusConnects is about transforming public transport and the strategic corridor F makes no sense to me. The Bill underpins investment in public transport around sustainable transport corridors, in particular the Bishopstown to Cork city route.

It would also be remiss of me if I did not make reference to the plan for the Luas for Cork going through Bishopstown GAA club and Highfield RFC. I have made my position quite clear as somebody who is in favour of the Luas but does in any way see any merit in the us going through Bishopstown and Highfield in any shape or form or affecting the residents of Wilton Avenue when a vast amount of land owned by the HSE in Cork University Hospital can be used.

This is a very important Bill. As the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, said, it is vital to provide a clear legislative framework to extend the national transport authorities remit and enable it to undertake the construction of public transport infrastructure. I remind Members that, with regard to the NTA, section 44(2) of the Act includes an accountability element. I thank Members for their contributions and look forward to the passage of the Bill through the Houses.

Question put and agreed to.

Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Transport, pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Cost of Disability: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that there have been four major reviews and reports on the cost of disability, i.e., the additional costs to which disabilities give rise for individuals and their families, beginning with The Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in 1996, the Indecon Report entitled "The Cost of Disability in Ireland" in 2021, the Government's failed Green Paper on the Cost of Disability in 2023, and the recent joint research project by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) "Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for the Cost of Disability" in 2025;

further notes that the Government launched yet another consultation on the matter in February of this year;

recognises that households in which a member has a disability undergo significant additional costs, compared to households in which no member has a disability, with the ESRI/IHREC estimating a weekly cost of €488 - €555 on average;

affirms that no one in the State should be worse off socially, politically, or economically, because of their disability;

condemns the choice made by the Government in Budget 2026 to withdraw emergency supports from workers and families, including, in particular, the €1,400 worth of cost-of-living supports withdrawn from disabled people this year;

recognises that workers and families, including and especially those with disabilities, cannot wait until next year and Budget 2027 for supports, and that on the basis of their Budget 2026 experience they cannot trust the Government to deliver what is needed; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately introduce an Emergency Budget with supports for workers and families, including a €500 lump sum for people with disabilities; and
- introduce, no later than Budget 2027, a new permanent cost of disability scheme, involving weekly payments for people with disabilities, whether they are in employment or not in employment, that recognises the additional costs to which their disabilities give rise.

I will be sharing my time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Just to be aware, there is an amendment proposed.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have seen that. I will get to that in a moment. The Minister should withdraw his shameful amendment, if for no other reason than because it is an insult to people with disabilities. Their voices are ignored and are entirely absent from the amendment. I have said it before and will say it again, people with disabilities are not disabled by their own

bodies or their intellectual capacity. Rather, they are disabled by a society that is ablest and a society and Government that talks down to them. They are disabled by infrastructure that is hostile to their mobility. They are disabled by Government policy failing them time and time again. They are disabled because they are not listened to and the lived reality of their lives and needs is not responded to.

The amendment references consultation. I want to give the Minister a bit of feedback from a person who was at his most recent summit. Gillian Sherratt, who the Minister will know, had a son Harvey who, for his short life, was one of the many children with scoliosis utterly failed by the State. She wrote that at the Minister's summit the journalists got a chance to ask questions of the Ministers but people with disabilities, disabled persons' organisation representatives, carers and advocates did not get the same opportunity. That is not fair. It is not on. Government has deployed all of its delay and deflect tactics and that is why we had to bring forward this motion.

This motion calls for immediate intervention because the crisis is now. The motion takes into account the lived reality of people with disabilities and the real need for a cost of living emergency payment. The motion is about listening to people. The Minister's tone deaf amendment makes no reference to the fact that the budget left people with disabilities €1,400 worse off. He should acknowledge and face up to this and respond to the urgent pleas of disabled people who are making stark choices, whether the Minister chooses to acknowledge that. They have to use their immersions and electricity and charge their vital mobility devices. Some people need to maintain a constant temperature in the house, but cannot afford to do so.

A constituent of mine in Balrothery spoke about the statement from the Taoiseach that an emergency payment is not fiscally sustainable and that people with disabilities must wait for a permanent cost of disability payment in budget 2027. She said she is writing to tell the Minister that asking disabled people to wait is what is truly unsustainable.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: There are two very straightforward asks in the motion. They are asks that deal with the reality that disabled people the length and breadth of our State are living. It is a reality that was shared with us by them when they came to the gates of Leinster House. It is difficult for people to come to the gates of Leinster House to tell strangers that they are rationing fuel or struggling to put food on the table, and to feel that they have to say it. That is a great shame on one of the richest countries in the world.

It is an amendment that very much ignores the lived reality. The amendment the Government has brought forward is extremely long. It does not once mention the words "poverty" or "deprivation". It ignores that lived reality.

When the SILC data is published annually, I always look at enforced deprivation because they are the people who cannot afford a decent pair of shoes, who are struggling to keep the heat on in their homes or are struggling to have a meal with meat once a week. On the figure for 2025, it is unfortunate that the CSO does not actually speak to and label various household compositions and who is in those households in terms of disabled people. They are classed as people out of work. A total of 39.2% of those people had lived and experienced enforced deprivation in 2025. That figure is up from the year before. That is stark. It represents people who are really struggling, day-to-day, to heat their homes and have a warm meal. It is really regrettable that the Government's very long amendment fails to acknowledge those people who

are living in poverty and who are experiencing deprivation. The rest of the amendment speaks to all of the budget measures from last year, all of which remain ineffective while people continue to live and experience poverty.

The second part of our motion is a commitment to introduce a cost of disability payment. The Government should commit to doing that in the next budget. The Minister should commit to a cost-of-disability payment in the next budget. There is an opportunity to do that this evening. The Minister did not commit to it in the amendment but I hope he will here this evening because people need to know that is coming. Unless we acknowledge that deprivation and those levels of poverty and those at risk of poverty, we are very much failing those people who experience it and live it, day in, day out.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Government amendment is nothing short of a disgrace. What is being proposed by Sinn Féin? We call for the immediate introduction of an emergency budget with supports for workers and families, including a €500 lump sum for people with disabilities. I know the Minister accepts there is a huge cost of disability. There would not be much point in having the consultation he had - with all of the deficiencies that were in it - if not for the fact the Government accepts there is a cost of disability. On the basis of the payments that have been made in previous budgets, I also know there was an acceptance there is a cost of disability that must be looked after. The only thing that lets all of this down is that this year, we, like many others in this Chamber, have been inundated by people talking about the cost of disability that is impacting on them now.

There are plenty of disability reports. We can go back to the Cost of Disability in Ireland, the Indecon report in 2021 and the Minister's own failed Green Paper on the cost of disability in 2023. The big one is from the ESRI and IHREC called Adjusting Estimates of Poverty for the Cost of Disability. What do they average the cost out at? They say it is €488 to €555. If you are talking about more challenging needs, it is €786 per week to €875 per week. That is the reality. I thank Physical Impairment Ireland. It provided me with a document called the list of shame. I can see why the consultation did not allow for those with disabilities to ask questions. Many physically impaired people exist in State-sanctioned poverty. Those unable to work live in physical impairment poverty in Ireland. It is now the case of deciding whether to eat or turn on the heating during the day and this is not acceptable. We have all heard the stories of those who cannot afford to charge wheelchairs. Heating may be less of a worry this week than it is most weeks but this is Ireland and the weather we are having is a particular outlier.

I also commend the Disability Federation of Ireland, Access for All and the Irish Wheelchair Association, which have been to the fore in relation to this. We have all read - or many of us should have read - the lived reality piece. People with disabilities should not have to fight for everything. If a person gets a job, they would lose their PA hours. The system makes no sense. They cannot afford medication the doctor says they need. They drag out blood tests as long as they can. It is a disgrace.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: People living with a disability face a double disadvantage. They face lower employment rates combined with a higher cost of living, as the Minister knows. Those living with a disability are entitled to an adequate standard of living, like the rest of us. That standard includes safe, accessible housing, nutritious food, quality healthcare,

rehabilitation services, education and access to meaningful employment opportunities. Yet, this Government took the entitlements from them in last year's budget. It did so by withdrawing critical emergency supports for workers and families and through the withdrawal of €1,400 worth of cost-of-living supports for people with a disability. These actions have directly impacted the quality of life of those living with a disability. These actions have been done and maintained despite the pleas of disability rights and campaigning groups and service users. Many of us have met them, whether in here or outside of the Dáil, where they had to protest themselves. Those living with a disability use the maxim "Nothing about us without us". However, when it comes to this Government, it presses ahead with a "Nothing for you regardless" approach.

Our motion today is to support those living with a disability. It supports their families. It is a response to the crippling costs that have been imposed on these families. While the costs remain and increase, the supports disappear. A 2024 Disability Federation of Ireland submission to the Department of Social Protection noted that 44.7% of people unable to work due to a disability experienced deprivation and 27% of them were at risk of poverty. What amazes me is that we know this and this was known to the Government, prior to last year's budget, and yet it still cruelly opted to cut necessary supports. It was a shameful decision that should be reversed by the introduction of an emergency budget with a €500 lump sum for disabled people. When the ESRI appeared before the disability matters committee, which I chair, in November 2025, it referenced a research programme it conducted with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission that estimated the cost of disability is between 52% and 59% of disposable income of disabled households. For those households where a member has severe limitations, this cost increases to 93% of their disposable income, leaving them with absolutely nothing.

When we call for a lump sum payment and the introduction of the cost-of-disability scheme, this is not a call for charity. It is a call for justice. It is a call to ensure that every person, regardless of disability, has the right to participate fully in society. It is a demand that the State and the Government recognises the additional financial costs a person with a disability faces. It is a recognition of the cost of medication, the cost of assistive technology and the cost of home modifications. These are all expenses that should not push a family into poverty.

It is past time for the Government to reverse these disgraceful cuts. It is past time for reviews and reports. It is now a time for action. It is time to recognise those with a disability for who they are; people who bring great value to our island.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: This evening I want to make it very clear what is at stake. As someone who has spent a significant portion of my adult life working with adults with disabilities, I witnessed the pressures they face. It is not just about heating a home or buying food. It is about the endless hidden costs that the vast majority of people never see. It is about those extra expenses able-bodied people never have to think about; the cost of transport, the need for specialist equipment or how restricted they are, even with transport options. It all adds up to constant, grinding reality. There is a heightened risk of poverty for those living with a disability in this country.

Tonight we stand here again speaking on the hidden cost of disability, just as we did a few months ago. Those with a disability and their families cannot afford a repeat of what happened

then. They were left disappointed, angered and feeling abandoned by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs as they voted down a motion on an emergency €400 cost-of-living payment for people with disabilities. The Government listened to the personal stories of relentless financial pressure crushing our disabled community and then turned its back. Week after week, we raise these cases. We bring the Government the pleas of people being left behind and yet, it falls on deaf ears. I have to ask the Minister directly; who is this Government championing? Is it the person with a disability who is struggling to survive? Is it a family struggling to find a home or affordable childcare? Is it the large property developers and multinationals, like Starbucks and McDonalds, which want to pay less tax?

When we look at the measures the Minister's party has put in place, the answer is clear: corporate giants receive generous tax breaks while our most vulnerable citizens do not even receive enough to keep up with inflation. The welfare and treatment of our most vulnerable citizens is the mark of the society we want to achieve. That is not my opinion; that is a measure of our humanity.

We need to see this Government act. We need to see it stand with the tens of thousands of people with disabilities and their families who are at the highest risk of poverty and deprivation. I have heard from far too many people in Carlow and Kilkenny who are experiencing a level of hardship they have never known before, hardship caused by the Government's failure to act. Deputy Kerrane summed things up quite well in what she said about the Minister's amendment. It seems to me that the Government is just not listening.

Deputy David Cullinane: The one clear message the Government is sending out today to people with disabilities, because of the long-winded amendment the Minister is tabling, is that people with disabilities have to wait, wait and wait again. His message to them is that they should accept second best. It is the same for carers, the people who look after them. However, it is particularly the case for people with disabilities, who everybody in this House accepts have additional needs and additional costs because of those disabilities.

People with disabilities want to be treated and respected on the basis of their individual abilities. At each and every step of the way, from when they are born through childhood and into adulthood, they face battles. We have moved countless motions in this House on children with disabilities who must wait for assessments of need, who must wait for access to a therapist, who cannot get a special school place and whose parents are battling for them. If they have a mental health issue, they must wait for access to mental health services. As they enter their teens and adulthood, they find it difficult to get employment. When they get older, they have unique issues, difficulties and challenges as well. They expect that the State will have their backs.

Despite the many billions of euro that the Government has every year in surpluses, which people hear a lot about, we cannot look after the most vulnerable in society. The Government turns its back on people with disabilities, who simply ask that exceptional needs payments and emergency payments be provided to deal with the reality of the cost-of-living crisis right now, today, tomorrow, next week and next month. The Minister, reflecting the usual position of the Government, is saying it will kick the can down the road and might do something in 2027. I do not see too many people holding their breath that it is going to happen.

I am afraid that for far too long when it comes to disability, we have not treated children or adults with the respect they deserve. We are not treating them on the basis of equality and we are certainly not doing everything possible to ensure they can live full lives in the same way as everybody else. That is the least they deserve. I am extremely disappointed that the motion moved by Teachta O'Reilly and all of the measures we have outlined – practical, deliverable and realistic proposals that would make a real difference right now for people with disabilities – are not being accepted. It is a slap in the face. There is no other way to characterise it, and it is deeply upsetting and disappointing.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank Teachta O'Reilly and colleagues for moving it. I am sorry that they have had to move such a motion again. The Minister will have seen similar motions from other Opposition groups.

The motion calls clearly on the Government to stop turning a blind eye and to finally deliver an emergency cost-of-disability payment, not next month and not in the next budget, but now. In last year's budget, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made a cold, cruel choice. They left people with disabilities €1,400 worse off. Just think about that. It is not a figure on a spreadsheet; it is the difference between heating a home and powering a wheelchair. It is the difference between a hot meal and an impossible choice. We have heard testimonies from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Barnardos, the Disability Federation of Ireland, other disabled persons' organisations, and advocacy groups, but more importantly, in our constituency clinics and communities, at kitchen tables and sitting beside people.

Households with a disabled member are being forced to choose between food, warmth and equipment essential to their lives. The average energy arrears of a household are nearly €500, but for families with a disabled member it is far higher. The Government should not hide behind the seasons or the weather. Just because we are moving into warmer months does not mean the additional costs disappear. Energy bills, including for heating, and bills for water, medical devices, transport and care do not take a summer break.

Sinn Féin is demanding an emergency cost-of-living budget, a lump sum payment for people with disabilities now and a permanent cost-of-disability scheme to end this neglect for good. People with disabilities should not have to beg for a decent standard of living. The Minister should withdraw his insulting amendment. People with disabilities are entitled to live with dignity, independence and security. This Government has a responsibility to act. It is time it fulfilled it.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"acknowledges that:

— the State provides a broad range of income, education, health and other supports for disabled people, has increased investment in these supports and under the leadership of the Cabinet Committee of Disability Matters chaired by the Taoiseach, will continue to prioritise further improvements over the lifetime of this Government, including with respect to the introduction of a cost of disability payment;

— Budget 2026 provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures, bringing expenditure in respect of disabled people and their carers to just under €6 billion per annum, this contained significant targeted measures to support disabled people and carers, including:

— a €10, or 4.1 per cent increase in the weekly rates of disability payments, bringing personal rates to €254 per week from January, this represents an additional payment of €520 in 2026 and a €51 increase in weekly disability income support payments since Budget 2021;

— the highest ever increase in the weekly Child Support Payment, an increase of €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over (an additional €832 per child in 2026), and €8 to €58 for children aged under 12 (an additional €416 per child in 2026), these payments have increased by €48.20 and €28.20 per week respectively since 2017, approximately, 53,000 recipients of the Disability Allowance (DA), the Blind Pension and the Invalidity Pension are in receipt of a Child Support Payment;

— a €5, or 15 per cent increase in the Fuel Allowance, bring it to €38 per week from January 2026, providing recipients with an additional €140 during the annual Fuel Allowance season;

— a €20 per month increase in the monthly rate of Domiciliary Care Allowance, bringing it to €380 per month from January 2026, this represents an additional payment of €240 per year in 2026, and an increase of over €70 or 23 per cent since 2022;

— an increase in the weekly Carer's Allowance income disregard to €1,000 for a single person (up from €625) and €2,000 for a couple (up from €1,250), while the weekly income limit for Carer's Benefit will rise by €375 to €1,000, all from July 2026;

— the extension of fuel allowance eligibility to enable people on DA or the Blind Pension payments to retain their Fuel Allowance payment for five years if they take up employment;

— the extension of eligibility for Back to Work Family Dividend payment to the DA or Blind Pension recipients when taking up employment;

— expansion of eligibility for the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) to people who acquire a disability while in employment, and to those who transfer from Invalidity Pension to Partial Capacity Benefit; and

— increased payment rates under the WSS, to encourage employers to employ disabled people;

— Budget 2026, also included an increased allocation of €3.88 billion for disability services funded through the Department of Children, Disability and Equality in 2026, providing €2.21 billion to deliver residential services for over 9,000 disabled people, enabling them to live as independently as possible in their local communities, including:

- day and night respite care of over 10,000 extra nights and 15,000 further day sessions;
- €10 million extra to support the transition of people under the age of 65 currently residing in nursing homes;
- €3 million extra for the development and continued expansion of Community Neuro-Rehabilitation Teams;
- €24.5 million providing approximately 1,400 new places for disabled students leaving school;
- €5.5 million for 100,000 additional home support hours and 50,000 additional personal assistance hours;
- €8 million for the recruitment of 150 additional staff for Children's Disability Network Teams;
- €20 million extra for the Assessment of Need Targeted Waitlist Initiative, through the provision of up to 6,000 clinical assessments; and
- €65 million for new developments in disability residential services, including €40 million that will provide in the region of 199 residential responses, including 152 newly created residential placements;
- Budget 2026, also provided for further improvements for disabled people in education, including an allocation of €3 billion to special education, will provide:
 - an additional 860 teachers for special education;
 - up to a further 3,000 special class and special school places for the 2026/2027 school year; and
 - 1,717 additional Special Needs Assistants bringing the total number to almost 24,900;
- in addition, Budget 2026 provided:
 - €130 million under the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with Disabilities;
 - a €25 million allocation to the Public Transport Accessibility Retrofit Programme, to deliver bus and train accessibility improvements to increase the numbers of wheelchair accessible small public service vehicles (taxis), and to expand the Independent Travel Support scheme;
 - approximately an allocation increase of €2 million to €13 million, to the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme Fuel Grant;
 - investment of €69 million in the School Transport Scheme, which will benefit 26,700 students with disabilities; and

— an increase of €3 million for the Fund for Students with Disabilities in further and higher education to €18.2 million, which supports over 24,500 students;

notes that:

— the €250 million energy relief package introduced in March included a four-week extension to the Fuel Allowance season, this directly benefits over 96,000 families where the recipient is in receipt of either the DA, the Blind Pension, or the Invalidity Pension;

— under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, a special Heating Supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances that have special heating needs, for example, in the case of ill health, infirmity or a medical condition; and

— the Additional Needs Payment may also be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which an applicant is unable to meet out of their own resources;

further acknowledges that:

— a dedicated Disability Unit has been established in the Department of the Taoiseach, to drive progress in enhancing supports for disabled people;

— progress will be monitored by the Cabinet Committee on Children, Disability and Education chaired by the Taoiseach;

— in addition to the measures already taken, the Government is determined to deliver on its Programme for Government commitment to introduce a permanent Annual Cost of Disability Support Payment;

— this commitment was reiterated as a core objective of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which the Government published in September 2025;

— under this strategy, the Minister for Social Protection hosted a Cost of Disability Strategic Focus Network Summit (the Summit) on 13th May, 2026, this summit brought together over 300 people (in-person and on-line), including disabled people, representatives from Disabled Person's Organisations (DPOs), key stakeholder groups, Members of the Oireachtas and officials from a number of Government Departments; and

— reflecting the requirement for a whole-of-Government approach to addressing costs of disability the Summit was addressed by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, and the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, and also attended by the Minister of State with responsibility for Disability at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality;

— the approach to and content of the Summit was informed by:

- responses to a public consultation to which over 1,100 submissions received;
 - direct input from DPOs who helped to develop the agenda, and played a key role at the event including, leading sessions; and
 - all relevant research, including the Indecon Report entitled 'The Cost of Disability in Ireland' in 2021, which was commissioned by the Department of Social Protection and represents the largest and most comprehensive analysis of the cost of disability;
- the discussions at the Summit highlighted:
- how the costs of disability are not uniform, but vary significantly depending on the type and nature of a person's disability, and their personal circumstances;
 - not all costs can be addressed through a cost of disability payment as many costs relate to services and require measures across other sectors, including health, education and transport; and
 - the preference by disabled people, for a basic universal payment made to all disabled people supplemented by additional amounts for disabled people facing the highest costs; and

further notes that the Department of Social Protection will continue to engage with disabled people and their advocates, with respect to a cost of disability payment, including at the Department's Pre-Budget Forum on 1st July."

The Government's amendments sets out our current and future work in respect of the costs of disability. The Government fully recognises that disabled people face unavoidable and ongoing additional costs in their daily lives. The concerns of disabled people and their family members have come through very clearly in the many personal contributions we have received in response to the very recent public consultation process and at the summit two weeks ago.

Improving outcomes for disabled people is a major priority for the Government. Our determination to achieve this is reflected in the programme for Government commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability payment. This is also the core objective of the national human rights strategy for disabled people for the period 2025 to 2030, which was developed with the involvement of disability advocates and representative groups. The Taoiseach has set up a dedicated disability unit in his Department to drive progress.

We know that addressing the cost of disability is not a question of income support alone. The delivery of and access to services are also key, and that is acknowledged in the research. All Departments and agencies must work together to address the issue in a comprehensive way. That is why the dedicated unit in the Taoiseach's office is crucial.

The strategic focus network on the cost of disability was a key commitment under the national human rights strategy for disabled people. The public consultation was a key action that was taken before we held the summit. It ran for just over six weeks until Tuesday, 7 April. There was an exceptional response, with over 1,100 submissions received. Eighty-seven submissions were from groups and organisations and 12 from disabled persons' organisations

and disabled persons' representative organisations. Accessible ways to participate were widely used, with 60 submissions made over the phone, 20 by post and seven by video.

I hosted the strategic focus network on the cost of disability on 13 May. It was attended by 150 people in person, with the same number joining online. Given its cross-government nature, it included other Departments as well as disabled people and their advocates. Representatives from disabled persons' organisations, key stakeholder groups and Members of the Oireachtas attended. The summit was addressed by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, her Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Canney. I spent the entire day at the summit engaging with and speaking to those who attended, formally and informally, and I am very much aware of their personal experiences.

The approach and content of the summit were informed by the responses to the public consultation process, direct input from disabled persons' organisations that helped to develop the agenda and played a key role throughout the event, bilateral meetings with stakeholder groups, and the relevant research, including the Indecon and ESRI reports. We heard directly, informally and formally, about the lived experience of disabled people, the unavoidable costs they incurred and the impact these costs had on their lives.

The discussions highlighted that the costs of disability were not uniform but varied significantly depending on the type and nature of a person's disability and his or her personal circumstances. Many costs relate to services that require measures across all sectors, including health, education and transport.

There was also a preference among disabled people for a basic universal payment made to all disabled people, supplemented by additional amounts for disabled people facing the highest costs. The summit and the submissions made through the consultation process will inform the approach to designing a payment and to identifying other cross-government ways to address the cost of disability in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Sinn Féin made a submission. However, unlike other parties that nailed their colours to the mast in relation to the amount of that submission, Sinn Féin said about rates of payment that the amounts must sufficiently cover additional costs of disability, reflective of the rise in costs of essential consumer goods, medicines, rent, transport and energy at the time of implementation. It had nothing more specific to highlight than that. There was also a chance to engage in the consultation process around eligibility. We in the Government are doing that job. We are engaging in the design of and eligibility for the payment. We are engaging with all the relevant organisations to do that. We are currently assessing all of the submissions in that regard. The report of the summit and the submissions will be presented to the implementation and monitoring committee, chaired by the Taoiseach, and will feed into the budget 2027 process.

After budget 2026, there are currently over 232,000 recipients of disability income support payments and over 174,600 recipients of carer's payments. Expenditure across illness, disability and carer's schemes in 2026 will be in the region of €6 billion, which represents an increase in expenditure of 38% since 2020. Budget 2026 provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures. We increased the weekly personal rates of payments such as disability allowance by €10, or 4.1%. This brings the personal rates of payment to €254 per

week. It represents a €51 increase in weekly disability income support payments, and equates to an additional €520 in the full year 2026.

Weekly rates of child support payment have increased by €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over, and by €8 to €58 for children under 12. These are the largest ever increases in these payments. Approximately 53,000 recipients of disability allowance, blind pension and invalidity pension are in receipt of a child support payment. They will receive an additional €832 per child aged 12 or over and an additional €416 per child aged under 12 per year. The domiciliary care allowance increased by €20, which represents an additional payment of €240 per year in 2026.

We also made significant changes to the carer's allowance means test. The weekly income disregard has increased by 60% to €1,000 for a single person and to €2,000 for carers with a spouse or partner. Since June 2022, this amounts to cumulative increases to the disregard of just over 200%. These are the largest ever increases in the carer's allowance income disregard. We have extended eligibility for the fuel allowance to enable those on disability allowance or blind pension to retain the payment for five years if they take up employment. We have provided a €5 increase in the fuel allowance, which brings it to €38 per week. We have provided an additional €140 in the regular annual fuel season. The extension of the fuel allowance to 1 May ensured that an additional €38 per week, which totalled an additional €152 per month, was paid. For an additional 96,000 families, the recipient is in receipt of either disability allowance, blind pension or invalidity pension in relation to the fuel allowance.

I am focused on those in employment and supporting people to take up and remain in employment. We have reduced the number of bands in the wage subsidy scheme from five to three and all rates were increased. Since April, the base rate is €7.50 per hour, up from €6.30. Employers of between seven and 16 employees under the scheme will receive a new rate of €8.50 per hour. The scheme has been extended to certain people already at work who acquire a disability or whose ability to work is reduced such that their job, task or role must be adapted significantly. We have a lot more to do in the area of employment of people with disabilities. It will be a key focus during the EU Presidency.

In budget 2026, the Minister, Deputy Foley, secured an increased allocation of €3.8 billion for disability services, an allocation of €3 billion to special education and other supports that go directly to improving the lives of those with disabilities, including through the opportunities and supports available. I again highlight that there is a range of supports available for people who are struggling with heating and energy costs. We will continue to make information available in relation to those supports.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss these important issues and to outline the supports available. We are committed to introducing a cost-of-disability payment. It is my priority for budget 2027. The contributions to the consultation process and the discussions at the summit are informing the design of that payment. I thank Deputies for the opportunity to discuss the issue.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister and his Government are failing children with disabilities. It is not just children but adults, too. That is clear. We saw it earlier this year, when people gathered outside the gates of Leinster House to protest the decisions that the Government has taken. It is not just the lack of services and supports. The fact that the

Government sat around the Cabinet table and decided to leave people with disabilities €1,400 worse off is shocking. It is an indictment. This motion relates to the cost of disability and Sinn Féin's call is to start to reverse that, to immediately make €500 available to people with disabilities and to bring forward a meaningful cost-of-disability payment that would meet the needs of people with disabilities.

The cost of disability is not just measured in euro and cent. It is also measured in the delays and dithering of the Government. When I say that, I am thinking clearly of two young children, and they are two of 150, in my constituency of Donegal, namely, young Aaron Langan from Laghy and young Diarmuid O'Sullivan from the Finn Valley. I had the pleasure of spending Sunday with young Aaron. He has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, DMD. He was here last year, demanding that the Government allow him access to a drug that was approved by the European Commission. It was approved one year ago next Saturday. He was demanding early access. He was walking around when that was happening. Today, he is in a wheelchair. Without access to that drug, people such as Aaron and the 150 others will not have quality of life. I am asking the Minister to deal with the cost of disability with no more delays in terms of euro and access to crucial medication.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Disabled people and their advocates made their requests clear well in advance of the budget. They were simple and reasonable, and called for the Government to address the additional costs of disability. This was not a new demand or an unknown issue. The Government itself had commissioned research into the cost of disability. In the context of a €9 billion budget surplus, you would think that acting on its own findings would not have been a difficult decision. Instead, the Government chose to do nothing. In fact, as we all know but it bears repeating, disabled people were left €1,400 worse off following the most recent budget.

Over the past seven months, people from across Kildare have contacted my office looking for help and answers. Why does this Government continue to ignore our needs? No one should be pushed into financial hardship because they have a disability. The State has a responsibility to ensure that disabled people can participate in society equally and live with dignity. They should not have to fight for the basic supports they need to get through everyday life. Disabled people are still being forced to make impossible choices between charging essential equipment and putting food on the table. Families continue to feel the pressure of the cost-of-living crisis despite Government claims that the worst is behind us.

We already know what is needed because disabled people have been telling us for months. Research estimates that the cost of disability is approximately €500 per week. People with chronic illnesses are forgotten. People living with conditions such as Crohn's disease and colitis face significant, ongoing medical expenses, yet these conditions remain excluded from the long-term illness scheme. People who require lifelong medication, regular hospital appointments and specialist treatment are still expected to shoulder additional costs and it is simply not fair. People do not need support next year or after another consultation process. They need support now. That is why Sinn Féin is calling for a mini-budget and an emergency €500 payment for disabled people, alongside the introduction of a permanent cost-of-disability payment. The needs of disabled people and their families have not disappeared since the last time the House debated this issue.

8 o'clock

Caithfidh an Rialtas seo beart a dhéanamh de réir a briathair agus an costas breise a bhaineann le maireachtáil le míchumas a aithint. Tá íocaíocht éigeandála €500 ag teastáil ó theaghlaigh le míchumas anois agus is cóir scéim bhuan a tabhairt isteach gan a thuilleadh moille.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The simple reality, the simple fact we all know, is that people who have a disability are much more likely to be poor, much more likely to be under incredible pressure at the end of the month and much more likely to have to make decisions about whether to pay a bill or do the shopping or whether they can afford a piece of equipment or to pay for insurance. These are the decisions people with disabilities face on a monthly basis and the reality is that situation has got worse.

After the last budget, people with disabilities were €1,400 worse off, according to independent analysis. They were worse off at a time the Government produced a budget with the biggest tax giveaway in the history of the State. It did not benefit ordinary workers, but went to developers, funds and so on. Ultimately, people with disabilities were right at the back of the queue, which is completely unacceptable and it needs to be redressed now. That is why we are calling for an emergency budget. It needs to be addressed.

I cannot believe the Government moved an amendment to our motion, withdrawing the call for an emergency budget and emergency payment. We have to return to the cost-of-disability payment. Under the last Government, the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, tried to bring in a system that seemed to be trying to coax and force people into work that would not have been suitable for them, almost on pain of losing their payments. It was completely rejected by disabled people's organisations and people with disabilities generally, but that is not a reason not to deal with the issue. The Government should not do it like that. It should not use a stick to deprive people of payments. Let us figure out what are the additional costs people have and how to meet them, because they can vary depending on whether people are living in urban or rural areas, the nature of the disability and so on. I know it is complex, that it is not necessarily simple, but it has to be addressed and it does not seem as if the Department is pursuing it with enough vigour.

Other people have made the point that people with disabilities and their families face struggles all their lives. One of the biggest ones being faced at the moment is that there is no plan for children with intellectual disabilities towards the end of their parents' or carers' lives, when they are in their 70s and 80s. The Before We Die campaign is highlighting this, that there is no plan for when people are no longer able to care and that is not acceptable.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Every day, people with disabilities and their families are forced to pay more just to live an ordinary life. They pay more for transport, heating, medical equipment, care and simply getting through the week. Yet, the Government expects people to survive on a €10 increase to the disability allowance that does not even keep pace with inflation. The Government's Indecon report confirmed the cost of having a disability can range from €9,500 to almost €12,000 per year. The Disability Federation of Ireland found that households with a disabled member require up to 59% more disposable income just to achieve the same standard of living as others. For those with severe disabilities, that figure can rise to 93%. These are not abstract figures. They mean families skipping meals, cutting back on heating, struggling

with rent and falling deeper into poverty. Figures from 2024 showed that, even when cost-of-disability supports were in place, one in four people with disabilities remained at risk of poverty. Yet, instead of strengthening supports, the Government has ripped them away. The energy credits, lump-sum supports and cost-of-living measures are gone. People with disabilities are now effectively facing a loss in supports of more than €1,400 per year compared with previous budgets. This is because the budget of last year was not in an election year.

The motion calls for basic fairness. Sinn Féin is calling for a permanent and immediate cost-of-disability payment to help people to cope with rising costs. The Government's amendment is disappointing.

We also need to address the poverty trap the Government has engineered. Ireland has one of the worst disability employment rates in Europe. People want opportunities but low income disregards and poor support actively discourage participation. The Government's approach is detached from reality and deeply unfair. People with disabilities cannot be treated as an afterthought every budget season. They deserve dignity, respect and meaningful support, not empty promises.

The Government is holding off for as long as it can with supports for disabilities, hoping the most vulnerable in society will go silent. The recent cost-of-disability public consultation is a delay tactic. The Government knows the vulnerable are suffering and finding it hard to cope with the cost-of-living, yet every individual with a disability must fight for supports. Residential places are getting scarce. Respite care is at times impossible to get and independent living is being encouraged by HIQA, yet supports are not available for people living with a disability to be able to live independently.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion on the cost of disability. It is important that the Minister is here to hear what the Opposition has to say about it. The Labour Party has continually raised the ongoing cost-of-living crisis that is affecting many households across Ireland and having a particularly profound impact on those with disabilities and their families who are dealing with the added difficulty of the cost of disability, day in, day out.

As we all know in this House - it has already been mentioned tonight - The Cost of Disability in Ireland report by Indecon showed that people with a disability face additional costs of between almost €9,000 and more than €12,000 per year. People living on disability allowance cannot be expected to absorb such massive costs alone. Budget 2026 should have been the budget in which the Government finally implemented the cost-of-disability payment, but it was pushed out again for another year. Given the public consultation on the matter, I sincerely hope the upcoming budget will at least make some progress towards getting this payment into the pockets of those who deserve it most. After the choices the Government made in that budget, disabled people are €1,400 worse off and I have no doubt those costs have increased massively due to the ongoing price rises in fuel, food and rent.

In my constituency office, I continue to see the consequences of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's poor decisions. Disabled people and their families are struggling to put food on the table and pay bills. Like many households in Ireland, they are just surviving. Instead of supporting disabled people, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents who support them decided to cut the VAT rate for fast-food chains that are already making millions in profits. This VAT could

have funded a new cost-of-disability payment starting at €25 per week, with money left over to do more for disabled people and their families. These are the choices the Government made and they are hurting many in this community.

Only a few weeks ago, the Labour Party brought forward a motion for a mini-budget that would undo the terrible budget decisions the Government made, but again, the Government sided with big business, while disabled people, workers and families were left worse off. I counted at least eight commitments to address the cost of disability in the programme for Government, not one of which has been addressed. They include a commitment to extending free travel to children who receive domiciliary care allowance, DCA. Disabled people and their families need to see action from the Government on the ongoing costs they continue to face. The Minister will be familiar with my continued calls to raise the DCA from 16 to 18 years. This because more than 800 parents said in a survey I recently carried out that it is the right thing to do. I could recount many of the reasons people stated that in response to the survey.

This is becoming a massive issue for many families. Information I received from the Minister's Department shows that between 2022 and 2025 almost 16% of children were unsuccessful in their applications to move from DCA to disability allowance. That amounts to more than 1,300 children. We must remember that the DCA payment is a payment designed specifically for children who have a severe disability. Yet, I am currently supporting many families of 16-year-olds who are trying to prove they have a disability despite already receiving DCA. This is completely wrong and places emotional strain on families with the constant battle for what they are entitled to. As many of those who have contacted me said, their child's disability did not go away when they turned 16. This is the part they cannot understand.

I am currently dealing with a number of cases of people with a disability trying to get to hospital appointments, turning to Alone and other such organisations to see whether they can help. A woman who has spent her lifetime in a wheelchair came to my office recently because she is unable to afford the high cost of a special taxi to attend a regular hospital appointment that is necessary for her quality of life.

That is just one example of many I could give here as to why we need a cost of disability payment now and not a promise on a piece of paper. The ongoing cost of disability is placing an immense pressure on disabled people and their families. Government cannot continue to ignore the reality that people are facing. We need to see action from Government to bring down the costs so many households are dealing with, including those for disabled people. The Minister mentioned in his speech that the Government had increased the disability allowance by €10. Is he aware that a number of approved housing bodies where many of those living with a disability are living - and thankfully living - have recently increased their rents? In a surprise move, the AHBs have increased their rents by €10; exactly what the Government gave them in the budget. It is being given with one hand and the approved housing bodies are taking away with the other hand, and those with disabilities are simply no better off.

I will finish with an email. I previously highlighted a case of a constituent of mine who has a disability and the ongoing cost of living is putting immense pressure on her and her family. It perfectly sums up the consequence of a Fianna Fail and Fine Gael Government and what it has done to so many people living with a disability. She says:

I am not looking for money to go and buy treats. It is just for physio and acupuncture which helps with my pain, diesel money and car parking for regular medical appointments. Tallaght Hospital costs €10 for parking. [The €10 again] Good quality shoes to help me with walking. The daily cost of living is crazy. What can I do so the Government can hear my voice?

This is what is happening on the ground. I sincerely hope the Minister will listen to the motion being brought forward by Sinn Féin and that he will withdraw the Government counter-motion. These are the people who need our help and they need it now.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on the cost of disability. It is something that has been raised on a consistent basis since I entered this Dáil Chamber over 18 months ago and it has been brought to my attention on a number of occasions in that time by many people, including parents, those living with disabilities themselves, schools and grandparents who have come into the constituency office who are obviously fearing for their grandchildren who may have a disability or their adult grandchildren who cannot get access to further education and employment. For a long time in this country we have had slogans about it. We have had protests and then we have had short-term responses to what the particular protests are about. However, for many disabled people and their families these are not occasional pressures. They are becoming permanent pressures and a permanent financial reality.

Living with a disability often brings unavoidable additional costs. I know this acutely, even from a personal perspective. People have higher energy bills, increased transport expenses, medical and therapeutic supports, specialised equipment, housing adaptations and, in many cases, reduced opportunities to participate fully in education or employment, as I said. These are not optional costs; they are essential costs. We can speak about grants, say, for home adaptations and things like that. It is the case a majority of the time that those grants for housing adaptations do not necessarily fit for these very people. Research commissioned by the Government has demonstrated that the additional cost of disability can amount to many thousands of euro every year. Yet, despite growing recognition of the issue, too many people continue to struggle to meet those costs on inadequate incomes. Advocacy organisations such as the Disability Federation of Ireland and Inclusion Ireland have consistently highlighted the financial strain being experienced by disabled people, carers and families right across the country. Behind every statistic is a lived experience. There are parents who are forced to absorb enormous additional household costs simply to ensure their child can access basic services, people on disability allowance who are trying to manage rising energy and transport bills while living on a fixed income, and young disabled people who want independence and participation in society but face financial barriers at every stage of life. These are serious issues that require serious policy responses.

There have been important steps taken in recent years, and it is right to acknowledge that awareness of the cost of disability has grown significantly across the political system. However, awareness alone is not enough. What is needed now is a sustained commitment to reducing disability poverty and recognising the real and recurring costs that disabled people face every single day. The Labour Party is practical about this. In our 2026 alternative budget we placed an extremely strong emphasis on protecting living standards and supporting those under the greatest pressure. Our alternative budget including proposals to increase core social

welfare rates, strengthen energy and household supports, deliver broader cost-of-living measures designed to support vulnerable households, and scrap the means test of the carer's allowance at a cost of €330 million. That is a costed real-life solution for many families right across this country. It is often the case that people come in here with populist slogans and do not have the costed proposals with them or often do not have the right answer for the people who are there. The solution, however, has been given to the Minister about getting rid of the means test for carer's allowance. Disability policy cannot be treated in isolation from housing, healthcare, transport or energy policy. All of these issues are connected. At its core, this debate is about equality and dignity. A fair republic should not ask disabled people to carry a disproportionate financial burden simply because the supports around them are inadequate. The objective should not merely be helping people to cope. It should be ensuring that disabled people can participate fully in society, live independently and enjoy the same opportunities and quality of life as every other citizen. That should be the ambition of every public policy and that is the standard we should set for ourselves as legislators.

As the Minister is here, it is important to point out that applications for any social welfare payment, but particularly for those who have disabilities, are not seamless. At times they are extremely difficult. The Minister will know this himself because I am absolutely sure his constituency office is as busy, if not busier, than my own. I have no issue with it and neither does my secretary, who has done it for 30 years, but as these applications are not seamless what we find is that people who are living with disabilities have to come to the office, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, and ask us to fill out the application form with them. That is a difficult process for those people to go through and it is really something the Department should look into trying to resolve.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I start by thanking Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. It is very important and I am very glad that it did.

Here we go again. We are back here again, several months after I introduced a motion calling for an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities. I am a new TD. I like to listen to what is happening around here. One of the first debates I saw was a three-hour debate on disabilities. It came from all sides of the House. Everybody was talking about how it was very difficult for families who had a disabled person in their home. We all agreed with it. What was the point of that conversation if the Government is not willing to put its money where its mouth is and if it is not willing to support motions like this to make sure people get the kinds of payments they need? In January, I called for an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities. In that debate, the Minister refused to acknowledge the lived experience of people with disabilities. He refused to acknowledge that people were choosing between heating and eating. He called it alarmist language and said that it was dangerous. I have asked him since to withdraw those remarks. He still has not done so, which, quite frankly, is shocking and despicable. There was a protest just before that debate and Michael from Clare, a fairly young fella, told me how he had to choose how many heating rungs on his electric heater he could afford to turn on. That is the reality that people are living with. We have heard these experiences over and over.

I will read into the record some other lived experiences because the Minister seems not to be familiar with them. He seems to be ignoring them completely, month after month, year after year in this Government.

These are all from the Disability Federation of Ireland. On unemployment:

It's financially irresponsible of me to go full-time at work [...] it's better for me to stay part-time than it is to go full-time, which makes no sense.

When I reach 66, I lose all my disability payments, but the extra costs don't go away.

On healthcare:

Because I don't have a medical card, I'm only allowed six physiotherapy sessions a year.

I can't afford medication the doctor says I need ... I drag out blood tests as long as I can.

On financial hardship:

Some weeks it's a toss between food or bills as there's nothing left. The disability allowance I receive falls so short in covering my financial needs. I feel penalised and knowing I will continue to deteriorate with no hope for a better future for myself and my children can be unbearable.

I have to attend a food bank weekly ... apart from it being demoralising, it's a necessity to survive. I know the cold, long winter nights are only around the corner, and it scares me.

Simply, the word saving does not apply to me, as I simply have nothing left over.

I'm not looking to be a millionaire. I'm looking for security, home, heat, food, family and not to fight for every basic thing.

We are more reliant than ever on our families and our independence is being eroded. This is not because of our disability. This is because we need to address the cost of [that disability].

You get tired of being the one who says 'sorry, I can't go'... people think you don't care, but you just can't afford it.

The ministers making decisions don't have a clue what it's like to have a disability.

People with disabilities shouldn't have to fight for everything.

We in the Opposition are fighting for people with disabilities. We have been fighting for months. We will be fighting for years, it seems like. Last week I was speaking to a constituent who has a disability. She is being evicted from her home. One thing she said to me that was frustrating was she was worried about gaining employment. I was at the summit the Minister of State was at and somebody told me it took them seven months after they lost their job to get their disability allowance back. This just is not working. While the summit was well organised and well done and I congratulate all the participants, it showed the Minister of State is failing at this and needs to act more quickly.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. The Social Democrats have been vocal about disability rights for a long time. Before the last general election, one of our red-line issues was having a Minister for disability. That was because in this country people with disabilities are failed so badly and we want to protect their rights and deliver what they have identified that they need.

The Disability Federation of Ireland is made up of several organisations and its report sets out a stark situation for anyone with a disability. One of the organisations involved is the Irish Wheelchair Association. When I came back from London to Dublin, I worked in that organisation as a personal assistant for a number of people. I had worked as a support worker for people with disabilities in London for a short time and there was a difference in how people with disabilities were treated in the two places.

This Private Members' motion is on costs but I want to highlight the human cost of ignoring and sidelining people who are disabled. The Government's amendment highlights what has been spent by the Department of Education and Youth on disabled people and the additional 860 people for special education. What it fails to say is the allocation for special education teachers was made for mainstream schools in March but, unfortunately, special schools like the mild general learning disabilities schools have not been given their allocation yet, on 26 May. Why is that?

The Government amendment refers to additional SNAs bringing the total to 24,900 which is welcome but that is thanks to the uproar that happened when there was a threat of cuts to SNAs. We have all these SNAs but they still do not have proper contracts, they do not know about redeployment and the workforce planning has not been published yet either. We can throw all the money we want at disabilities and stand up here and say all sorts of things but the reality on the ground is a different situation altogether, one where disabled people are ignored and failed.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I commend Sinn Féin on this motion. This issue goes to the heart of whether we are serious about disability rights or content to keep repeating the language of disability rights while leaving disabled people to absorb costs that are neither optional, marginal nor of their own making.

The cost of disability means higher expenses associated with transport, equipment, therapies, healthcare, communication supports and personal assistance, among other things. It means the cost of navigating a society that is still far too inaccessible and being expected to pay personally for that inaccessibility. It has been long established that disabled people face major additional financial burdens as a direct result of living with a disability in a society not properly adapted to their needs. The figures are stark: one in five people unable to work due to long-standing illness or disability lives in consistent poverty; around two in five experience enforced deprivation, meaning they cannot afford basics such as heating or new clothes.

The ESRI and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have shown that when the additional cost of disability is properly factored in, poverty among disabled people is drastically underestimated. Even those figures do not capture the daily reality. At a protest outside Leinster House before Christmas, one person spoke about having to decide whether to turn on one or two bars of an electric heater because energy costs have risen so sharply. At a later session on the Leinster House campus, we heard a harrowing account of a disabled person who had to stop home dialysis because of energy costs and rely instead on hospital dialysis, a change that put her health at greater risk. That example should stop us in our tracks. Home dialysis services a serious medical need. It means a modicum of increased independence in extremely challenging circumstances. It can mean fewer exhausting journeys, a little bit more control over one's life and less pressure on hospital services. Essentially, we have here somebody

pushed into greater medical dependency and, ultimately, at greater cost to the State. It is a complete absurdity. Because of the cost of powering essential medical care at home, that person was forced away from the safer and more independent option. That is what the cost of disability can mean in real life. It means people making impossible decisions between heat, health and independence.

This is happening, unforgivably, in a country with a flourishing economy, large budgetary surpluses and repeated Government statements about inclusion, participation and rights. There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government to introduce an annual cost-of-disability payment. There has been a consultation and a summit. There may be further papers, processes and interdepartmental work. Some of that will be necessary but disabled people cannot pay bills with consultations or heat their homes with strategy documents. They cannot run medical equipment on future commitments. The Government needs to move from acknowledgement to serious action.

There must be a permanent annual cost-of-disability payment. There must be immediate relief for people under pressure right now. Disability allowance and related payments must be brought to a level that reflects the reality of poverty, deprivation and additional costs. Too often, our system treats disability support as though it is only about whether someone can or cannot work. However, many disabled people want to work, want to build careers, want to start businesses and want to contribute socially and economically. What they face is a system full of cliff edges, maddening complexity and risk.

Disability campaigner Eddie Hennessy from County Cork has described this powerfully. After a major stroke, Eddie built a photography business and became an award-winning photographer. He has gone to major lengths to highlight the infuriating barriers faced by disabled entrepreneurs: higher costs, the need for personal assistance, the risk of losing essential supports and a lack of joined-up responsibility across Departments and agencies. One reality he has captured is that supports exist, to some extent, for businesses to employ disabled people but not for disabled people to employ themselves. That is exactly the kind of structural barrier we need to confront. For disabled people, self-employment may be the best path to self-actualisation and the best way to work flexibly, yet instead of supporting that ambition, the State often turns it into a bureaucratic nightmare. People are then forced to ask: if I try to work, will I lose my supports? If I take on a contract, will I be punished? If my business has a good month and then a bad month, will the system understand that? If I need assistance to do the parts of the job my disability makes difficult, will that be recognised as a legitimate cost of participation? This is where cost-of-disability policy must connect with policies on employment, enterprise, transport, housing and health.

Otherwise, we trap people in poverty and then congratulate ourselves for speaking about inclusion. The Government cannot continue to describe disability rights as a priority while refusing to resource the basic conditions that make those rights real.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputy O'Reilly and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on the cost of disability. I reiterate what Deputy Doherty said about the situation that Aaron Langan and Diarmuid O'Sullivan are in. The situation is that a year ago we were in the audiovisual room along with Diarmuid and his parents. Diarmuid's story is that he has DMD. His brother also has it and is on a trial which means that he has the medication while Diarmuid

does not. That is serious issue. Diarmuid is up against it in the context of time. Aaron Langan is also up against it. Aaron lives in Laghy, which is ten minutes from Belleek in County Fermanagh where the relevant drug is readily available. I plead with the Minister to get something done about this. A year has passed. These children are losing time, and time is muscle. I will move on.

More than 20% of the population are living with a disability. Despite making up a fifth of our population, however, those with disabilities are often left behind. In the context of accessing services, these people are three times more likely to be at risk of entering poverty. That is an absolute disgrace in this day and age. Those to whom I refer have twice the risk of developing conditions such as depression, asthma, stroke, obesity or poor oral health. According to Social Justice Ireland, two in five people with disabilities are unable to afford essentials such as heating and clothing. One in five people with disabilities lives in constant poverty. The ESRI has found that households with disabled members have a lower standard of living than those that do not have disabled members. The cost of disability is between 52% to 59% of disposable income. The average weekly household disposable income for a disabled household is around €944, which means disability costs between €488 and €550 per week. That is another mortgage for people. The Government has to take responsibility and help these people, because as people in every constituency office will confirm, we are constantly inundated.

People with disabilities are €1,400 a year worse off because of the removal of essential supports in budget 2026. That is a fact. It is not surprising that the risk-of-poverty rate is much higher for disabled people compared with their able-bodied counterparts. The risk-of-poverty rate has risen to 24% for disabled people. This compares with a rate of 10% for non-disabled people. The situation is ridiculous. They are not getting equality and households with disabled members require 41% to 93% extra disposable income to meet their standard of living.

When it comes to it, the significant additional costs faced by disabled people are not being met by existing social welfare programmes. We can see that through our constituency offices when we are applying for stuff and trying to help people. Numerous studies have shown that costs are continuing to rise significantly. We need to step up as a State. We need to promote equality and help people. In particular, we need to step up to support disabled people who have been impacted by living houses built using defective concrete. Can the Members imagine having a disability and living in such a home? The costs to run the home are already astronomical because of the structural failures involved. People may have equipment that they need to bolt to the wall but they cannot do so. I deal with these people every day of the week and am trying my best to help them. We tell them that help is coming and that the has said that it is going to help. However, they have been left waiting time and again. It is significant that they feel desperate in their circumstances and in extremely poor conditions in which they live.

As we move forward, the Government needs to start engaging with people who have disabilities and who live in defective concrete homes. Those people need to be heard. They need to feel that they have a voice. They feel that they do not have a voice and that they are not being listened to. It is bad enough having a disability, but imagine having a disability and being stuck in a home that is crumbling around you. These people are not going to be able to afford to move. Their mental health is down the drain, and we are not talking about one, two

or three people. I have had five, six, seven or eight people come into my office since the day I was elected, and I am representing them.

The Government needs to take this seriously. It needs to do a study on people with disabilities who are living in defective concrete homes, because they are not being treated properly. Their human rights are being violated. They have been violated for far too long. They have not been given the opportunity to be listened to. I plead with the Minister to start engaging with the families of people with disabilities who are living in defective concrete homes over the next few months.

Deputy Seamus Healy: We are exhausted by the number of reports, reviews and investigations into the cost of disabilities for individuals. We had the Commission on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in 1996. We had Indecon's Report on the Cost of Disability in Ireland, which was published in 2021. We had a Green Paper on the cost of disability in 2023. We had an ESRI joint report with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in 2025, and we had another consultation in February of this year. We have been waiting over 30 years for a decision. I wonder whether a decision will ever be made or whether there will ever be a cost-of-disability payment for persons with disabilities. This extraordinary delay has left disabled persons with a totally inadequate standard of living.

The at-risk-of-poverty rate for persons with disabilities is 24%, more than two and half times the rate for the rest of the population. As the Minister knows well, the cost of disability is between 52% and 57% of a household's disposable income. The additional cost is estimated to be anything from €488 to €555 per week. On top of that, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of disability employment in Europe. There are huge barriers to employment for people with disabilities, including a lack of personal assistants, a lack of equipment such as electric wheelchairs and a lack of personalised budgets. The fear of the loss of benefits is another huge barrier to employment. Those losses could include the loss of a medical card, the loss of the fuel allowance, the complete loss of or a reduction in a person's disability payment or the loss of the free travel card.

In other EU countries, disabled people do not lose disability entitlements when they work. The biggest fear about and barrier to working is the loss of the medical card. Medical need should decide an entitlement to a medical card as opposed to someone's income. Because of the limited nature of income disregards, people with disabilities, if they work at all, tend to do so in low-paid or part-time employment.

In relation to approval for disability allowance, the strict means testing and cliff-edge nature of the limits exclude many persons who would otherwise qualify for payment. Persons applying for allowance are often means-tested against their spouse's or partner's income, which is very problematic. Thousands of applicants are refused on initial application, with 43% of cases, or almost one in every two, overturned on appeal. The cost of means testing should be assessed, and consideration must be given to a move to universal payments.

Housing is another cause of huge difficulty for people with disabilities. Many continue to live at home with their parents. Parents often are carers and care into their 70s, 80s and 90s. There are 2,065 adults with disabilities who are living with parents who are over the age of 70. Five hundred of these people live with parents who are over 80 years of age.

Of course, the cost-of-living crisis has severely impacted people with disabilities. It is literally a case of heating or eating or charging an electric wheelchair or eating. The cost of home heating oil has gone through the roof, with no reduction whatsoever on offer. A significant number of people with disabilities are among the 317,000 families who in arrears on their electricity bills and the 185,000 families who are in arrears on their gas bills.

The cost of food has spiralled out of control in recent years. Over the past five years, milk is up 43%, butter is up 42%, cheese is up 28%, diced beef is up 48%, chicken is up 33%, beef is up 32% and lamb is up 52%. On top of all that, the Government withdrew all cost-of-living supports in budget 2026, hitting workers, families and people with disabilities very hard. Families are being put to the pin of their collar to make ends meet. They cannot wait for next year's budget. They are in trouble now and they need help now. We need an emergency budget and a range of supports for families and people with disabilities. That must include a lump sum of at least €500. The money is available. The Minister knows that. The budget surplus this year will be €9.2 billion. Two or three weeks ago, the Government stated that the surplus will increase from €5 billion to €9.2 billion. I ask the Government to bring in an emergency budget and to do the right thing.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There is a significant cost to having a disability. We all know that. We do not need any more reports, consultations or reviews. This is very clear. The cost involved is in the region of an additional €1,500 per year. The Indecon report of 2021 clearly outlined the cost of disability. That report was commissioned by the Government. In light of inflation, we know that the cost has risen significantly. The cost of energy, for example, for people with disabilities is significant. Many people with disabilities are immobile and feel the cold. The cost-of-living and cost-of-fuel crises have hit people with disabilities in a significant way in the context of the cost of assistive technologies, healthcare, medicine, housing adaption supports, mobility and transport. I know many people in Mayo whose main mode of transport is specialised taxis. In rural Ireland, it is an extraordinarily expensive endeavour to get around, socialise and engage with services. We all know people with disabilities. I recently spoke to a wonderful mother whose child has a disability. That mother is afraid to die. She is afraid to die because of the lack of supports for her adult child. It would break your heart to hear a woman in her senior years coming to my clinic and saying that she is afraid to die and asking what supports, including in the context of housing, are available. It is quite devastating.

Let us look at Government policy, campaigning, rhetoric and the promises made to people with disabilities most recent general election campaign. It must be stated that, to date, those promises have been broken. The programme for Government contains a commitment in respect of the introduction of a permanent payment for disability supports. We do not need to issue more reports or commence any new consultations. We all know that the cost of disability is significant and that it must be prioritised. The Government cannot wait until the next general election and then campaign on the same basis that it did in the most recent one. Promises must mean something. They must be delivered upon. The truth is that budget 2026 was described by the Disability Federation of Ireland as a "devastating setback". You would not have thought that would be the case in the context of a budget produced by the politicians who campaigned very hard on this topic. The Disability Federation of Ireland said that because people with disabilities were in the region of €1,200 less well off after the budget than they were beforehand. The Government removed all the one-off supports and did not replace them with

any significant supports. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government comes good on its promises this time.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: People with disabilities face additional rising costs and are struggling in light of reduced supports. The Government provided one-off cost-of-disability supports in the aftermath of Covid-19. In budget 2026, all of those were removed and nothing else was put in place. At least one in four people with disabilities is at risk of poverty. That is a terrible statistic. Previously, I have referenced that the cost of living with a disability might average up to €15,000 per year in the current economic climate. That is way beyond what the current supports cover. While the overall increase of the €10 was welcome, many people have seen their income fall in real terms since the budget. Removing the living alone allowance, the disability support grants, electricity credits and the October double payment has hit hard. We then have all the additional energy and fuel-related cost-of-living increases that people are having to cope with thanks to international events. Rents have also increased.

The cost of disability is reflected in the unavoidable extra spending that disabled people face every day, including in respect of mobility aids, transport, communication supports, care medicines, equipment and adapted appliances. As stated on previous occasions, many disabled passengers rely on taxis because they cannot drive or afford an adapted car or cannot depend on public transport that is either inaccessible or unreliable. Even the BusConnects changes can make journeys harder. Two wheelchair users often cannot travel together because older buses lack adequate space to accommodate them. That is a whole load of extra costs and hidden discrimination.

The Government's commitment to a permanent cost-of-disability payment is set out in the programme for Government. According to the Minister, the Government is looking at that this year. I hope it will be substantial rather than a case of kicking the can down the road. In that context, I support a once-off payment in light of the ongoing pressures relating to fuel, energy and inflation. The cost of living hits disabled people the hardest. Long-term supports are urgently needed. What sort of society are we if we do not protect our most vulnerable?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The cost of living for people with disabilities has been highlighted across the Chamber. If we start off with disabilities and things we could have done even before we reached this point and which were asked for, Maurice Noonan, who is from Granagh, and his partner were here last year. They are both wheelchair users. They were here in the Chamber. Mr. Noonan told me about simple things that he lost out on in childhood. He is 25 years old; the same age as my son. He missed 18th and 21st birthdays as a result of the fact that he could not get into any of the places in which they were being held because they did not have wheelchair-accessible toilets. That is still the case in pubs and other places that people go to in order to socialise. It is still the case because there was no incentive or grant aid offered by the Government to make sure that businesses installed disabled toilets. No matter how small or big a business is, it should have the facilities for everyone. Simple things like that prevented Mr. Noonan from going to 18th and 21st birthdays or even from going out with his friends.

Something that struck me is the fact that people who have outgrown their equipment have to hand it back. It is then kept in a warehouse and those responsible for it are not allowed to give it back out. Individuals have offered to look at, for example, a wheelchair or whatever to check that it is okay. People have outgrown their wheelchairs, which have been left sitting in

warehouses. There are children who are looking for bigger wheelchairs but who cannot be given the ones to which I refer. Under the system that is in place, people have to wait two years for equipment that is sitting in warehouses. That equipment is perfect, but they are not allowed to have it.

That does not make sense, and now we have the cost-of-living crisis on top of it.

Everything has become so expensive. People with disabilities should be treated as equals but they are not. Everything comes second and third. If people were put in that situation, they would have a different outlook on life. If a person could not see or hear, would they not have a different outlook? Because we do not have that, we do not see it. The Government should look at simplifying different things for people with different disabilities, to make things easier in the interim for them until they get what they need. The one thing that struck me was Maurice stating that he could not go to an ATM or to a 21st birthday party. He would often go into places and be told that the disabled toilets were up three steps. People simply do not think of the basics. If we cannot get the basics right, and now we have a cost-of-living crisis to get right, what hope does anyone have if we cannot see that? I ask the Minister of State to take a common-sense approach and simplify things. It is not actually that hard.

Deputy Michael Collins: Let us stop pretending that we do not understand the problem. The Government has had evidence for decades now, but what has changed for people with disabilities? The answer is very little, and the proof of the failure in this regard lies in the figures. Disabled people are far more likely to be living in poverty, not slightly more but multiple times more. We are talking about poverty rates of over 30% in some cases when disability costs are taken into account. We are talking about consistent poverty rates four times the national average. We are talking about people spending over half their income, and in some cases, up to 93%, just on the cost of disability. After all of that, there is no proper system in place to address it. That is not a gap; it is a failure.

Failure number one is delay. Instead of acting on the evidence, the Government has launched yet another consultation process. People do not need to be consulted again about whether they are struggling. They are telling the Government that they are.

Failure number two was cutting supports in budget 2026. The Government removed cost-of-living payments which are worth around €1,400 a year to disabled people. While costs remain constant and unavoidable, supports are taken away. That is not reform; it is regression.

Failure number three is relying on once-off measures. Disabled people are saying clearly that this is not a temporary crisis. There is permanent pressure from a cost-of-living perspective, so why is the Government still treating it like a once-off emergency? A once-off payment might help for a week, but it does not fix a lifelong cost.

It is the Government's whole approach to people with disabilities that I would like to talk about. It is not just this issue alone. The Government has been talking about the means test for a long time, but it is still means testing carers. These are people who are giving their whole lives over to minding loved ones in their homes.

Another matter, which I raised earlier today and which affects many people with disabilities is the summer programme or the July provision for children with special needs. For this year's programme, schools were given just one week's notice. Usually, they are given three to four

months notice in order that they can be prepared and get their applications for funding in, which they will hopefully get. This year, they were only given one week to apply, which was extremely late on the part of the Department. As a result, many schools missed the deadline through no fault their own. Earlier, I called for a debate on the matter of providing an extension in order to ensure that no child will be left out.

I was at the Silver Springs Hotel in Cork the other night where about 500 people from the Before We Die group attended a meeting. People spoke about those with intellectual disabilities. Those at the meeting are extremely frustrated with the inability of successive Governments to understand the crisis people are in. Some 78% have no formal housing, which means that parents do not know where their children are going to go when they die. Some 48% of carers are over 60, 14% are aged over 70 and 2% are aged over 80. Some 92% of adults with an intellectual disability still rely on their parents. There is a major crisis out there, and these parents need to know what is going to happen. By God, as I say the other night, they have massive backing.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Beidh mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún seo agus tá áthas orm an deis a fháil labhairt ar an topaic fhiorthábhachtach seo. Beidh mé ag tacú leis an rún seo mar cuireann sé na deacrachtaí atá ag daoine atá faoi mhíchumas os ár gcomhair go soiléir. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go bhfuil rún mar seo againn arís mar bhí topaicí mar seo os ár gcomhair cheana.

I am happy to get the opportunity again to speak on this very important issue. When it comes to disabilities, we keep saying the same thing over and over again. I taught many children with special needs during the ten or 12 years I taught in schools. I observed at first hand the level of frustration and of desperation at times that exists among parents and even among class teachers who are trying to access adequate supports for children in terms of ensuring that they reach their full potential, which was laid out as a vision in the Education Act 1988. Every child must be enabled to reach their potential. How can they do so if they are not supported?

I am very concerned about this matter. I would go as far as saying at this point that children with special needs in Offaly and Laois are being neglected because of the lack of access to therapy. This has gone on and on. When I was elected in 2016, one of the first issues I raised here was the lack of speech therapists, occupational therapists, dieticians and psychologists. It is becoming a major issue. Lately, this was confirmed to me very clearly when I dealt with a case where a young child had been referred at a primary care team meeting in December 2023 to a dietician and an occupational therapist. Because those vacancies have not been filled, there is a problem and that child still has not had access. That was nearly three years ago, and there is no doubt but that the child has regressed. If that is not a prime example of neglect, I do not know what is. There has to be a change of direction. I have stated time and again that Offaly and Laois are among the worst counties in the State in terms of there being no therapists and vacancies not being filled. I cannot for the life of me understand why therapists from the other CHO areas where there is not a backlog cannot be brought in, along with private therapists, to clear the backlog in Offaly and Laois.

We are hearing about recruitment all the time from the HSE, but this sorry saga has gone on too long. I know of children who have not received speech therapy and who have regressed considerably. How are such children going to reach their educational potential? It is not fair,

and it is leading to a lot of distress for children and parents. It is causing huge stress for them because they are frustrated, and rightly so. School principals and teachers are frustrated, and we are all seeing it time and again. The mess in Offaly and Laois needs to be sorted out. I call here once again for emergency action solutions, which I have outlined, to be put in place. Therapists should be brought in from CHO areas where the list is not as long and private therapists also to clear the backlog. I would hope that those solutions in the short term could be taken on board, because children are being failed and are being left behind by the ordeal in Offaly and Laois.

I want to give another example of failure and a lack of planning and efficiency. Last week, it was brought to my attention that the portal that deals with SNA applications was not open for one particular school in Offaly to allow it to make its application for September. Bearing in mind that the schools will be all closing in June, it is grossly unfair on the school in question and on the particular child with special needs. That child and their parents do not know if they are going to have an SNA for September, which is very unfair. It is not giving anyone a chance really. I hope that this can be resolved. I have written to the Department of education and I await its response. I do hope that timely action will be taken to sort that out. That is a basic thing; a portal not being open for a school to make an application for an SNA should not be happening in this day and age. If there is a shortage of staff in the Department, people should be taken from some other Department. Practical actions need to be taken with a common-sense approach that goes back to basics and clears the problems. That is what I am recommending we do here tonight.

We have debated other issues such as shortages in respite care, inadequate home supports, therapy waiting lists and the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities time and again.

9 o'clock

In February and March last year and in contributions before that, the same pleas were made. Families are worn out from fighting for basic but vital services that really should be automatic. They tell me all the time in my constituency office that they really are battling. Every day is a battle for them. It could be trying to access basic supports for school transport and then trying to make sure that their child is catered for. Our Education Act talks about the importance of collaboration, working with people and making sure that inclusion is a top priority, but we are not seeing it. We are not seeing joined-up thinking; it is very disjointed. The services all need to work in tandem together, particularly with schools. Children are definitely regressing without timely occupational therapy or speech and language support.

It is important that we mention carers because they save the State billions of euro every year. They do not get fair pay because when it comes to respite, it can be very difficult for them to take time off. That issue also needs to be looked at. We also need to look at the home helps who support our elderly people in their homes. If a home help takes time off, as they are entitled to, there needs to be a replacement person immediately. We have to make sure that people with disabilities, our most vulnerable in society, are being looked after. No doubt the Government will point to its National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. It states:

At all stages, the views and opinions of disabled persons, their organisations, and other relevant stakeholders will be central to delivery, and we are committed to building their capacity where needed to support them in providing this strong voice.

However, to the families on the ground, this reads as little more than hollow rhetoric because they are not seeing that in their lives every day when they have to cope with things they should not have to deal with, when they have to battle and fight for access to basic therapies or when they have to battle for SNAs with the school principal. It is just not happening.

Where is the real meaningful action? Where is the urgency? Where is the accountability when respite places remain chronically underfunded in rural counties like Offaly? The strategy speaks of central involvement yet families tell me that they feel sidelined and that their experience is reduced to consultation checkboxes rather than driving real and meaningful change. People have had enough of tokenism and box ticking, which people use for self-preservation or whatever it is for. We need to see meaningful and genuine change. We need to go back to basics and put short-term solutions in place until we can devise more long-term sustainable solutions. We cannot keep kicking the issues concerning disabled people down the road with strategies and plans while people, particularly children, suffer.

We need to move from the *déjà vu* debates that we have had here over and over again - it is like Groundhog Day at times here - to actual delivery. People need to have confidence that the Government is delivering for people with disabilities but we are not seeing it. Unfortunately, it is not there. Obviously, we need adequate funding to be delivered, if necessary through an emergency funding package such as the motion suggests. However, I suggest that we take short-term actions and put therapists in place in Offaly and Laois as soon as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputies for their contributions to this important debate. The Government is well aware of the additional costs faced by disabled people. The Government has opposed this motion and tabled an amendment, but that does not mean that we do not recognise the difficulties and additional costs that disabled people face. We are very aware of those costs. Our determination to assist people with those costs is reflected in the improvements we have made to disability support schemes in recent years and our commitment to further improvements.

As the Minister, Deputy Calleary, explained earlier and as outlined in the programme for Government, we are committed to introducing a permanent annual cost-of-disability-support payment and we will do that. The huge response to the public consultation process, the discussions at the recent strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability and the relevant research will all feed into the development of that payment.

Regarding heating and energy costs, I stress that the community welfare service is available to provide financial support for these essentials when people need it. The additional needs payment and the heat supplement exist for precisely this purpose.

Our commitment to introducing an annual cost-of-disability-support payment is incredibly important, but it is just one piece of the jigsaw. We know that payment cannot solve everything. The availability and accessibility of services and other supports are also key. That is why the cross-departmental nature of the national human rights strategy for disabled people and the summit in particular are so important.

We have committed to reforming the disability allowance payment and removing anomalies in the current means test for the payment. As I am sure Deputies know, the Department of Social Protection is conducting a review of means testing across its schemes. Any future changes will be guided by the outcome of that review. We are committed to progressively increasing weekly disability payments. We have been doing this, including in the most recent budget where we have increased the personal rates, as well as the rates for qualified adults, and the child support payment.

The issues facing disabled people cut across Government and that is why the national human rights strategy for disabled people is a key focus. It adopts a whole-of-government approach with individual Departments and State agencies responsible for planning and delivering the commitments that come under their remit across five key pillars, including employment. The Department of Social Protection is the joint lead on the employment pillar together with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

We all know that many disabled people face barriers in the workplace and when looking for employment. The Government wants to address those barriers. The Department of Social Protection, through its nationwide network of Intreo centres, provides employment services for jobseekers. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, these mainstream services are available to disabled people. The Department also offers tailored supports. EmployAbility offers specialist employment services to people with disabilities. It can help people find work through its job-matching service and offer ongoing in-work support to employees and employers.

There is now a designated disability employment personal adviser in each of the 62 Intreo offices. Training initiatives are being promoted to raise awareness and understanding of disabilities among Intreo staff.

In July 2022, the Department of Social Protection launched early engagement. This scheme proactively invites people to talk about their employment ambitions with Intreo and then helps them achieve their goals through the Department's employment and training supports. Taking part is completely voluntary.

In December 2023, a new employment programme under the new European Social Fund Plus funding was announced. WorkAbility: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme aims to support up to 13,000 disabled people in progressing their training and employment ambitions through 57 local, regional and national organisations. The programme runs from January 2024 to December 2028. The experience to date has been very positive. The Department of Social Protection also provides funding for AHEAD's GetAHEAD and Willing Able Mentoring programmes to help people with disabilities transition from education to work. GetAHEAD works to upskill graduates with disabilities with information sessions and training events. Willing Able Mentoring provides mentored and paid work placements for graduates with disabilities. The Government has committed to expanding and building on successful programmes like WorkAbility, EmployAbility and the new work and access programme to support people with disabilities into employment.

Budget 2026 provided for an expansion of the wage subsidy scheme and an increase in the payment rates. These positive measures build on other recent improvements to the schemes such as the reduction in the number of hours from 21 to 15.

There are already arrangements in place whereby when a former disability allowance customer's employment ceases or their hours significantly reduce within 12 months of the termination of their disability allowance, it is open to that person to contact the Department to have their disability allowance payment reinstated without the need to make a new application. These requests are read within 48 hours of receipt and fast-tracked back into payment from there.

We are committed to further improving the position in this regard.

We are also extending the back to work family dividend to people with children who are moving off disability allowance or blind pension into employment. This will help ease that transition over a two-year period. We will also work with employers and across government to improve employment of disabled people. Employment is hugely beneficial for people, but we know that there are costs associated with going to work. This was one of the clear messages at the recent summit.

Secondary benefits are of great support in assisting people with additional costs. Fear of losing secondary benefits can be a significant concern for people when they are considering taking up or increasing their employment. That is why it was important for us to introduce measures whereby recipients of disability allowance or blind pension would be able retain their fuel allowance payments for up to five years on moving into employment. There are already arrangements in place for the retention of certain secondary benefits when a person moves off a disability payment into employment.

A person can retain their eligibility for the free travel pass for five years if they move from one of the following disability payments into work: disability allowance; invalidity pension; partial capacity benefit from invalidity pension; or disablement benefit, when paid along with an incapacity supplement. In addition, a person who had been in receipt of certain social welfare payments, such as disability allowance, for 12 consecutive months may retain their medical card for three years on moving into employment.

In the work we are doing now on the cost of disability, it is important to remember that we are building on the supports already available and the improvements that have been made to same, particularly in recent years. The Government is also committed to introducing a permanent cost-of-disability support payment. We will do that. It is important to emphasise that the Government remains fully committed to continuing its consultation and close engagement with disabled people, disability representative groups and other stakeholders.

I thank the Deputies who tabled this motion and all the Deputies who have contributed on it. While we are tabling an amendment, it does not mean that we do not recognise the difficulties and additional costs that disabled people face.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: No person should be left socially, politically or economically worse off because of a disability. I think all of us in this House would agree on that in principle. Where the problem lies, however, is that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have their heads in the clouds. The estimated additional cost to a household in which a person with a disability lives stands at €555 per week. Worse again is that, rather than improving the situation, the Government's budget last October actually made the situation worse. Despite a cost-of-living crisis continuing unabated, the Government chose to withdraw supports for people with

disabilities to the tune of €1,400. It is simply not good enough to tell people that they have to wait for budget 2027 or beyond. It is a failure to recognise the current pressures that people are facing. What are people with disabilities to do?

It was an error of judgment when the Government pulled supports last year. This motion recognises the lived reality of people with disabilities. It mandates urgent intervention through a lump sum of €500 for people with disabilities and a permanent intervention through a new cost-of-disability payment to be introduced immediately, rather than at the next budget or later. It is a disgrace for the Government to say that.

Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and their Independent supporters have a choice now. Do they agree that these interventions are necessary or do they think that people with disabilities should wait until budget 2027 or beyond before the Government responds and actually does something? The previous Government carried out a report on this five years ago. Surely, it has had enough time to decide what to do. We cannot listen to any more excuses, nor can people with disabilities.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: This motion goes to the heart of dignity, equality and basic fairness because the reality is that disabled people in Ireland are carrying a cost that is relentless and deeply unjust. As the Clare Leader Forum said:

Disabled People are under sustained financial pressure. These pressures are not confined to one area of life. They arise across transport, housing, employment, independent living, energy, communications, social participation and personal assistance. The Cost of Disability is not marginal, occasional or discretionary. It is structural, ongoing and unavoidable.

That is why the Government's amendment misses the point entirely. It means that the Government is not listening. The cost of disability is not about extras, luxuries or optional spending. It is about what it simply costs to be able to live and participate in society and have independence and dignity.

According to the Disability Federation of Ireland, 39% of people unable to work due to disability face enforced deprivation. Think about that. That is nearly four in ten people, yet the Government's amendment does not even mention deprivation or poverty. By refusing to name these realities, it is enforcing what so many disabled people already feel, that is, that they are not listened to, their struggles are invisible and they do not matter. They do matter, however, and the lived realities behind these statistics are stark. People with disabilities are reporting having to visit food banks. Families are forced into impossible choices between whether to run essential life-saving equipment, keep the heating on or eat. It is always about choosing one essential over the other. No one should be forced to continuously make those decisions. No one should have to ration their independence because the Government refuses to recognise the true cost of disability.

Disabilities do not wait for people to afford them. The wheelchair battery still needs charging. Transport costs still need to be paid. The personal assistance hours are still needed. Extra heating, therapies, equipment, rent and food are not optional costs that can be parked for better times. People with disabilities need help now. They deserve to be heard, respected and given the means not just to survive, but to live with dignity.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Last year's budget was an opportunity to ease cost pressures on people with disabilities, but instead of providing them with support, the Government chose to abandon them and withdraw payments, which meant that they were worse off by €1,400. The Government has ignored the pleas from people with disabilities who told it they were having to make the most difficult of decisions, such as having to choose between heating and eating. Once again, people with disabilities have been told to wait. Altogether, there have been four major reviews and reports on the cost of disability, and another consultation was launched in February.

Disabled people face significant additional and unavoidable costs every single day. It is estimated that they face weekly additional costs of between €488 and €555 on average. These costs include higher electricity and heating bills as well as the cost of equipment, transport, personal assistance, assistive technology and everyday adaptations that they need to simply live, work, study and participate in our communities. They have not been supported and they have suffered as a result of rising costs in energy, housing and transport in addition to the increased costs associated with their disabilities. In the words of one person who contacted me:

These extra costs are not lifestyle choices. They are not luxuries. They are the price of survival and participation in a society that is still not fully accessible for me.

This reality is why we have brought this motion forward tonight. The Government's amendment to our motion demonstrates just how out of touch it is with the lived realities that people with disabilities face. It is telling people with disabilities to try to hold on until the next budget and next year when a cost-of-disability payment might be introduced. How is that going to give any person with a disability any comfort when their bills keep coming in? People need support now. Supporting people with disabilities is one of the most fundamental things that we must do as a society. I urge the Government to finally recognise the cost of disability and provide adequate financial support. No more reports and delays. There must be an emergency payment in advance of a permanent cost-of-disability payment being introduced in the next budget to help meet the real additional costs faced every day by people with disabilities.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister of State said in his contribution that one payment would not resolve anything but if you have not got any money to pay for a taxi and you need to get to an appointment, a payment makes all the difference. What we have spoken about this evening is the money people with disabilities need to live. One payment makes a difference. A more permanent payment would absolutely make a difference but if he was listening to people with disabilities, the Minister of State would understand they were struggling right now. When you are in an emergency - these are people who face an emergency every single day - one payment makes a difference. That is what people are asking for. They have an emergency now. They do not have enough money to live now. They need an emergency payment now.

Nobody has said there is not a cost to disability. The Minister of State knows that there is, that the Government took €1,400 a year from people with disabilities last year, that the cost of living is rising and that this is impacting people with disabilities disproportionately. All of this he knows, and even if he did not, there is report after report that would tell him. This consultation process is dragging it out, people are being made to wait and they are being told that it is not sustainable to give them an in-cash payment now, but it is not sustainable to ask people to make those horrible choices between heating, eating and charging mobility devices.

People with disabilities are used to being fobbed off and ignored but, by Jesus, they were gaslit this evening. The Minister of State should reflect on that. Do not come in here and tell people that there is not an emergency or that he thinks they can wait. They cannot wait. We do not get endless hours of speaking time in this Chamber. We use our time really carefully because we only get one chance a week. We are standing up for people with disabilities. The Minister of State is not listening and the Government is not listening. People with disabilities cannot wait. It is cruel that the Government is ignoring them.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 27 May 2026.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Cost of Living Issues

136. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will bring forward an emergency budget to help people deal with the cost of living. [39713/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I ask the Tánaiste again to review the decision not to have an emergency budget. It is absolutely crucial. What was announced last October in the budget left people worse off. It is not just Sinn Féin saying this - we saw in the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, analysis of the budget that families were left worse off and those on lower incomes were worse off. Added to that, inflation is running at nearly double what was projected on budget day. People cannot wait until next year until the Government brings forward the budget. They need support right now with the cost-of-living crisis.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has already intervened to help absorb the impact of rising energy prices for households and businesses with two packages of measures worth over €750 million. The first package of measures introduced in March reduced excise on fuel, cut the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy to a nominal amount and enhanced the diesel rebate scheme. We also extended the fuel allowance season by an additional four weeks. This meant that 470,000 households received additional financial support, an extra €152 in total. A further package of measures was introduced in April. Excise on fuel was cut further, bringing the total reduction in diesel to 32 cent per litre, 27 cent per litre for petrol and 7.4 cent per litre for green diesel. We are also delaying the scheduled increase in carbon tax and introducing a support subsidy schemes aimed at key productive sectors of our economy, both haulage and agriculture. We have shown we are not afraid to act when the circumstances demand action but we have also been clear that the best way to manage the State's finances is as part of a carefully considered annual budget process. I emphasise that the Government's response has been made possible because of the resources we have thanks to the careful management of our public finances. We have run surpluses for consecutive years. Running surpluses has not always been popular, but it has given us the flexibility and agility to respond swiftly and forcefully to this shock.

The resources of the State are not infinite. There are still vulnerabilities in our public finances. Around €1 in every €6 paid in tax comes from about ten firms in the country. The vulnerability around what we refer to as windfall tax receipts is real. We are highly exposed to any deterioration in the global economy and there are structural changes on the horizon that must be prepared for. That is why it is important that we get into that annual budget cycle.

I accept the Deputy's point. People are feeling the pressure and, as a result of the war in Iran, inflation is higher this year than it was expected to be. The focus in the budget will be to see what measures we can take in a rounded way to try to assist people, including in a structural way, with the charges that families and businesses face.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Many people would love to be in the Minister's shoes and have the luxury to wait this out until next year until budget 2027 but they are not in that position. We have 320,000 families across this State who cannot pay their electricity bills. One in four households cannot pay their gas bills. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of other families are paying those bills but are really struggling, finding it difficult to make ends meet at the end of the week, working every hour God sends them and doing everything right, yet still they find it tough because groceries, insurance and rent have gone up. All the pressures of life are bearing down on them and they are looking at a Minister who has a surplus that is now twice what was projected just a couple of weeks ago but who tells them to hang in there, to tighten their belts, to hold tight and that the Government will come to them maybe in October or might have something for them in January. People need support right here, right now. The Minister needs to understand that there is serious pressure on families at this point in time and they are looking for a Government that will listen and respond to them. The way the Minister needs to respond is to bring forward measures that recognise the pressures families are under right now.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not sure that the Deputy's take on the Irish people is where they are at. The Irish people get the fact that this Government responded with one of the largest packages of support in the European Union, so nobody has been asked to wait at all. We reduced excise on diesel and petrol and put in place measures for key sectors. All of that benefits every citizen in this State in terms of trying to put some downward pressure on what the Deputy rightly said was rising inflation. The Department of Finance estimates that the overall package will reduce inflation by about 0.5% on what it otherwise would have been. We are taking proactive measures but I have to be honest with the Irish people - the winter could be very challenging. We have to try to make sure we can have a well-considered package for how we assist people, families and business not in a temporary way, but in a way that looks at structural change. I am open to positive and constructive engagement. We had a discussion about this in the budgetary oversight committee today.

What can we do structurally on energy? What can we do to make it easier for people to make their own homes warmer? Are there measures we can take there? However, getting into that annual budget cycle is to the benefit of citizens in this country.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There the Minister goes again saying the winter could be very challenging. People are telling me that it is very challenging right now. How more challenging does it need to be when you cannot pay to keep the lights on in your home? That is the pressure that people are under. The Minister is saying that we need to keep the power dry until the

winter and budget 2027 and I am telling him that there are large numbers of people who are really under pressure. They are under pressure because of the budget that the Government brought forward.

The Government brought forward a budget of €9.4 billion last year and the Government left workers and families worse off. That is what the ESRI says. The ESRI is very clear on what the Government has done. They are worse off this year than they were last year. That is the Government's conscious decision. On top of that now, we have inflation. We have so much pressure bearing down on people.

Can the Minister not understand that people's lives are really challenging now? What they are seeing is a Government that thought it would have a surplus of over €4 billion, now it is twice that amount and the Minister is still not willing to alleviate the pressures on those families right now.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is doing it again. The Deputy is speaking for the people of Ireland. We both went to Galway and we put our cases to the people. The Deputy said, "Send a message to the Government on the cost-of-living crisis - vote Sinn Féin", and the people of Galway West said, "Now, hang on a second here. We can see through this." The Deputy should have a little humility in terms of coming in here speaking for the people of Ireland and that the Deputy is in touch with everyone and I am out of touch. We just had an election. That is the first point.

The second point is, we need to be very careful we do not chase inflation. The Deputy's budget proposals last year would have put up inflation. The Deputy knows that too. We have to get this balance right. We had a good conversation of Government and Opposition at the oversight committee on this today. We have to be very careful that anything we do does not chase inflation because things that we do that could in the temporary moment seem like we are trying to assist people could end up pushing up prices for them and nobody in this House, I presume, wants to achieve that situation too.

We have taken measures. The people of Ireland get this. It is one of the largest packages of support in the European Union to help people. We will work in the annual budget cycle but if we get into this situation of mini-budget here and mini-budget there, it is a dangerous spiral that will not serve the people of this country well.

Regeneration Projects

137. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if any applications have been made to date to the Revenue Commissioners from property owners in Drogheda and Dundalk for access to the living cities initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39890/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: I am seeking an update on the number of applications or inquiries that have been made with the Revenue Commissioners in relation to the living cities scheme since its expansion to cover Drogheda and Dundalk. I appreciate that it was only a month ago that this happened but this is a critical scheme for the area to address vacancy and dereliction. If the Minister has an update, I would it if he put it on the record of the House.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate the Deputy's support for the initiative.

The living city initiative is provided for in Chapter 13 of Part 10 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. It offers income or corporation tax relief for qualifying expenditure incurred in the refurbishment and conversion of qualifying residential and commercial buildings located within special regeneration areas. Often these are inner city or central town areas where there is above-average unemployment and which demonstrate clear evidence of dereliction, perhaps neglect and under-use.

There are four types of relief available under the initiative: owner-occupier residential relief, rented residential relief, commercial relief and living-over-the-shop relief.

As the Deputy will be aware, we introduced this in 2015. We took a decision in the last budget to expand that as well and the Deputy was eager that that would happen. Indeed, it was expanded to five more areas, namely, Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo.

I appreciate the speed at which the local authorities worked. I acknowledge Louth County Council in getting in the maps that my Department was then able to get independently assessed.

The scheme, as the Deputy says, now has opened. I am advised by Revenue that it has recently received information from Louth County Council in respect of the number of requests for letters of certification received by the local authority. Revenue understands that Louth County Council has received fewer than ten requests between 8 April 2026, when the scheme was opened, and 20 May 2026. As the Deputy says, it is a short window. For reasons of taxpayer confidentiality, Revenue will never give the exact number but just under ten is an indication. In only a month of the scheme, I see that as somewhat encouraging.

I will continue to monitor this. I am happy to provide the Deputy with further updates as they become available.

Deputy Ged Nash: Vacancy and dereliction is an absolute scourge that is affecting every town, city and village across this country. For many years, I have sought the expansion of the scheme to areas such as Drogheda and Dundalk.

Drogheda, especially, as the Minister will understand, is a very ancient area with sensitive architecture. That being said, one of the main aspects of this scheme now is that it applies, at least from the point of view of commercial premises, to properties that were developed before 1975. It previously pertained to buildings built prior to 1915. The change to 1975 should capture quite a significant number of buildings that could be brought back on stream.

One thing I propose would be that the Revenue Commissioners proactively market this. If it is the case that in previous iterations of the scheme, the Revenue Commissioners went out and conducted workshops in communities trying to promote the scheme, can they be encouraged to do so?

Deputy Simon Harris: That is a fair point. Truthfully, I do not know whether Revenue went out and marketed the scheme previously. From my recollection, it is generally the local authorities that promote the scheme and obviously the Revenue Commissioners that administer the scheme.

On the Deputy's broader point as to whether we should have roadshows or workshops, absolutely we should. On foot of the Deputy raising this here this evening, I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Browne, from the local authority perspective, and my own officials and Revenue, and see what can be organised here.

We set up these schemes because we want them to succeed. We set them up because we accept that the issue of dereliction is real. Dundalk and Drogheda won the argument in terms of the need for that scheme to be expanded and now we want it to be a success.

In the first instance, I would encourage at a local level the local authority and other stakeholders, who I am sure will, to get the word out there. Should that be happening, if we can supplement that with Revenue or the likes, I will certainly engage with the Deputy positively on that to try to make that happen. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Browne, and we will both revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Ged Nash: One important aspect is that this is user-friendly and accessible. The Revenue Commissioners and the Department have taken on board some of the critiques of the scheme over the past few years. Certainly, the enhancement of the scheme will make it more attractive. Clearly, it will become more attractive to enterprises that are engaging in redevelopment given the expansion of the value of the relief from €200,000 to €300,000. In reality, with some of the sensitive and large-scale buildings we are talking about in areas such as Drogheda and Dundalk, it may be only commercial enterprises that will have the deep pockets, ambition and wherewithal to undertake the work that would be needed on architecturally sensitive buildings to put them back into use.

I know from the maps - I acknowledge the Minister stated quite correctly that Louth County Council were quick out of the traps in terms of developing the proposed special area of regeneration - that close to 60 buildings in that area are considered to be derelict and this could be a game-changer, if it is taken up.

It is important that Revenue promotes it. I myself will contact them and make that case that they may very well need to conduct some workshops with the local authority and local businesses.

Deputy Simon Harris: As I say, I am positively disposed to that. We passed a law in this House to make this living city initiative available to five more regional towns, including places such as Drogheda and Dundalk. We all want to see it succeed now.

We have tried to show flexibility as a Department and as a Government in terms of enhancing the scheme. In the previous Finance Act, there were a number of enhancements. First, the scheme was extended to the end of 2030. Second, it is now available to residential properties built before 1975 instead of 1915, as the Deputy said. Furthermore, if the work is carried out by an enterprise, the maximum relief has been increased from €200,000 to €300,000. Of course, the big announcement, from the Deputy's perspective, was it was extended to five regional centres, including Dundalk and Drogheda.

The new living-over-the-shop relief is an important step in terms of trying to bring life back onto our main streets, tackle dereliction, but also the whole safety and security issue that can create in a positive sense as well. Having no building age rule for the conversion of commercial

into residential will facilitate greater access to the relief for living-over-the-shop or mixed-use developments.

I will follow up with the Deputy in relation to that workshop concept.

Insurance Industry

138. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the reason the motor insurance transparency code is voluntary and not subject to administrative sanctions procedure. [39714/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister finally published his motor insurance transparency code, which was promised in the so-called insurance action plan. The action is completely powerless with no powers to sanction companies. Worse still, I understand it is voluntary. That was never mentioned in the original action plan. Why is the Government afraid to stand up to the insurance companies and hold them to account?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): The motor insurance transparency code was launched as a priority measure under the Government action plan for insurance reform from 2025 to 2029 to enhance transparency, clarity and consumer understanding in the motor insurance market. The code was developed by a working group comprising insurers and intermediaries with the support of the Department of Finance and the Central Bank.

The code is designed to complement, rather than duplicate, existing regulatory requirements. It sits under the legislative umbrella of the Central Bank of Ireland's consumer protection code, CPC, and aligns with relevant disclosure requirements and requirements to inform customers effectively. The revised CPC came into effect on 24 March this year and is legally binding on insurance companies and intermediaries. The Central Bank's administrative sanctions procedure will be applicable in respect of non-compliance with the revised CPC.

The voluntary nature of the code allows for an appropriate balance between transparency and the protection of commercially sensitive information. The code has been carefully designed to provide meaningful insight to consumers into how premiums are calculated, while ensuring that firms are not required to disclose information that could undermine competition or market functioning. While the code is not subject to the administrative sanctions procedure, there remains a clear framework for oversight and monitoring. The Central Bank will provide a report to the Minister for Finance in advance of the first review of the code, which will take place within 18 months of implementation. This report will be on the Central Bank's observations on firms' adherence to the code and the effect the code is having in achieving its objectives. If it fails to achieve the objectives, we are, of course, open to putting it on a legislative footing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The cost of car insurance is going up and up. This is the fourth consecutive year of price rises and every motorist knows it. Irish people already pay almost double what the European motorist pays for car insurance. When one adds soaring fuel costs, too many people are being pushed to the brink in trying to keep a car on the road. We know

from the Central Bank that the cost of car insurance is going up while costs for insurance companies are going down. The simple fact is that companies are pocketing the difference with the tacit support of Government. The answer of the Government is a voluntary code designed by the insurance industry. It is difficult to overstate how weak an approach this is. How is the public supposed to have any faith this will work when it is optional and completely toothless? We need a Government that is standing up to insurance companies and ensuring that the benefits of the reforms that have been passed in this House over the past number of years are not going into the pockets of the companies but, rather, are passed on to consumers in the form of reduced premiums.

Deputy Robert Troy: As the Deputy will be aware, we are implementing the second action plan on insurance reform. Reforms are working. The latest CSO data of April 2026 shows that in the year to date insurance premiums are 2.2% lower this year than in April 2025. The Deputy may want to dispute that figure. Premiums are still 35.8% lower than they were at the peak of 2016. I acknowledge that we need to keep a close focus on this to ensure we continue to see a downward move. This transparency code will help to achieve that. Some 2.2 million policyholders will see the benefit of this code in their quotations and renewal documents from quarter 3 of this year. Despite the fact that it is a voluntary code, 97.5% of insurers and intermediaries selling insurance in this State have already signed up to it. This will enable consumers to see exactly how their policy is charged and to shop around to ensure they get the best value for money in their policy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister of State not accept the average cost for motor insurance in this State is now €655? Does he accept that insurance companies are paying out less than half of that in claims? Does he accept that insurance companies are taking more in profits and inflated costs that they are paying out? They are all facts. Insurance companies are squeezing people dry to appease their shareholders. The Government wants to blame drivers. This Government is going along with that. The transparency code refers to risk mitigation and driver behaviour more than profit or inflated costs.

I tabled proposed legislation four years ago in the House to set out how a Government could mandate insurance companies to show how they are actually passing on the benefits of these reforms to customers and not profiteering from those same reforms. Instead, we get a voluntary code with no audits or enforcement. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the Independents that support them are blocking my Bill. The public deserves to have full transparency. They deserve not just transparency and accountability, but also reduced premiums, as was promised by these reforms. Unfortunately, if we do not have a Government that stands up to the industry, the industry will of course deepen its pockets with profits.

Deputy Robert Troy: Insurance premiums have fallen in the past couple of months, according to the CSO.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Not according to the Central Bank.

Deputy Robert Troy: That is a welcome development. There were a couple of years where there were increases. We are still 35% lower than we were at the peak. That is a success. The

reason we re-established the action plan on insurance reform was that we acknowledged there was more work to be done. We are doing that. The transparency code has been published in a timely and efficient manner. Consumers will see the benefit of that code in their renewals come quarter 3 of this year. The last time the Deputy raised the question with me regarding his insurance premium he spoke about how it has increased, but when he shopped around he got a lower one. The simple fact of the matter is that not enough people are shopping around. We now have ten insurance companies providing insurance cover in the motor insurance sector in Ireland. There have been three new players in the past number of years. That is success. There is more competition in the market. Only one in four people shops around and of those, 76% achieve savings. This will enable people to get better premiums on their insurance policies. We will keep the matter under review. It is a success. The Deputy can never acknowledge any progress.

Tax Code

139. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will reconsider his position and introduce a windfall tax on energy companies in order to fund support for workers and families with the rising cost of bills. [39715/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister reconsider his position and introduce a windfall tax on energy companies in order to fund support for workers and families in the cost-of-living crisis? The Minister has stated he will not introduce a windfall energy tax on energy companies unless his hand is effectively forced by action at the European level. His performance during the last energy shock was abysmal. He allowed companies to enrich themselves. I urge him not to repeat the same mistakes, reconsider his position and prepare windfall tax measures in the State.

Deputy Simon Harris: The European Union does not work in the manner in which the Deputy described. It is not about forcing anybody's hand. We are members of the European Union. The Deputy's party did not support joining the European Union, but we are members of it and sit round the table and make decisions together. It clearly makes sense in a single market that if you are introducing a taxation system around energy, you would endeavour to examine the measures available at European level and try to move in concert. That is the position of the Government. We certainly have not ruled out acting on a windfall tax. We have said it would make sense that we do that at a European level.

As the Deputy is aware, the European Commission's AccelerateEU communication addresses the EU's rising energy costs and volatile fossil fuel markets and aims to accelerate the clean energy transition and strengthen EU energy resilience. While the communication notes member states may take domestic measures, no EU-wide approach has yet been agreed. The temporary solidarity contribution, TSC, was introduced in line with Council Regulation 2022/1854 of 6 October 2022 to tackle windfall gains being made in the energy sector at the time, following the commencement of war in Ukraine. The TSC formed part of a co-ordinated European response, reflecting the highly interconnected nature of EU energy markets - when we acted, we did so at an EU level - and a view that an emergency intervention to mitigate the

effects of high energy prices at the time could not be sufficiently achieved by member states individually.

It continues to be the Government's view that tackling the energy crisis in a co-ordinated way between EU member states is preferable, given the interconnectedness of EU energy markets. We will continue to engage constructively with EU partners on these matters and aim to ensure that any joint European response to these challenges is co-ordinated and effective. In this context, potential solidarity measures and broader energy market developments continue to be a central focus and Ireland continues to engage with our EU partners, in collusion during our forthcoming EU Presidency.

The Government is conscious of the increased financial pressures on households and businesses, which we have discussed in terms of the temporary and targeted measures we have introduced, one of the largest packages in the European Union. Alongside this, work is ongoing through the national energy affordability task force to identify further measures to enhance energy affordability. The ongoing conflict shows the need to accelerate the deployment of renewables at domestic and EU level.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is the same old playbook. We see the same playbook being used by the Government on the occupied territories Bill. When it does not want to do something, it reaches for the EU and uses it as an excuse. The EU has given member states the green light to act on this. The ball is in the Government's court, yet it is still finding excuses as to why it will not or cannot act. It is trying not to rewrite history. The Government opposed action at EU level during the last energy shock. Electricity companies were never hit with a windfall tax in the State. The TSC the Minister mentioned did not apply to electricity companies, but the European Commission has been crystal-clear this time that member states can act. The Minister can act. Does he accept that he is choosing not to act on a windfall tax on energy companies?

Does the Minister accept he is choosing not to act in relation to windfall tax on energy companies now?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: I fully accept that it is the very clear position of the Government that if we were to act on windfall taxation, we would do it at an EU level because of the interconnectedness of the EU market. That is the position of the Government. This week, Deputy Doherty wants to fund the new measures he would like to do outside of a budget with a windfall tax.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who said that? Why are you making that up? Did I say that?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Speak through the Chair, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: With respect, did I say that? Is the Minister just going to make up lies? Is he just going to do that?

Deputy Simon Harris: The transcript of the Dáil will show-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not say it.

Deputy Simon Harris: Let me speak, Pearse. Come on.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not say it.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: The angry routine is not working. Just let me speak. I thank the Deputy. I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. The transcript will show that Deputy Doherty talked about bringing in a windfall tax measure that could help to provide supports families and businesses.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not say that. I actually did not say that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Deputy Doherty can do this outside. This is not a conversation. There is no back and forth. The Tánaiste can finish.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: This is my time. I am allowed to speak. I might be allowed to suggest the Deputy might tell me what the purpose of it is if he does not believe it is for that. Last week, he wanted us to use the surplus. The point is we have put in place one of the largest energy support packages in the European Union. We are working at an EU level because a co-ordinated approach matters. Being isolated and not working at a European level does not work for this country's economy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Deputy Doherty has one minute.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: He just used all of my time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I know the Minister wanted me to say that and that is fine. I have no problem saying that but I did not say it. I did not work with the narrative of the Minister's script.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: I do not have a script.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let us be clear. The Minister has the power to do this now. He has the power to introduce a windfall tax on energy companies. He is refusing to do so. These companies are ripping off Irish customers left, right and centre. There is a decision the Minister has to take about which side he is on. He talks about the EU energy market but it does not stack up. The Irish energy market is not as integrated as that of other member states because we are an island nation.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: That is the problem.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is a difference there in the first instance. That is a bit of a smokescreen in relation to an action. The reality is that the Minister does not want to do this.

The European Commission has given him the power to do it and, of course, he should do it. Let us look at the last time we saw money collected. We know that €178 million is still sitting there. That was money that was supposed to directly support workers and families with the cost of electricity. I told the Minister earlier on. There are 320,000 families who cannot pay their electricity bill and the Minister has sat on a fund of €178 million for the past three years that is just sitting there. It is ridiculous.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: It is also important to note, as the Deputy referenced the last time, that when the temporary solidarity contribution was brought in, and this is already facing multiple legal challenges in the Court of Justice of the European Union, the actors questioned the legality of the measures and the actors questioned the retroactive elements of the measure. Claimants are arguing that the EU incorrectly adopted the levy under Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, TFEU, as emergency measures rather than requiring unanimous agreement. The last time this was done, it was subject to legal challenge.

The Government is working at a European level because we believe in a single market for energy. That is where we are all working to get to. There is an interconnectedness to this. We have provided significant financial assistance to families and businesses. We will be doing more in the budget to help people with the structural costs they face in their lives. We will continue to keep all matters under review.

Question No. 140 taken with Written Answers.

Tax Code

141. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he is considering new taxation measures to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness to support the growth of the indigenous sector and encourage retail investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39878/26]

Deputy James O'Connor: Will the Government consider any new measures in the forthcoming budget to support the growth of the indigenous sectors in Ireland and to encourage more retail investment? I do not need to tell the Tánaiste the importance of small and medium-sized companies in this country. When we see the enormous exposure Ireland has regarding our corporation tax receipts, although it is a huge benefit to the economy, there is also a risk if we ignore Irish businesses and do not do enough to support them, foster them and help more businesses to grow, expand and be founded in our country. Does the Tánaiste have anything to say?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for this important question. A number of tax incentives that are in place are intended to encourage investment in indigenous businesses, particularly in our small and medium enterprises. These measures include the employment investment incentive, the research and development tax credit, the start-up capital investment and the relief for investment in innovative enterprises, also known as angel investor relief. The research and development tax credit is another tax relief that is now making a significant contribution to Ireland's competitiveness.

Ireland still does not have a sufficiently diversified savings and investment culture. This is a real issue in our country. Deposit accounts are appropriate for many people and for many needs but as inflation can erode their value over time, they should not be the only practical option. Investment in capital markets by retail investors can offer another path to long-term financial well-being while also supporting growth and competitiveness in the wider economy, as has been identified in the EU's focus on the savings and investment union, SIU. I acknowledge the work the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, is doing with me in this key area.

An important aspect of the SIU is the European Commission's recommendation on increasing the availability of savings and investment accounts in member states. At the recent savings and investment forum, I announced our intention to introduce a legislative framework for an investment account in Ireland in the next budget. We want to make investing simpler, clearer and more accessible for ordinary people. In designing the model that best fits the Irish economy and the needs of Irish households, the views of relevant experts are being considered and we are learning from international best practice. That is not about picking up something from another country and saying that we will take exactly that. We will learn from best practice and find what is the best model for our country too. Many countries have implemented similar schemes and they have reported that investors tend to have a home bias in their investment choices.

Budget 2026 included a commitment to publish a roadmap for the taxation of retail investment in 2026. The development of the investment account is a key part of that roadmap, as is consideration of the existing taxation regimes for investment. I expect to be in a position with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, to publish that roadmap this summer.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Tánaiste and appreciate his response. Yesterday, we saw some very important information come from the International Monetary Fund that effectively warned Ireland about a level of exposure our economy has when it comes to bloated expenditure and wastage of public money and the risks in our economy, such as the advances in artificial intelligence. They are things the Government cannot afford to ignore. I fear that we are not quite at 2008 levels yet, but we are back in 2005, 2006 and 2007, when the Celtic tiger reached its peak and it all came to a miserable end. I wanted to say that on the record of this House and I hope I am proved wrong in four or five years' time. We need to ensure that indigenous businesses, our SMEs and our entrepreneurs are supported, that our economy gives them the best possible chance of success and that we are able to derisk Ireland from what the IMF has stated is a particular concern.

We know that multinational companies are moving five times faster than the SME sector when it comes to the application of artificial intelligence. We have a bloated number of employees in Ireland working in multinationals. The risk is clear and obvious. It is a serious risk to the State.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. He said he wanted to put something on the record of the Dáil so let me do that as well. While the Deputy is right that we should always be cautious about our economy and never take economic stability or growth for granted - sometimes that seems to be the case in our discourse - I contend that the country has structurally learned a lot of lessons in terms of plans and actions from the crash.

That ranges from the fiscal rules we have in place to our level of indebtedness, both at a national level but also at a business level, being a lot lower too.

The Deputy's point about the indigenous sector is right. It is still a statement of fact that the greatest number of people in employment in Ireland are in Irish-owned SMEs. This is a sector we have to really support. The research and development tax credit is now being used by more and more SMEs, but making this as simple as possible for smaller companies to access is important too. On AI, the approach of the Government and country has to be to maximise the opportunities and minimise the challenges. I know both Ministers, Deputy Burke and Deputy Lawless, are working on how we can address the skills deficit that interacts with those two Departments. The Industrial Development Agency, IDA, and Enterprise Ireland, EI, are supporting companies as well. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, is looking at how we can train more people in these areas. There are also huge opportunities for the Irish economy, for both indigenous and FDI-supported companies, in terms of productivity if we can get AI right.

Deputy James O'Connor: I appreciate the Tánaiste's response. Undoubtedly, the agencies he mentioned, including the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, have done great work. As Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, I commend them on the huge body of work they have done over many decades. Beyond politics and beyond what happens in this House, they are working diligently on behalf of the State across the world and that has to be commended. We have to come to terms with the fact that AI will change the world. It will change how people work. It will reduce the number of people in our workforce and we know that. We see it happening. We saw it with Meta recently and other companies that are starting to downsize their workforce.

Informally, some governments are already talking about a future, amazing to say it, without the income from PAYE workers. That is the level of change. If we look at the pioneering companies in respect of this, such as Anthropic and others, they have discussed the possibility that from 40% to 60% of the current workforce in the United States of America could be finding themselves in some way redundant over the next ten to 15 years. We need to take this seriously and look at the key risks to the economy in Ireland.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: That is right; we need to take it deadly seriously. I do not mean this about Deputy O'Connor but about me. I always think that speaking with great authority on something that is fast evolving is challenging because we are all learning about this in real time. That is not an excuse or a reason not to take it extremely seriously because the countries that work out how best to respond to this are the countries that will do the best. We have only to look at the Future Forty report, which my Department published.

10 o'clock

It refers to the huge demographic challenges this country is going to face. One of the great ones is that everyone is going to live to be much older, on average, and the population is going to age. The question of whether we can transform healthcare through the use of AI, for example, points to one area where I believe we could see real productivity gains. At the moment, all of the conversation seems to be about productivity gains in the private sector and just being aware of the risk in the public sector. We have got to do a bit better than that.

The other point is that, up until now, every technological revolution has resulted in more jobs at the end of it than at the start. That merits close monitoring. What we do know is that training and upskilling comprise an immediate issue, and we have to take that very seriously.

Fiscal Policy

143. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure that the Government and the Central Bank are acting in accordance with the recommendations set out in the report on the Israeli bond programme of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39701/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Israel is still issuing war bonds across the EU and using this money to fund a genocide. While our role in approving these bonds has been moved to Luxembourg, Ireland remains the home member state for Israeli bonds. We have a legal and moral obligation to do everything we can to stop genocide when it is taking place. What action is the Minister taking to ensure we are not complicit in the sale of these bonds and in implementing the recommendations from the committee's report?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank an Teachta O'Callaghan very much for the question. I have read the report of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, and Digitalisation and it has also been reviewed by my officials. It was published last August. It sets out 15 recommendations, some directed to the Central Bank of Ireland and others to the Government.

Chief among the recommendations made is that the Government engage at EU level with a view to amending the prospectus regulation. I directed that senior officials in my Department engage with the Commission on this matter. Department officials subsequently liaised with their counterparts in the European Commission, drawing attention to the work of the Oireachtas committee in its report and, in particular, the committee's recommendation that the prospectus regulation be amended. We formally conveyed that as the view of the Oireachtas to the European Commission. This engagement reflected my view that the European Commission should have regard to the report, its findings and recommendations. Officials outlined, in their engagement, recent developments in Ireland and sought the views of the Commission on the possibility of a legislative initiative by the European Commission to address the Oireachtas committee's recommendation. In its response, disappointingly, the EU Commission indicated it currently has no plans for a review of the prospectus regulation.

My officials have also engaged with the Central Bank since the report was published. The Central Bank has also reviewed the report's recommendations. It has on a number of occasions, both before the committee and elsewhere, set out its position on the matter. I do not need to remind the Deputy, because he said it, that the Central Bank has no role in the review and approval of the 2025 prospectus for the State of Israel.

Ireland is continuing to press for appropriate action at EU level. I support the proposal of the committee, and also the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement in response to the egregious Israeli breaches of human rights, international law and democratic principles.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, indicated in the Dáil last week that she will advance the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory Bill in the coming weeks, and she secured Cabinet approval on that today.

Our Taoiseach also wrote to European Council President Costa on 20 May reiterating Ireland's position on EU trade with Israel and requesting an urgent discussion of these issues among EU leaders at the next meeting of the European Council. Perhaps on foot of this question, I will brief the Taoiseach on the committee recommendation before that Council meeting.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste for his response and for the work that has been done on this. What he said earlier, in response to a different question from a different Deputy, was that while we are part of the EU, we do not simply do what it tells us. Rather, we are part of shaping what it does. Clearly, therefore, the response from the European Commission is not satisfactory and is not in line with what we want as a country. What is the Tánaiste going to do to follow up with the European Commission on this? It saying it has no plans to do anything about this simply is not acceptable. We need to do as much as possible in Ireland and more broadly in the EU to address this. We cannot have a situation where bonds are being sold in Europe that have been marketed by Israel to fund its war and genocide. What follow-up action is the Minister taking with the European Commission to push it into acting on this, because its response simply is not acceptable?

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with that. What I will do is raise it at a political level as well. We have been raising it at an official level. I have directed my officials on a number of occasions on back-and-forth engagement with the Commission on this. I will speak to the Taoiseach as well because I know he has rightly sought a conversation at the European Council on foot of Israel's egregious breaches of international law. That is due to be scheduled for 18 and 19 June.

I have examined whether Ireland can do something domestically because I know we have had debates in this House on the matter, but the clear, solid view is that national measures could not allow for the Central Bank to refuse a prospectus because the requirements of the EU prospectus regulation have to be met, including the standards of completeness, consistency and comprehensibility. We need to respect EU law, but I take the point that we also have a role in shaping it. There are different views across the EU on this matter, although I really hope it can be addressed, particularly after the horrors we saw in relation to the flotilla. It should not have taken that at all, nor should it have happened. If that is how Israel treats European citizens, it gives a real insight into how it must treat Palestinians.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste. Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, clearly stated, "International law says that all financial actors have to abstain from being directly linked to human rights crimes". That applies to the financial actors and authorities in Ireland, Luxembourg and across the European Union.

I welcome the Minister saying he is going to raise this at a political level. What does that mean? I welcome that he is going to raise it with the Taoiseach. Who is the Minister going to

talk to and when? Will he give us details of the timeline for his plans to raise this at a political level?

Deputy Simon Harris: That is a fair point. I will correspond directly with the relevant European Commissioner in the first instance, following up on the official engagement and reflecting the view of the Oireachtas committee on the prospectus regulation. I also do not rule out having further political engagement with EU counterparts on this.

What is clear, and I know there are strong views on this issue in this House and in this country, is that sometimes there can be a grey area and we can debate how much is in compliance with EU law and how much we can do domestically. On this matter, solidly, the EU treaties and the obligations of member states seem to necessitate any change happening at an EU regulatory level. In the first instance, I will personally correspond with the European Commissioner and will update the Deputy when I receive a response.

Tax Reliefs

142. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he is considering a reduction in the capital gains tax rate from 33% to 25% for active business assets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39656/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Aidan Farrelly: We will revert to Question No. 142 in the name of Deputy Cathal Crowe. It will be taken now by Deputy Tony McCormack. I apologise to the Deputy for having skipped it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy very much for the question. The rate at which capital gains tax, CGT, is charged has varied both upwards and downwards since its introduction in 1975. The current standard rate of 33%, which applies to most gains, has been in place since 2012. However, a number of reliefs are already provided for business assets, including retirement relief on the transfer of business or farming assets, revised entrepreneur relief and participation exemption relief. For example, the revised entrepreneur relief provides a reduced rate of CGT for qualifying business assets. The lifetime limit of €1 million of gains on which the relief can be claimed was increased to €1.5 million with effect from 1 January this year. The increased lifetime limit should significantly assist entrepreneurs to grow and scale their businesses or to begin new ventures building on their previous entrepreneurial experience.

As with all taxes, there are options for amending the scope of the tax, including changing the rate of the tax, amending or abolishing existing reliefs or exemptions or considering the introduction of new reliefs and exemptions. However, a narrower base of a tax regime with significant exemptions often requires a higher rate to generate an appropriate yield. A wider base may facilitate a lower headline rate of tax as it applies to a wider set of economic and commercial activities, reduces reliance on any one activity and potentially maintains a more sustainable yield.

On the cost of changing the standard rate of CGT, and this is a legitimate issue people highlight, each 1% reduction or increase is estimated to amount to around €87 million in a full

year, assuming no behavioural change. We always have to assume that, although it is harder to factor in. Therefore, a 5% reduction in the standard CGT rate in a single budget would have an Exchequer impact, at least in that budget, of €436 million, assuming no behavioural change. There are also costs to the Exchequer associated with extending the level of relief, as suggested in the question. I put that out to be helpful as people consider budget options.

The programme for Government commits to maintaining a broad tax base to guard against the need for countercyclical fiscal policy in the event of a downturn and to prepare for future budgetary challenges. CGT is an important part of the system to ensure taxation is not focused solely on income tax and that those who benefit from gains in the value of assets are included. As with all taxation measures, it will be kept under review as part of the budget.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. I welcome the Government's continuing focus on competitiveness and supporting indigenous enterprise. As we all know, investment is vital in enabling companies to grow and expand and for start-up companies to get off the ground. However, Ireland's 33% CGT rate remains among the highest in Europe and there are growing concerns that it can discourage reinvestment, entrepreneurship and business scaling.

The Taoiseach himself recently acknowledged concerns that Ireland may be losing some investment and capital when people sell businesses and relocate elsewhere.

He also made the important point that what matters is ensuring that capital is recycled back into smaller companies, innovation and new technologies. In that context, would the Tánaiste agree that there is merit in examining a more competitive and targeted capital gains tax approach for active business assets, particularly where proceeds are reinvested into Irish enterprise, regional employment and productive economic activity?

Deputy Simon Harris: I heard the Taoiseach's comments. I hear regularly from stakeholders and business groups about the importance of making sure that our taxation system is pro-enterprise. What I would say in response is that while that is important, everything is a balance. There will be a finite amount of things we can do in the budget on tax. I am eager that there will be a personal tax package. There was not one last year. I am very eager there will be one in the next budget and I know that is a view shared across the Government. It is probably shared by people beyond the Government. That is one of the options I want seriously considered and acted upon as part of the budget. We will obviously consider and review through our tax strategy group papers. We will have a national economic dialogue in June, the summer economic statement in July and the budget in October. We will keep all these matters under review.

As all Ministers for Finance are meant to say, all taxation matters are for budget day. We will give consideration to all matters. This evening, I wanted to usefully put the cost on the record of the House so that we can all be informed as we consider those suggestions. That cost would be approximately €87 million in a full year for each 1% reduction.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Another issue that has been raised consistently is the failure to index capital gains tax, CGT, thresholds and exemptions over time. When CGT was introduced in 1974, the annual exemption was £500 and if indexed properly would be a lot more than £500

today. That would have been 10% of the average value of a house at the time. Instead, the exemption currently stands at €1,270 and has not been adjusted since 1992, when it was set at £1,000. There is a legitimate concern that taxpayers can end up paying increased tax simply due to inflationary growth in their asset value over time rather than any real gain. Would the Tánaiste consider asking the Department to examine both indexation measures and a targeted reinvestment relief model ahead of the next budget, particularly where proceeds are reinvested into SMEs, innovation and job creation here in Ireland?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy and will reflect on what he has said. I would point out that there are already a number of exemptions. If I am being bluntly honest with the House, I do not believe that existing levels of CGT are acting as a disincentive to investment because when they are looked at beyond the headline rate, we already have a range of exemptions and reliefs on CGT, which are designed to try to foster certain activities and avoid taxing people in situations that would be seen as unreasonable, such as retirements or the sale of a principal private residence. These reliefs reduce the level of CGT actually paid by many individuals, and include an annual exemption for the first €1,270 of gains arising from the disposal of assets. In addition, there are targeted reliefs for entrepreneurs and angel investors.

CGT, as with all taxes, is subject to ongoing review, which involves consideration and assessment of the rate of CGT and relevant reliefs and exemptions from CGT, and the policy and legislation around it will be reviewed as part of the annual budget and finance process. I will certainly reflect on what the Deputy has raised.

Banking Sector

144. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the reason €7.7 billion in proceeds from the sale of AIB shares is sitting, uninvested, with the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF. [39793/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has come to light that the proceeds of selling off the State's assets in the form of the shareholding in AIB is still sitting with the ISIF and is losing value. How has this been allowed to happen under the watch of the Tánaiste and his predecessor as Minister for Finance? What action is he going to take to address it? This is a significant amount of money that is losing value at a time when the Tánaiste has been running around and telling people that they need to get a return on their own investments. We have millions of euro losing value under his watch.

Deputy Simon Harris: I would be interested to one day tease through the Deputy's view on the investment accounts. I hope that is something he might consider supporting.

As the Deputy is aware, ISIF is composed of the discretionary portfolio and the directed portfolio. ISIF holds the directed portfolio under direction from the Minister for Finance, comprising receipts of bank share sales. The National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, has advised that at the end of 2024, the directed portfolio had a value of €7.7 billion, composed of ordinary shares in AIB, valued at the market price of €5.31 per share; €5 billion in cash and cash equivalents, including commitments of €165 million to the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI; and a €305 million loan to Home Building Finance Ireland, HBFI.

Of the cash and cash equivalents, €4.838 billion was invested in Irish Exchequer notes. Exchequer notes help to ensure capital preservation and are relatively liquid, which is an important consideration to meet the timing and quantum of transfers out of the directed portfolio. The majority of the portfolio is now in Exchequer notes. The resources are actively being drawn down to support major infrastructure investment priorities.

The end of 2025 position will be disclosed in the 2025 financial statements, which will be published in the coming months. The unaudited end of 2025 value of the directed portfolio was €6.4 billion and since the end of 2025, the value of the portfolio has been further reduced due to drawdowns to the Exchequer on foot of directions. The figure of €7.7 billion was at the end of 2024 and the unaudited end of 2025 value was €6.4 billion.

As part of budget 2025, the Government decided to use €3 billion of the proceeds from bank share disposals to provide funding for infrastructure, including water, housing and the electricity grid, and in the case of housing and water is additional to ongoing Exchequer expenditure. In 2025, €514 million of the €1 billion allocated for Uisce Éireann was paid over. The remaining balance will be paid over the period out to 2028. In late 2025, a further €750 million was drawn from the directed portfolio to provide funding for investment in the electricity grid. The balance of €1.25 billion is for the Land Development Agency. The remainder of the directed portfolio is intended to be used in support of the national development plan. These are one-off receipts to support infrastructure development.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have always been of the view that the State should have retained ownership of AIB. It was a mistake to sell off the shares. Fine Gael has a different ideological point of view and wanted the bank back in private ownership and is entitled to hold that opinion. However, the ideological position has come at a real financial cost. I think we can accept that now with the benefit of hindsight. The public AIB share was sold off at one of the worst times. When the Government started selling shares, they cost €2.32. They are now worth over €10. That shareholding would today be worth €16 billion before we even talk about the massive dividends that we no longer get from the bank. What we have instead is less than half of that sum. Worse still is that the Government sold off the public shares at that time and just left large portions of the proceeds sitting there. It did not use the money to build the necessary infrastructure. The money is losing value. That is the issue. The Tánaiste talked about Exchequer returns, but it is circular. It is in the State and getting a very low return. There is no actual return. It is a net zero return.

Does the Tánaiste accept that if we held those shares, they would be worth twice what we have now? That money should at least be getting some return as it sits in the ISIF account.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate the different political, ideological or policy positions on bank ownership. It is legitimate for people to hold different views on these subjects. The stated intention of the Government, and I think successive Governments, was to seek to return those banks to private ownership and to seek to recoup the money that the taxpayer had put into those banks, namely, AIB, Bank of Ireland and PTSB. That objective was largely fulfilled. I do not think the State should be in the business of owning banks. We all know how we ended up in that position as a State and it certainly was not by some sort of design. It was because of the financial crash and the chaos that ensued.

I am conscious that I am reading out a lot of figures and I am happy to send the Deputy a detailed note on the issue. I would just point out that the assertion around €7.7 billion was at a point in time at the end of 2024. What I have tried to do this evening is to update the Deputy on the current position because we have seen that number reduce as the result of investment decisions we have made, including for infrastructure projects. I will send the Deputy a note.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I appreciate what the Tánaiste has put on the record, that there was a reduction from €7.7 billion to a figure over €6 billion in the period of a year. However, it does not matter if the total is €7.7 billion or €6 billion. The money is sitting there and not making any return. It is in Exchequer notes, which means that the State is paying another organ of the State the 1%. It is making no return. It is financial mismanagement, on top of the fact that the Government sold the shares at one of the worst times. These shares would have been worth twice what we got for them if the Government held them today. We would be getting hundreds of millions of euro in dividends. This is serious financial mismanagement that the Comptroller and Auditor General should be exploring. We are not talking about hundreds of millions, or hundreds of thousands wasted on a bike shed or the €50 million wasted on the Irish Rail IT project. We are talking about billions of euro that has gone amiss as a result of selling the shares in AIB at the wrong time and then putting the proceeds from the sale of those shares in a fund that gets absolutely no return when inflation is running at 3.7%.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Comptroller and Auditor General is welcome to look at anything he wishes to look at. Indeed, it was the Comptroller and Auditor General who put that figure on the record of the Committee of Public Accounts on 14 May and it was a figure for the end of 2024. It was a moment in time and the Government has thankfully been in a position to make a number of decisions about what to do with that resource, including investing in infrastructure such as water, housing and the electricity grid. There is no question of waste. There is a question of correct deployment of a one-off resource to try to improve critical infrastructure, particularly around water, housing and electricity.

I am looking at the end of the ISIF's 2024 financial statements. The ISIF discloses its direct portfolio total interest income in its financial statements and the end of the 2024 financial statements states the interest income earned in 2024 was €126 million. The position at the end of 2025 will be disclosed in the 2025 financial statements.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Thank you, Tánaiste. We move to Question No. 145

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who paid the interest? Was it the other organ of the State?

Deputy Simon Harris: The ISIF does not disclose the terms of individual investments.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is an Exchequer note, which means it is the other organ of the State. It makes a mockery of it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Thank you, Deputy Doherty.

Middle East

145. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will ensure the Irish Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, is fully divested from all companies that are directly and indirectly involved in illegally occupied Palestinian territories, OPT; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39699/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The ISIF remains invested in companies that are profiting from illegally held Palestinian territories. More than €6 million of public money remained invested in six companies identified on the UN database at the end of 2024. Irish people do not want this. Will the Tánaiste ensure that the ISIF, which is public money, is divested fully from companies operating in illegally occupied Palestinian territories?

Deputy Simon Harris: I restate the Government's clear opposition to illegal Israeli settlements, which are contrary to international law and damaging to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East.

Ireland has demonstrated its support of the Palestinian people and taken practical steps at national, EU and international levels. On 13 January, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, announced that Ireland will provide €42 million in assistance to the people of Palestine in 2026, including €20 million in core funding to support the work of the United Nations Relief Works Agency, UNRWA, in providing vital services to refugees in Gaza and the West Bank. Ireland has provided more than €122 million in support to the people of Palestine since January 2023. This includes €68 million to UNRWA, of which €10 million was provided this January.

The Deputy is referring to the UN Human Rights Council database, known as the UN database, which identifies businesses involved in specific activities. It was first issued in 2020, updated in June 2023 and most recently updated to include 158 companies in September 2025 as mandated by the UN Human Rights Council. It is important to state that the ISIF has complete independence in implementing its investment strategy under the law of the land, the NTMA Acts, through an investment committee that reports to the NTMA's board.

I met the NTMA earlier this year and was assured that the ISIF will continue to monitor its holdings to ensure that investments remain aligned with its risk profile and investment parameters. Legislation underpinning the ISIF reflects a commitment to be a responsible investor, as a steward of public assets, by protecting and enhancing the long-term value of the ISIF and the reputation of the NTMA in how it delivers its mandate. The ISIF has taken an investment decision to divest from six companies, all of which remain in the UN database, with a total value at the time of the divestment decision of approximately €2.95 million. The six companies - I think I have read the names to the Deputy previously - were a variety of banks and a chain store. It is important to state that the type of companies on the UN database in which the ISIF still has holdings are ones that operate all over the world and that the ISIF's investment in them represents a very small proportion of its overall investments. This is part of the challenge. Unfortunately, divestment from these companies does not mean that they would stop deriving income from activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, OPT. The

NTMA also divested from directly held sovereign bond holdings within the global portfolio across Egypt, Israel, and Jordan in July 2025.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste. I acknowledge the huge importance of the Irish support of UNRWA, the funding that is in place and the real difference it makes. I also acknowledge the Government's complete opposition to illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. However, when we are talking about the ISIF - and it has complete independence - this is public money the Government hands over the NTMA to manage on its behalf. It is fine to say the NTMA monitors this and that it is meant to be a responsible investor and is meant to worry about its reputation and so forth, but this is public money. I do not think there is any support in this House or in this country for public funds to be invested in companies profiting and operating illegally, against international law, in the occupied Palestinian territories. This requires action from the Minister as the shareholder, on behalf of the public, to ensure our money is not used in this way.

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully accept the Deputy's sincerity on the issue and share much of his sentiment. I pointed out the NTMA Acts and the Deputy acknowledged that. I also acknowledge that the ISIF has taken the investment decision to divest from six companies, all of which remain on the updated UN database, with a value of more than €2.95 million at the time of divestment.

While these are decisions for the ISIF to make, some of the companies that operate are large global companies and they may have a very small presence in the occupied Palestinian territories. It is not perhaps obvious, or possible to work out, the level of benefit individual companies gain from being active in the OPT. It is a somewhat pedantic point, but it is somewhat important. There is no external indication of the level of revenue that arises from these activities and no indication it is significant in their overall worldwide activities. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether these companies have economically significant activities in the OPT.

However, I take the broader point the Deputy made and I stress the views of this House to the NTMA on a frequent basis.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Tánaiste expresses the views of the House to the NTMA on a frequent basis. That is welcome but, at the same time, he is equivocating a bit. He is asking how much they profit, how much they are involved and saying that is not clear, so he is kind of sending a signal, that perhaps, as the person responsible - the Minister for Finance, the shareholder - for funds, the Government is against it, but maybe it is okay. He is equivocating so I ask him not to do that. I want him to be really clear - and I think these are the views across the House and country - that we do not want a single cent of our public money to be used in this way. Will he be clear about that and clear with the NTMA? That is the kind of support that is needed on this, not equivocations saying that maybe it is okay in some circumstances. Will he be clear that we do not want a single cent to be used?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not trying to equivocate, though I take the criticism. However, I have a particular legal role as Minister for Finance and I am not in a position to direct the NTMA or the ISIF about this. That is why I am perhaps somewhat precluded, more than other

Deputies, from expressing my personal view because the law of the land is clear that these investment decisions must be independent of the views of the Minister for Finance of the day.

The NTMA operates a commitment to be a responsible investor as a steward of public assets, by protecting and enhancing the long-term value of the ISIF and the reputation of the NTMA and how it delivers its mandate as manager and controller of the ISIF. In this context, the ISIF operates an exclusion policy that is consistent with its statutory mandate, as amended from time to time. Exclusion is used on a limited basis. It reflects exclusions mandated by legislation. The investment strategies for the Future Ireland Fund, FIF, and the Infrastructure Climate and Nature Fund, which are also to be extended to the ISIF, include certain companies listed on the UN database of business enterprises involved in specified activities in the occupied Palestinian territories. Certain Israel-based companies that are on the UN database and derive a significant element of turnover from Israel and the OPT will be excluded from investment by the ISIF, FIF and the Infrastructure Climate and Nature Fund.

Credit Unions

146. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the way in which he is supporting the expansion of the credit union sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39633/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Question No. 146 will now be taken by Deputy McCormack

Deputy Tony McCormack: We all know about the great work done in our communities by credit unions. In some cases, they are the lender of last resort for some people.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Government is committed to supporting the continued development and expansion of the credit union sector, recognising, as the Deputy does, its important role in providing community-based financial services. A range of legislative and regulatory measures have been delivered and the focus now is on the development of a new five-year strategy for the credit union sector. On 19 April, I formally announced the commencement of the credit union strategy project. This programme for Government commitment will, for the first time, deliver a sector-wide approach to future-proof the credit union movement and allow the sector to address challenges and capitalise on emerging opportunities.

This strategy will build on the foundations of the Credit Union (Amendment) Act and the Central Bank's lending reforms, and will focus on establishing a shared vision and a clear strategic direction for the sector, primarily within the existing legislative and regulatory framework. The Credit Union (Amendment) Act 2023 introduced significant reforms aimed at strengthening and modernising the sector and broadening the range of services available to members. Key measures include loan referrals, loan participation and provisions relating to the establishment of a corporate credit union. Amended lending regulations, which commenced on 30 September 2025, significantly enhanced the lending capacity of credit unions. The regulations increased the lending limits to 30% of total assets for mortgages and 15% for business loans, thereby enabling credit unions to expand their offerings and compete

more effectively in these markets. Based on sector assets of €22.5 billion at the end of 2025, these changes permit up to €6.8 billion in mortgage lending and up to €3.4 billion in business lending.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for his response. As I said earlier, credit unions already play an enormously important role in communities, with millions of account holders across Ireland and a very high level of public trust. Following the departure of a number of retail banks from the Irish market, there is clear need for greater competition within the banking sector. One of the most significant opportunities for expansion is in mortgage lending. While credit unions currently account for only 1% of the mortgage market, the sector has ambitious plans to expand substantially in this area, potentially up to €10 billion in mortgage lending over time. Greater competition in that space would be hugely positive for consumers and could help place downward pressure on mortgage rates. Does the Minister of State agree that supporting the responsible expansion of credit union mortgage lending represents a significant opportunity within the Irish banking market?

Deputy Robert Troy: I could not agree more. Certainly, since my appointment, I have been struck, as I go around the country visiting different credit unions, just how in tune they are with their members' needs and how ambitious they are to meet the enhanced needs of the communities they represent. That is why the amended lending regulations, which came in on 30 September last year, offer a huge opportunity to the credit union movement to really compete in the mortgage sector and in the SME lending sector. As I work with the sector to develop a five-year strategy, I am engaging in a series of consultation events with the credit union movement to see what more we can do to ensure we put this critical financial institution on a long-term sustainable footing for the next five years.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State. Credit unions have also been given greater capacity to grow, as he said, including the ability to lend over 30% of their assets in long-term lending. However, business lending still remains a relatively small part of the overall market, with approximately €190 million currently in SME and business lending. There is clearly potential for further growth in this area, as the Minister of State said, particularly for small businesses and local enterprise seeking relationship-based finance. At the same time, one of the real strengths of the credit union movement is that while credit unions continues to modernise and adopt new technologies, people can still walk into a local branch, sit down face to face and discuss financial matters with someone who understands their circumstances but also, most important, understands the community they come from. Does the Minister of State believe there is scope for further support, collaboration and shared service models within the credit union movement in order that the sector can continue expanding responsibly while maintaining that trusted local presence?

Deputy Robert Troy: The credit union is an extremely trusted financial institution. In fact, for ten years in a row the credit union movement has have been awarded the ranking of the most reputable brand. There are huge opportunities based on the very trust its members have in its service. We have already seen that the amended lending regulations has given credit unions opportunities in both the mortgage space and the SME lending space, and there is an appetite there to exploit the opportunities that exist. I have been very strong in requesting the

participation of the local enterprise offices and the chamber of commerce representative bodies, as I go around engaging with various regional workshops, to ensure we hear from business representatives to see what type of products they require so that the credit union can fill that gap. There are great opportunities there. There is an ambition by the credit union movement to exploit those opportunities and I want to help it to make sure it does just that.

Tax Reliefs

147. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will reintroduce indexation for capital gains tax to eliminate this annual stealth tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39883/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: Indexation for capital gains tax relief was abolished in 2003. Will the Minister of State consider reintroducing this indexation, something that, at the moment, is effectively an annual stealth tax because there is no indexation?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Timmins for raising the matter. Ireland's capital gains tax rate is 33% and is paid on the chargeable capital gain made when a person disposes of an asset. The chargeable gain is usually the difference between the price paid for the asset and the price it is disposed of and is payable by the person making the disposal. Section 556 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides a measure of relief for capital gains, which are attributable purely to inflation, commonly known as indexation relief. The Finance Act 2003 amended section 556 such that indexation relief does not apply from the 2003 tax year onwards. Indexation relief, does, however, continue to be available in computing a chargeable gain arising on the disposal of an asset where the deductible expenditure on that asset was incurred prior to the tax year of 2003, with the relevant indexation multiplier being determined by reference to the year in which the expenditure was incurred. Indexation relief was ended as a means of gradually broadening the tax base, and my officials would contend it has been proved to effective in that regard.

It is the case that when indexation was introduced in the 1970s, inflation was extraordinarily high. Since then, inflation, while somewhat high now, has been consistently much lower, even taking into consideration spikes we have had around the Covid pandemic and recent geopolitical events. It is also important to bear in mind that there is no indexation of other taxes. We do not currently have an indexation of income tax, corporation tax or capital acquisitions tax.

The programme for Government does commit to maintaining a broad tax base to guard against the need for counter-cyclical fiscal policy in the event of a downturn and to prepare for future budgetary challenges relating to an ageing population. CGT is an important part of our system to ensure that taxation is not focused solely on income tax and that those who benefit from gains in the values of their assets are included within the tax net on an equitable basis. As with all taxes, CGT is obviously subject to ongoing review, which does involve consideration and assessment of the rate of CGT, the relevant reliefs and exemptions, and wider tax policy considerations.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will give a simple example to illustrate this better. If you had €10,000 in savings, you bought shares today and they gained by 20% over the next five years, say, 4% per annum, that would mean they would be worth €12,000 in five years' time. If inflation is a similar rate, which may well happen - 20% over the next five years - your €12,000 in five years is worth the same as €10,000 today because the 20% inflation has wiped out that 20% gain. You have no real gain, in effect, but if you go to sell those shares in five years' time, you are deemed to have made a gain of €2,000 because you bought the shares for €10,000 and sold them for €12,000. However, you are actually no better off because the €12,000 in five years' time is worth the same as the €10,000 today. Yet, you have to pay a tax on that €2,000. That is my whole point. It is effectively an annual stealth tax.

Deputy Simon Harris: I hear the Deputy and I never like to disagree with my constituency colleague, but the point I would make is that we consider all taxation measures as part of the annual budgetary process through the tax strategy group papers and the likes. Being honest with the House, I would be concerned with an indexation for the CGT space when one could make similar arguments or cases for indexation of other taxes that we do not currently do that with either. My biggest priority in terms of a taxation package this year will be around personal income tax because there is a real need for that, and I know the Deputy and I share a view on that. There is a compelling case around CGT, how it operates, how it works and the rate, the relief and the exemptions.

Ireland often gets told we have a high rate compared to other European countries. At a headline level, we probably do, but when the reliefs and exemptions are factored in, does that alter the picture somewhat? It does. All these things are kept under review. As of now, there is no plan to reintroduce indexation, but I will ask my officials to reflect on what the Deputy has said and will come back to him with further views.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I understand this is a tall order because the position has not changed since 2002. That is 24 years. It has been an issue every year since then but various finance Ministers have chosen not to act. I would also argue that capital gains tax is different from income tax, gift tax and inheritance tax. In fact, tax credits and bands have increased considerably over the past 20 years. The exception has been capital gains tax, where there has been no indexation whatsoever, unlike all other taxes. When indexation was abolished, one of the reasons was capital gains tax was 20% at the end of 2002 and for a few years prior to that. That was given as a reason - we did not need taxation because it was being taxed so little. Since then, it has steadily increased, as the Tánaiste said in reply to an earlier question, and is now up at 33%.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is an argument to be had around CGT - on the rates, the reliefs, the exemptions and how it acts as an incentive or otherwise to entrepreneurial activity. I have given views on that, as has the Taoiseach. As is always the case in a budget, all this will come down to balance and priorities as part of the overall tax package.

We will have the national economic dialogue in Dublin Castle in June. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I will publish the summer economic statement in July. That will give an indication of how the Government intends to divide between spending and tax. I have no doubt there will be an opportunity to have intense engagement between then and the budget in

October as to the best menu of options to deploy. There are always trade-offs. CGT will, as with all taxes, be reviewed as part of that.

Budget 2027

148. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the income tax measures he is considering for budget 2027 to support middle-income workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39178/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: Working families are under pressure. They feel like they are often chasing their tails and that there is not enough at the end of the month to show for all their hard work. It is what I have always described as the struggle to juggle. We have consistently supported working families over the years. The Tánaiste and others have said this budget will include income tax changes, which I welcome because those families deserve to get more back based on what they are putting in.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question and for her consistent raising of this issue around working families. Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future contains specific undertakings with regard to personal taxation. It commits to "implement[ing] progressive changes in taxation if the economy remains strong, including indexing credits and bands to prevent an increase in the real burden of income tax". It also states that "in the event of an economic downturn and unexpected deterioration in the public finances ... [w]e would also postpone changes to income tax credits or bands, as we did in Budget 2021". As we plan for budget 2027, it is my intention to have a personal income tax package as part of that budget.

As the Deputy will be aware, to ease the burden facing average and middle-income earners, over successive budgets the previous Government substantially increased the entry point to the higher rate of income tax for all earners by €8,700, or around 25%. The main tax credits increased by €350, or around 21%. In line with the Government's policy of ensuring full-time workers on the minimum wage remain outside the top rate of USC, the ceiling of the 2% USC rate band was increased. Budgets 2024 and 2025 also cumulatively reduced the 4.5% rate of USC to 3%. Broadly, the income tax measures implemented over the period of the previous Government are expected to be in line with wage growth. We used a formula in the previous Government to allow people to earn more before they paid the high rate of tax and to make changes to the USC. That formula was an interesting and potentially desirable one.

Budget 2026 was the first of five budgets to be delivered by this Government. There was not a personal income tax package in the first one. I think there needs to be one in the next four, all things being equal.

On the exact levers we will pull and the exact menu to use around personal tax, I am not an ideologue when it comes to that. I want to see what is in the best interests of families and how people benefit the most. I would like, if possible, to anchor tax policy for the next four budgets. In other words, if we pick an option for the next budget, could that be a roadmap for the following three to provide certainty?

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the principles of what the Tánaiste is setting out. I know he cannot get into the details. I can see the Government, in an extremely difficult geopolitical situation, is trying to future-proof our country with the infrastructure and the foundations it needs as a growing modern state, and to deliver on our promise to move away from cycles of boom and bust to something far more consistent, stable and sustainable, planning ahead with the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. However, workers need to feel more of the benefits of that strategy now, especially considering what has happened in the last six months. A quick look at other countries in the EU will show we are pushing average workers into the higher tax band at one of the lowest entry points. This is having an impact on people's decision-making, livelihoods and home lives.

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully agree. We want work to always pay and we want people who work hard to be able to get ahead, not just get by. The tax system is an important part of that. That is why we are committed to delivering a personal income tax package.

I will make a point to somewhat balance my comments. While it is absolutely correct that Irish people pay the higher rate of tax at a lower entry point than many other European countries, when you look at the social insurance contributions other countries make, that somewhat adjusts for that. The broader point the Deputy makes is entirely correct. We have taken people from paying the higher rate of tax at around €33,000 in 2015 up to €44,000 now. I would like to see more progress on that.

I do not need to tell the Deputy this as she champions issues like this, but when these families we are talking about are looking for a break and a chance to get ahead and not just get by, tax is a part of it. Other costs, like childcare, are part of it. Also, how can we structurally try to reduce energy costs? The budget will need to look at all of this in the round. Tax is a part of it, but so too is whether we can make permanent structural cost reductions in key areas like childcare.

Deputy Emer Currie: The Tánaiste is right that it is difficult to compare like for like and that we have to look at working families and their budgets in the round. He has consistently referenced childcare as an area where he wants to support working families. Every week, I speak, as I know the Tánaiste does, to families, women and services about the cost of childcare and about provision.

Today, with Deputy Carrigy, I met with Longford Women's Link. I know the Tánaiste is completely committed to reducing childcare fees to €200 per month over the next four years but the wider reform I spoke of earlier is critical too. That means putting systems in place that last and that people have confidence in. State-led childcare is a major opportunity in the short and long term and should be allowed to evolve. The not-for-profit services that are due to provide it, at least in the short term as it evolves, need a system around them so they can scale up. That is achievable. Core funding requires reform but it is fixable as the State continues to play a greater role. I could go on but my point is this: these are not just problems to fix; they are opportunities for genuine reform and innovation.

Deputy Simon Harris: I did not realise the Deputy met members of Longford Women's Link today. They are amazing. I visited them in the not-too-distant past and am grateful for the

work they do and the opportunities and accessibility they provide to people in a range of areas. I met them in the context of higher education.

The commitment in the programme for Government is clear. We want to get childcare to €200 per child per month in the lifetime of the Government. The Deputy is right that fees and the cost to families make up a part of it, but there is also building the system and reform. I would like in the next budget to make progress on childcare costs but also make progress in the roadmap. In fairness to our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, some important steps have been taken in the recent past around capital being for the first time available to invest in public facilities.

We need to be conscious - and we are - that one size does not fit all when it comes to childcare. We have to empower parents to make the decisions that make sense for them. Sometimes it is someone coming into your house to mind the children, sometimes it is your children going to someone's house, sometimes it is your child going to a crèche and sometimes it is a voluntary provider. There are many options.

That is why to get the best return for the taxpayer, the parent and the child, we need to see the roadmap of reform alongside the fee reduction.

Questions Nos. 149 to 163, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Banking Sector

164. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the rationale for selling PTSB; and the safeguards that will be in place to protect jobs and the bank branch network. [39794/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This question is in relation to the sale of the State's shares in the banking sector. Will the Minister outline to the House the rationale he had for selling the shares? I acknowledge that parties are entitled to different ideological positions. Permanent TSB was never a strategic bank. I would rather have held the ownership of AIB within the State, but Permanent TSB has the potential to be a third force in banking in the State. Will the Minister outline the rationale and also the safeguards that are in place to protect jobs in branches? Will he also expand on the new ownership of the bank? How long is it involved in retail banking with branches?

It is Question No. 164.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not think we would reach it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I did not either.

Deputy Simon Harris: I apologise, but I am glad that we have.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I appreciate that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Doherty. The State's investment in Permanent TSB, PTSB, was made during the financial crisis to safeguard the stability of the banking system and protect depositors. The State has been and continues to be very supportive of PTSB. The Government believes that it is in the long-term interests of PTSB and citizens in general that the bank be returned to full private ownership. I accept that we have differing political views on that. This transaction would mark a successful conclusion after a period of stabilisation. A sale reflects the Department's confidence in PTSB's strength and ability to succeed without State support. A sale of the State's investment would be consistent with the objectives of recovering taxpayer funds that were used to rescue the Irish banks and deploying these to more productive purposes.

The board of PTSB announced a formal sale process on 30 October 2025. This process was conducted under the Irish takeover rules and resulted in the board unanimously recommending a cash offer from a subsidiary of BAWAG Group AG. BAWAG has set out a long-term ownership approach, including maintaining a strong and resilient PTSB, investing in the business, retaining the headquarters in Dublin, keeping a meaningful branch footprint and safeguarding existing employment rights and pension arrangements in line with applicable law. BAWAG noted that in its view, the PTSB branch network is a real asset. I met BAWAG and its representatives reiterated that point to me as well. It genuinely sees the branch network as an asset. It does not intend to make any material changes with respect to the fixed asset bases. Instead, it notes that branches could shift from being transactions-based based to advisory-based, as it adds new products to the bank's offering. This is probably something that we would see PTSB and others doing anyway, in terms of the role of a bank branch changing rather than the branch not being there. BAWAG has also indicated its intention to leverage its broader European expertise to strengthen the bank's competitiveness, including in areas such as SME banking, which would be very welcome, energy-efficiency finance and operational integration. These stated intentions formed part of the overall assessment to support BAWAG's recommended cash offer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister mentioned the policy objective to return the banks to private ownership. I mentioned earlier that the State should have retained its position as a majority shareholder in AIB. It is not unique, as I am sure the Minister knows, for countries across Europe to be the majority shareholder or a significant shareholder in significant banks. It happens right across Europe, including in France and Germany. Many western European countries have that model, so the idea of the State having a share or a majority share in a bank is not something alien in terms of other European countries and in some cases competitors. The issue in this country is that we have a very small retail banking sector. I have always believed that despite some of the activities of AIB, the fact that the State was a shareholder forced it to be first movers in a lot of issues where it brought Bank of Ireland along with it. Will the Minister expand on whether he has received any guarantees from BAWAG during this sale process in relation to staffing and the branch network?

Deputy Simon Harris: I accept that we have legitimate points of difference in relation to bank ownership and there is a legitimate debate to be had there. The position that we have always taken and the position that the programme for Government takes is to move the State out of the ownership of the banks and to restore them to private ownership.

I want to make the point that the circumstances in which Ireland ended up being in the position of bank ownership certainly was not strategic. We did not sit down to plan it out. It was an emergency rescue response to the financial crash.

The Deputy's point in relation to the lack of competition in retail banking is an important one. We have seen some potentially positive moves lately with Monzo getting a banking licence, along with Avant Money and others. I look forward to the banking competitiveness report at an EU level that will be published during our European Presidency because competitiveness in the banking sector is important.

In relation to BAWAG, in the interest of accuracy, I will come back to the Deputy with a note on this. I am very happy to write to the Deputy on this, but I did meet BAWAG and it made it clear that it is committed to the branch network. It made it clear on quite a number of occasions that it sees PTSB's branch network as a real asset and that it does not intend to make any material changes with respect to the fixed asset base. It has also met with the trade unions and others and has talked about safeguarding existing employment rights and pension arrangements in line with the applicable law. It is also a company that does not particularly like outsourcing, so there may be insourcing opportunities too. I am happy to correspond with the Deputy on the engagements I have had with BAWAG and any commitments it has given.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister is aware that a number of taxation and levy measures flowed from the fact that the State rescued these banks at a time when they were literally bankrupt and bankrupted the State with their activities. The Government has already overturned some of those, for example, the salary caps within banks. There is a prohibition on bonuses or at least there is an excess charge that applies in terms of a 45% additional USC charge on any bonuses that are paid out above a certain limit. There are other restrictions as well, including the levy. Where does the Minister now stand in relation to those issues with the State divesting its shareholdings in these three banks that were bailed out?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Deputy Simon Harris: That is a fair question. The Government makes a decision annually on the banking levy, as the Deputy knows, as part of the budgetary process. We will do that again because we find it desirable to do it as part of the annual budgetary process, but I do not see a case for not having a bank levy.

In relation to the super charge on what are referred to as bankers' bonuses, while every bank in Ireland and anybody doing business in Ireland might have a view, I do not see a case for changing the policy position in relation to that either.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): That ends the session on questions. I am not sure if we have a Minister for the Topical Issues yet. We will suspend until 11 p.m.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ag 10.57 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.57 p.m. and resumed at 11.01 p.m.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss allowing for the inclusion of parental details on children's passports in cases where they do not share the same surname to allow for easier international travel.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss discrepancies in inheritance tax and capital gains tax.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss introducing financial literacy to the school curriculum.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss Labre Park regeneration.

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

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the delay in funding BusConnects in Limerick.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the urgent need for a person to have treatment under the EU cross-border health directive.

Deputy Carol Nolan - To discuss implementation of the EU CPC driver training directive.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for social and affordable housing in Arklow, County Wicklow.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss ongoing delays in the SEAI warmer homes scheme.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss recognition of long Covid as an occupational illness for healthcare workers.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the development of a public multisport recreational facility in Sallins, County Kildare.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss the employment conditions and protections available to staff providing broadcasting services to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Deputies Barry Heneghan and Johnny Guirke - To discuss working conditions and employment protections for Oireachtas broadcasting staff.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the humanitarian crisis in Cuba.

The matters raised by Deputies Ward, Nolan, Cahill, Farrelly and O'Hara have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Passport Services

Deputy Barry Ward: This is an issue that I have raised previously relating to a gap in the provision of the passport services. We are very lucky with the Passport Office. It does amazing work. I know from the work that my office does that the response that we get from the Passport

Office is consistently excellent, co-operative and helpful. The Passport Office does not decide what goes into the passports insofar as a statutory regime provided for under the Passports Act 2008 dictates what should be in a passport. That is also in line with guidelines from the International Civil Aviation Organisation, ICAO. An Irish passport is a very valuable document. We occupy a space in the top ten of the international Henley passport index. It is one of the most coveted passports in the world. In no way do I want to interfere with the security or the value of that document. However, there is a situation that primarily affects women. Parents do not necessarily have the same name as their children. When they are travelling internationally with their children, they face difficulties crossing borders because the surname on their passport is different from surname of their children. Therefore, they have to demonstrate in a different way that child is their child, and they are entitled to cross that international frontier with that child.

Most parents present a birth certificate of the child that has their name on it and carry it with them. That will solve the problem most of the time. They should not have to do that. We live in an age now where I do not know what proportion of women who get married do not take their husband's name but it has to be substantial. We no longer live in a world where we expect women to take their husband's names. Yet we live in a world where we expect them to carry extra documentation so they can travel internationally with their children. The solution I am suggesting is that opposite the passport picture page where there is a blank page at the moment, there would simply be either on the parent's passport a list of their children's names or a list of their parents' names on the child's passport. It is something that could allow us to circumvent this unnecessary difficulty crossing international borders.

I raised this in the Seanad on 7 March 2023. The answers I received did not engage with the issue. I was told, for example, that there is a GDPR issue. There is not. Parents can consent to that data being shared. They can also consent on behalf of their children. It is not something that I am saying has to be done. It is something that should be created as an option for parents because it makes lives easier. I was told that it is not the norm, and it is not the norm. Diplomatic passports are issued to members of the diplomatic service. On the passport page opposite the photo page will be the description of why holders have that diplomatic passport. It will state ambassador, ambassador's spouse or whatever it is. There is a precedent for doing this in a certain way. I have been told that it is not in accordance with the guidelines issued by the ICAO. If that is the case, those guidelines need to change because they compromise the ability of the passport to do its job. Of course, first of foremost, the job of the passport is to establish identity and nationality. We could argue that the information in relation to parentage is part of the identity of that child because it helps them to cross an international border. The guidelines of the ICAO are fine and important. The security aspects of them are particularly important. However, we are also a sovereign country and get to decide what goes in our passports. More importantly, we have to remember that the passport is a service that is extended to our citizens. We are not bound by other rules. We passed the Passports Act. We could easily pass a passports (amendment) Act to change this.

I ask the Minister of State for a practical accommodation for parents who are currently having difficulty crossing international borders with their children simply because they have a different surname from their children. There is a practical and easy solution to this. I ask that we implement it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee.

A passport is an internationally recognised travel document which attests to the identity and nationality of the bearer. The passport service follows recommendations from the ICAO, which the Deputy referenced, in relation to data that is held on a passport. The ICAO is an international body that develops policies and standards for aviation safety and security. Internationally, the Irish passport has a strong reputation. The passport service takes seriously its responsibility to protect the integrity of the Irish passport and the issuing process. Our passport ranks fourth on the Henley global passport index as it provides citizens visa-free access to 185 countries. All passport applications are subject to the terms of the Passports Act 2008, as amended. The Act provides a legal basis for the various policies and procedures that are applied by the passport service in the issuing of passports. Section 10 provides that a passport will issue the name of a citizen as it appears on their birth certificate or naturalisation certificate.

The function of the data held on a passport is to confirm the passport holder's identity and nationality. The passport service does not include guardians' names on children's passports, nor is this required by the provisions of the Act. A passport for a minor under the age of 18 is valid for five years. It is important to note that it is possible that the guardianship circumstances of a child can change. The child may also become an adult during the validity period of their passport. A child travelling abroad must have their own passport and cannot be included on their guardian's passport. The practice of allowing children to be included on a guardian's passport is being phased out internationally. This is intended to make international travel more secure for children. The previous practice of including a child on a guardian's passport meant that the child was not identified via photograph prior to travel.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade understands that situations arise where a guardian is travelling with their child who does not share their surname, and the guardian may be requested to produce further documents confirming the guardianship link. Border control authorities may also request extra documentation when children travel either unaccompanied or with an accompanying person who is not their guardian. The purpose of border control authorities requesting further information is to safeguard the rights of children and their guardians. The Department's website contains information for adults travelling with children and outlines additional documentation they may be required to carry, depending on the country to which they are travelling. The passport service does not have any plans to expand the purpose of a passport to indicate a guardianship relationship between a child and their guardians but continues to consider ways in which to enhance their essential citizen service. That is the update from the Minister and the Department. I wait for the Deputy's further contribution, and I will respond accordingly.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State very much. I know he is providing the House with a response that has been prepared on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. He has described it as an "update". It is far from an update. I read through the transcript of what was said in the Seanad on 7 March 2023. There are so many similarities as there to be no update whatever so ever. It is exactly the same issue about what is required. The Minister

of State said in his response is that it is not required by the Act. So what? It is required by common sense and we can change the Act to reflect common sense.

The Minister of State then told us guardianship can change during the currency of a passport. Of course it can. It is not beyond our systems to have a situation whereby a passport can be amended or whereby, in a change of guardianship, a notification to the Passport Office be required to change or cancel a passport. The Minister of State has also told us that the child may become an adult during the currency of the passport. Of course that is also true, but exactly the same provisions apply.

It is totally clear in the question I asked that I am not suggesting that a child would be included on a parent's or guardian's passport. That is clearly outside the parameters of what happens now. It may have happened in the past but it does not happen any more, and that is not the question I am asking. What I am talking about is not about interfering with the identity page of a passport, but on the page opposite that, providing additional details that will help parents to cross international borders with their children who happen to have different names.

Here is the most extraordinary thing. Almost exactly the same sentence was stated in the Seanad three years ago as when the Minister of State stated here, "The passport service does not have any plans to expand the purpose of a passport to indicate a guardianship relationship between a child and their guardians but continues to consider ways in which to enhance this essential citizen service." That is exactly the same line that was given three years ago, so here is my final question. What has actually been considered to enhance this service? What has actually changed between now and then to enhance the service we are providing to our citizens, notwithstanding the fact that I have clearly identified a lacuna and a failing of that service to certain citizens who happen not to share their surname with their children?

Deputy Carol Nolan: I again thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. As I said earlier, I am taking the matter on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. As the Deputy is aware, passports, in particular children's passports for family holidays, are an important topic for Members as we approach the busy summer travel period. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade wishes to assure Members that the passport service is in an excellent position to deliver on the demand forecast for the rest of the year. Last week alone, 21,000 passports were issued.

In relation to the data held in a passport, it is only possible for the passport services to follow the recommendations from the International Civil Aviation Organisation. The function of the data held in a passport is to confirm the passport holder's identity and nationality. A child travelling abroad must have their own passport and cannot be included on their guardian's passport. The Department strongly urges anyone who is considering travelling overseas, particularly families with young children, to check the validity of their passports before booking their tickets and to apply online for their passports in plenty of time.

I have no doubt that Deputy Ward will be following up with the Minister directly on foot of the questions he has posed. With his legal background he will be able to outline precisely the changes he feels could be made on a practical level to reflect the argument he is espousing on behalf of his constituents.

EU Directives

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise the Road Safety Authority's, RSA, defective implementation of the EU certificate of professional competence, CPC, driver training directive and, in particular, its latest flawed initiative, namely, a biased heavy goods vehicle, HGV, driver safety survey that is deeply concerning for road safety and the future of the haulage industry.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

EU Directive 2022/2561, on the initial qualification and periodic training of drivers of certain road vehicles for the carriage of goods or passengers, is transposed into Irish law by the European Communities (Vehicle Drivers Certificate of Professional Competence) (No. 2) Regulations 2008 (SI 359 of 2008), as amended.

Under the directive, transposed via the 2008 regulation, to drive a truck or bus professionally in the EU, drivers must have a valid CPC qualification. This involves passing four exams, a theory test, a case study, a driving test and a walk around. This qualification is maintained by completing CPC periodic training of 35 hours in each five-year training cycle. Each module consists of seven hours of periodic training and drivers must do seven hours of periodic training every year, adding up to 35 hours and five modules over the five years. Drivers with both a bus and truck CPC must complete 42 hours of training over each five-year period. The duration of training is defined in the directive and the training is obligatory for professional drivers in the EU.

Annex 1 of the directive outlines the minimum CPC training requirements. It establishes the knowledge to be taken into account by member states when establishing the driver's initial qualification, and periodic training must include at least the subjects specified in the directive. Trainee drivers must reach the level of knowledge and practical competence necessary to professionally drive, in all safety, vehicles of the relevant driving licence category.

In Ireland, training modules are developed by the RSA in line with the directive. The RSA reviews CPC modules and is responsible for selecting the content in each module, based on the objectives outlined in the directive. The RSA works with CPC trainers and a panel of subject matter experts from the industry to ensure relevant input into module content. The RSA recently completed a review of Module 1: Control of Vehicle and Eco Driving Techniques, which is due to be issued to all CPC training providers shortly. The next module to be reviewed is Module 3: Health and Safety for the Professional Driver. Work on this will start as soon as module 1 has issued.

Following the RSA-CPC survey, some drivers expressed an interest in online training. However, the directive makes provision for only a small portion of the syllabus to be conducted online, so drivers could only do part of a module online and would have to complete it in person. Accordingly, the RSA has decided not to pursue this option at this time.

In keeping with the Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030 action to review the accessibility of driver CPC, the RSA has introduced a pilot programme for drivers with a valid ADR dangerous goods certificate. Qualified drivers can apply for an exemption from CPC module 2 provided their ADR certificate is valid on the expiry date of their current CPC card.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for taking this question and for his response. It is very disappointing to see that neither the Minister for Transport nor the Minister of State with responsibility for transport is here because there are serious issues around the RSA. Last month, the RSA commissioned Leeds Beckett University to carry out research on HGV driver safety. There are a number of issues with that survey, which I will highlight now. They planned to interview only 40 Irish HGV drivers, but the extraordinary thing was that they wanted a sample of 20 drivers who had experienced issues such as speeding, drink driving, phone use or careless driving. It was like they were trying to engineer a particular sample for a predetermined headline, such as 50% of HGV drivers breaking the law. It really was biased.

I have been in contact with the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, which has called this out and labelled it as fundamentally flawed and inherently biased. The survey ignored real-world problems and factors such as dangerous road infrastructure, the behaviour of other road users, levels of enforcement and indeed the performance of the RSA itself. Instead it focused on the negative and it was really like they wanted a particular outcome - no doubt about that.

The sham survey, unfortunately, is not an isolated mistake by the RSA. It is a symptom of the RSA's wider failure to properly implement the EU CPC driver training directive. It is all down to the way this is being implemented. I have been provided with detailed correspondence from an experienced CPC trainer and member of the IRU expert panel in Brussels. He highlights the stark contrast with other EU member states. For example, in the Czech Republic, approved training centres have real flexibility and can deliver practical, relevant content, including first aid, emergency response, cargo security and company-specific training, even on the operator's own premises. Belgium offers 28 certified CPC courses, while the Netherlands offers 22. Drivers and operators have genuine choice and relevant training but it is not so in Ireland. There are issues with the RSA's implementation.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. The legal basis for the certificate of professional competence for professional drivers is contained in EU Directive 2022/2561 on the initial qualification and periodic training of drivers of certain road vehicles for the carriage of goods or passengers. Under this directive it is a legal requirement that all new category C and D professional drivers complete and pass their driver CPC qualification and undertake periodic training.

CPC is mutually recognised across all EU member states allowing drivers to work in different EU member states without gaining additional certification. Periodic training further ensures that professional drivers remain informed of developments in road safety legislation, including in technology, regulatory obligations and best practice within the transport sector. The continued professional development model underpinning driver CPC recognises the importance of professional driver safety, requiring ongoing complex regulatory oversight. Both the duration of the training and the subjects to be covered are specified under the directive on mandatory professional drivers operating in EU member states.

The RSA is responsible for creating a curriculum in line with the directive in Ireland. The RSA undertakes periodic review of the training modules to ensure that they fully meet the requirements of the directive and represent best practice in terms of training requirements. The

overarching purpose of qualification and periodic training process required by the directive is to ensure road safety and the safety of drivers. It ensures drivers can navigate adverse conditions, operate complex equipment and ensure passenger safety and cargo collection. It allows harmonisation of professional driver standards across the EU, enhancing road safety and professional mobility.

I know Deputy Nolan raised a specific point in her contribution. Obviously, it will be brought to the Minister's attention. I expect she may have already done so or will be doing it but the specific point she raised could be taken up directly with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. May I come back?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): No, the Deputy cannot come back. I apologise.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Okay.

Tax Code

Deputy Michael Cahill: I again raise the issue of inheritance tax and the anomalies that exist for parents and their children on the one hand, and childless adults, their brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews on the other hand. Currently children inheriting a family home from their parents are exempted from tax on inheritances of up to €400,000, which, considering the price of homes currently, is undoubtedly far too low. However, a major anomaly exists when it comes to childless couples and individuals who often decide to leave their home and assets to their nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters. Unlike children inheriting from parents, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters are only entitled to €40,000 tax free leaving them with a significant tax bill, which often precludes these individuals from affording the property.

At a time when this country is in the midst of a housing crisis, should we not be doing everything possible to ensure families are able to afford to keep homes instead of penalising those who do not have children and those who are left assets by their uncles and aunts? Tonight I am calling on the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to reduce inheritance tax which is charged at a flat rate of 33% on the value of assets exceeding specific relationship-based tax-free thresholds and to significantly increase these thresholds of €400,000 to €800,000 in the case of a son or daughter and furthermore, to separate the limit on the house that I proposed, the €800,000, from any other inheritance.

The €40,000 cap in the case of a niece, nephew, brother or sister is absolutely ridiculous and discriminatory. In the upcoming budget I propose that the Minister for Finance increase the €40,000 cap up to €250,000 on a house and again separate it from any other inheritance. These bands are less today than there were 15 or 16 years ago when they were reduced during the recession. If the value of the house and any other assets is €600,000, a son or daughter is liable for €66,000 in capital acquisition tax, or inheritance tax as it is known. On the very same inheritance a niece, nephew, brother or sister is liable for €184,800. Our parents, our grandparents and their parents before them worked extremely hard to provide for their families and build a family home. The same applies to our uncles and aunts and their people before

them. They too worked extremely hard to build a family home and paid all their taxes I may add.

Sadly, today in certain cases individuals are turning down inheritance as they simply cannot afford to pay the taxes. This issue needs to be addressed in the coming budget and successive budgets. It is obvious families and individuals are being taxed on the double.

I call on the Government again tonight to urgently address another anomaly that exists with the current taxation system in respect of capital acquisition tax when applied to partners as opposed to married couples. Current legislation means a partner, even a lifetime partner, is regarded as a stranger for capital acquisition tax purposes and therefore the current threshold limit of €20,000 applies, with anything over that amount taxed at 33%, whereas married couples are exempted from that tax. Current legislation discriminates against partners. 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 them 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 Service pension as they were not married and this was also found to be unconstitutional.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this matter in the House today. I also acknowledge his advocacy on this issue since his election to Dáil Éireann. Capital acquisitions tax, CAT, is a beneficiary-orientated tax that is payable by the recipient of a gift or inheritance as opposed to the person providing that gift or inheritance. CAT plays an important role in ensuring that we maintain a broad tax base. It raised €854 million in 2024 and approximately €1.1 billion in 2025.

For CAT purposes, the relationship between the person giving a gift or inheritance, the disponent, and the person who receives it, the beneficiary, determines the maximum amount, known as the group threshold, below which CAT does not arise. The Finance Act 2024 increased each threshold, and the estimated cost was €88 million annually. The group A threshold, which in general applies where the beneficiary is a child of the disponent, increased to €400,000 from €335,000.

It is useful to note that the definition for children for CAT purposes includes any stepchildren, adopted children or certain foster children. All can avail of the group A threshold in respect of gifts and inheritances received from that disponent.

The Group B threshold increased to €40,000 from €32,500. This threshold applies where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, niece, nephew, lineal ancestor or lineal descendant such as a grandchild of the disponent. The group C threshold increased to €20,000 from €16,250, with this threshold applying in all other cases.

It should also be borne in mind that where a person receives gifts or inheritances that are in excess of the relevant tax-free threshold, CAT at a rate of 33% applies on the excess benefit.

It is important to be aware that there are significant costs associated with increasing the existing thresholds. For instance, a €100,000 increase in threshold A to €500,000 would cost in the region of €86.6 million, while an increase in threshold B to €60,000 would cost approximately €70.1 million.

Last year in the CAT tax strategy group, TSG, paper, Department of Finance officials reviewed idea of combining thresholds A and B to bring relatives such as nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters within the scope of the higher threshold. As part of this exercise Revenue estimated the cost of merging group B with group A to be €305 million. These costs have been updated recently and it is estimated that such a change could now cost in the region of €349 million.

The tax strategy group paper was published in advance of the budget and is the best means of considering issues such as inheritance tax in an analytical and transparent way. The tax strategy group is not a decision-making body and the papers produced by the Department of Finance are simply a list of options and issues to be considered in the budgetary process. Officials intend to include a further update of this matter in the tax strategy group papers later this year.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and assure him that the Tánaiste is conscious of the burden of capital taxation and continues to engage with his officials on these matters. The capital acquisition tax group thresholds are kept under review annually by officials throughout the Finance Bill cycle.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed response. I mentioned the case of the civil servant who passed away. His partner was refused the widow's portion of his civil servant pension as they were not married. This was also found to be unconstitutional. Contrast this with the current taxation system where partners are treated as strangers for capital acquisition tax purposes. This is wide open to a constitutional challenge to the current legislation. Obviously, I am aware that during the past week, the State secured a Supreme Court appeal against the judge's ruling that it breached the Constitution when it refused a spouse's pension to a man who had lived with his late partner.

There are anomalies in the current taxation system. Where a partner makes a gift to his or her partner, this will give rise to both capital gains tax and a gift tax. If they were married, however, there would be no tax. The tax rate bands for married couples differ from those for partners living together. This needs to be urgently addressed, and it is a matter for the Minister for Finance, Deputy Harris, to do so. The current legislation must be amended as soon as possible.

I referenced and made a couple of proposals in this regard. The current cap of €400,000 should be increased to €800,000 on the home and separated from any other inheritance. Equally, the €40,000 cap for a niece or nephew or brother or sister should be increased to €250,000. We should also be looking at the 33% tax on the value of assets exceeding the specific, relationship-based tax-free thresholds. Those thresholds should be significantly increased, as I have already stated.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy. I listened carefully to the points he raised. I am aware that this is an area of concern for many people. Indeed, James Sexton, whom we mentioned earlier, has led a well-documented campaign, End Discrimination in Inheritance Tax. He will be presenting to our parliamentary party tomorrow evening on it, and he has been presenting in the audiovisual room at Leinster House as well. This issue has been raised by many people in this House.

As I mentioned before, the Government increased the thresholds in the Finance Act 2024. These increases amount to an increase of approximately 19.4% on group A, while the thresholds for groups B and C increased by 23%. The Tánaiste met with the End Discrimination in Inheritance Tax group, which, as I have said, is an advocacy group in relation to this matter. He told me the meeting was a productive conversation and he understands the concerns raised along with the burden of capital taxation. He is committed to having ongoing engagement with this group.

The tax strategy group paper is looking at CAT this year across a number of areas, including thresholds levels. That paper is expected to be published in late June or early July. It will provide assistance to the Tánaiste and the wider Government as they prepare for whatever budgetary decisions will be taken later this year.

It is worth noting that any increase or widening of the CAT thresholds will have costs and will be part of the annual budgetary considerations and process. Obviously, it will be competing with other budgetary demands. This is a matter that has been raised by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, as well as by Deputy Cahill this evening. Indeed, I have heard both members of the Opposition and Government raise this matter on a number of occasions. It is about striking the right balance and taking into account how far we can afford to go in any particular year, while acknowledging the perceived inequities that are there currently.

Sport and Recreational Development

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louis O'Hara): We move onto the next Topical Issue in the name of Deputy Aidan Farrelly. It is to ask the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O'Donovan, to discuss the development of a public, multi-sport recreational facility in Sallins, County Kildare.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue this evening. I am not sure if he has been to Sallins, County Kildare. I know he has had many a nice day in Kildare previously. Sallins is a growing town with a population of over 6,000 according to the most recent census. The Minister of State can imagine the news in 2024 when the community was awarded €3 million as part of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. It promised to be a very exciting time for the community. The town is served well by Sallins GAA and Sallins Celtic, along with many other clubs. These amenity lands will include a number of multi-use pitches for the likes of GAA, soccer and cricket. There will be many uses. What the community cannot comprehend, however, is how, two years on from that announcement, there has not been an iota of movement in expenditure with regard to the project.

We know the project is being led by the local authority. It has recently finished a wonderful project in Kerdiffstown where the old refuse site has been transformed into a recreational amenity space. To see it is to believe it. It is marvellous. The council has the authority and competency to be able to deliver this project but the Department has asked for more information over and over again and another business case. It talks about gateways 1, 2 and 3 and it has tied the project in a level of bureaucracy that I have never seen before. A number of projects were part of that tranche, totalling nearly €170 million. Out of that €170 million, I wonder how

many other communities have struggled to even press the start button on their project because of this level of bureaucracy and the Department's mistrust of local authorities or bodies that have managed to secure the funding in the first place by going through such a rigorous application process.

The issue was the budget. The cost of the project in the first instance was far in excess of €3 million. When the €3 million was allocated, it was bit of a case of going back to the drawing board. The council stepped in and matched that funding with another €3 million, but it still required a rethink of the project. What it boils down to now is a need for leadership. We need to see the money coming from the Department to Sallins, County Kildare. It is a simple and straightforward thing. Two years later, that is not too much to ask. It needs the Minister of State with responsibility for this area, Deputy McConalogue, to act. I ask the Minister of State to take this back to his colleague this evening. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, needs to show a bit of leadership, convene a meeting between all the stakeholders to determine where the problems lie and ensure we deliver this project for the community.

This is happening in a context where the variation of the county development plan is open for public consultation this week. Sallins Celtic is facing the prospect of the land it plays on being rezoned for residential use. It is potentially looking at a situation where it will be homeless in the near future. There is, therefore, an urgency about this matter. I ask the Minister of State to consider that in his communications with the Minister of State with responsibility for this area. I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue this evening.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Farrelly for raising this matter on behalf of his constituents, which I am taking on behalf of Minister of State, Deputy Charlie McConalogue. Under the 2024 round of the large-scale sports infrastructure Fund, LSSIF, Kildare County Council applied for funding for the development of Sallins Park Community Sports Centre, which the Deputy referenced. The project was allocated €3 million for phase 1 of the development. Phase 1 consists of the development of five pitches and all associated works. Two pitches for Gaelic games and soccer will be completed, with the remaining pitches to be developed into grass training pitches. It is envisaged that the training pitches will be developed into soccer, GAA and cricket pitches in phase 2. The project will also include access roads, paths and a car park.

As with all large-scale capital expenditure, each project must undergo assessments, as required by the infrastructure guidelines set out by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. This project is currently being assessed at approval gate 1. The required documentation has been examined by the Department, which has sought updated information in relation to some aspects. The Department anticipates the project will pass approval gate 1 in the coming weeks. The Department and Kildare County Council are in regular contact regarding the project. I note the Deputy's advocacy on behalf of his constituents about how important this particular piece of infrastructure is.

Kildare County Council was also allocated €500,000 under the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, in 2024 for the development of pitches at Sallins Park Community Sports Centre. However, as it was subsequently allocated €3 million under the LSSIF scheme, it now plans to apply to repurpose the CSFF grant for an alternative project.

Looking at the wider picture regarding capital investment in sport, the Department operates two capital programmes for sport, namely, the CSFF and the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. Over €250 million was allocated to 3,048 community sports clubs and facilities in 2024 from the 2023 round of the CSFF, representing the largest ever investment in sports facilities in communities across Ireland. Details of these allocations are available on the Department's website. In line with previous rounds of the fund, a review of the previous funding round has been undertaken and will be finalised shortly. It is anticipated that the next CSFF round will particularly target areas and sports that have been underinvested in over the years. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, hope to open a new round in the coming months.

The large scale sport infrastructure fund was established to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects, typically those requiring investments greater than the maximum available under the community sport facilities fund. A total of €86.4 million was awarded to 35 different projects under the first round of LSSIF in 2018. Additional funding of €37.6 million was allocated to 27 of these projects in December 2023 bringing the total awarded under LSSIF 2018 to €124 million. Grants totalling €173 million benefitting 35 individual projects were allocated under the second round of the large scale sport infrastructure fund in November 2024. With this announcement, the cumulative investment from the large scale sport infrastructure fund since 2020 now stands at €297 million. I will bring back the point the Deputy raised in respect of the development of the Sallins Park community sports centre to the Minister and the Department.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: You can see it in the response - "The Department anticipates the project will pass approval gate 1 in the coming weeks" - but it is two years since the funding was secured. I will emphasise a couple of points. From the Sallins perspective, it is Kildare County Council running this. It is not a community group that may or may not have the time. It is the local authority running this project. How can the local authority not be trusted, having to put it through so many hoops or what you might want to call "gateways"? I think four or five times the Department came back to the council looking for more information. It is borderline ridiculous at this point. People in Kildare always seem to be on the suffering end whereby the housing is coming but so are the congestion, lack of services and slow pace with which important social infrastructure is delivered.

From a public accounts perspective, I really query whether Sallins is alone in this. The Minister of State said there may be another round in the coming months. The allocation is brilliant. This type of money and investment in our communities is brilliant but when you get past the headline and look at the ability to draw down that money, I am really concerned Sallins is not alone and there will be many other projects that have gone through a similar gateway fiasco, where they have the funds but cannot access them. That is a problem we need to consider collectively. I will bring the matter to the Committee of Public Accounts.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Deputy Farrelly for the opportunity to discuss the development of Sallins Park community sports centre. I am taking this Topical Issue debate on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy McConalogue.

County Kildare received significant capital funding for sports infrastructure over the past number of years. Specifically on Sallins Park community sports centre, this project is currently

being assessed at approval gate 1. Required documentation has been examined by the Department, which sought updated information on some aspects. The Department expects the project will pass approval gate 1 in the coming weeks. The Department and Kildare County Council are in regular contact regarding the project. It is clear the Government is committed to the success of Irish sport with record investment in our sport facilities, supporting the ambition of high-performance athletes as never before and fundamentally ensuring everyone enjoys the right to participate in sport and physical activity. I look forward to the development of Sallins Park community sports centre. It will provide much needed sporting facilities for the growing population.

The Department, the Minister and Minister of State will look back on this debate. I have no doubt, if he has not already, that Deputy Farrelly will follow up with the Department, the Minister and the Minister of State specifically on Sallins Park community sports centre in terms of expediting that project on behalf of his constituents.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This is an issue which has been debated a number of times. Healthcare workers went above and beyond during the pandemic and put themselves in harm's way to protect others. Well over 100 healthcare workers who have not returned to work due to long Covid have lost the special scheme since the beginning of the year and are due to lose further entitlements. I will read out part of a letter from a constituent who is a former front-line nurse with over 30 years' experience. She said:

Since my initial Covid-19 infection in January 2022, I have not recovered. If anything, my condition has worsened over time. I am living with debilitating symptoms that have profoundly impacted my ability to carry out even basic activities of daily living. My predominant symptoms include severe and persistent pain and stiffness affecting my shoulders, mid and lower back, buttocks, hips, thighs and extending into my legs, feet, hands and fingers. I experience constant pins and needles and burning sensations in my feet along with clearly altered sensation in both lower legs below the knee. These symptoms significantly impair my mobility and independence. I struggle to walk even short distances, have great difficulty dressing and showering and can only manage minimal household tasks due to severe pain when standing or bending. In addition, I suffer from shortness of breath, hypertension, tinnitus, brain fog, weakness in my hands and arms, dizziness, debilitating fatigue and severely disrupted sleep.

Before my illness, I was a highly experienced nurse working at a senior level and fully committed to patient care. I remained in work throughout challenging periods in healthcare including the pandemic where many of us continued our duties despite personal risk. Like many healthcare workers, I contracted Covid-19 in the workplace while caring for others. I did so willingly as part of my professional responsibility. However, the long-term consequences of that exposure have been life changing. Since attending occupational health in early 2022, I have been deemed unfit for all duties. I have had to come to terms with the reality that this is now my life - one I would not have chosen, but one I continue to face with as much resilience as I can. On 24 March of this year, I underwent an occupational health assessment for early retirement on ill health grounds. My application was declined on the basis that there was insufficient medical evidence to confirm that I am likely to remain

permanently unfit for work until my normal retirement age. This was despite submitting detailed medical reports.

The loss of my career has had profound financial consequences but it has also deeply affected my sense of identity, purpose and independence. I am asking you to urgently consider the formal recognition of long Covid as an occupational illness for healthcare workers particularly nurses who contracted Covid-19 in the workplace. Such recognition would acknowledge the risks taken by front-line staff and provide a fair and structured pathway to appropriate supports and protections. If the Government is not prepared to recognise long Covid as an occupational illness, then I ask that you consider an alternative - allowing affected healthcare workers to access early retirement on the grounds of ill health without being subjected to prolonged and adversarial processes. Many of us are being forced to fight for recommendations from occupational health while already severely unwell. We are not physically or mentally able for this battle. After decades of service, we should not have to struggle to prove the impact of an illness acquired while caring for others. We should be allowed to retire on ill health grounds with dignity without having to fight tooth and nail for recognition or support. At present, the process itself can feel as burdensome as the illness.

That letter speaks for itself. In his response, I ask the Minister of State to speak to the experience of that woman and the well over 100 of her colleagues who are suffering from really severe effects of this illness but are not getting the protection and supports they need and deserve.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this important matter which I am taking on behalf of Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary. In responding to the question, I will first provide an overview of the occupational injuries benefit scheme and the supports available from the Department of Social Protection to people with long Covid.

The occupational injuries benefit scheme is a group of benefits for insured workers if they are unfit for work either due to an accident arising out of and in the course of employment - at work or an accident while travelling, on a continuous journey, to or from work - or due to the contraction of a prescribed disease, due to the type of work they do and in the course of insurable employment. The two main payments under the scheme are injury benefit and disablement benefit. The scheme is financed from the Social Insurance Fund, which, in turn, is funded by PRSI contributions. Persons insured at PRSI classes A, B - limited coverage -, D, J and M - limited coverage - are covered. Claims for injury benefit are made by persons in a variety of employments and for a range of reasons, including injuries from falls, car accidents and the contraction of a prescribed disease. Injury benefit is paid at a weekly personal rate of €254 for a maximum period of six months. Disablement benefit may be paid where an insured employee suffers a loss of physical or mental faculty because of a work-related accident or disease. Payment is made where the level of disablement following the accident or disease is assessed at 15% or more. Payment may be in the form of a gratuity - a non-taxable lump sum - or by way of a weekly pension. The Department also has a range of income supports, including illness benefit and invalidity pension, at the same or higher rates of payment as payments under the occupational injuries benefit scheme, which are available to people who cannot work due to the effects of long Covid.

I recognise the testimony the Deputy has given on behalf of, I presume, one of his constituents. In November 2022, the European Commission made a non-binding recommendation on the recognition of Covid-19 as an occupational disease. The Commission did not make a recommendation in relation to long Covid. The decision regarding recognition is a member state competence. Recognition of Covid-19 as an occupational disease confers different entitlements in different member states, with employers paying the compensation in some countries and social insurance systems paying in others. In November 2023, the Department of Social Protection published a report on the inclusion of long Covid in the occupational injuries benefit regulations. The report concluded that Covid-19 does not satisfy the statutory criteria for recognition as an occupational illness or accident at work. Specifically, it found that presumptions about workplace transmission would not be sustainable as it is not possible to establish with confidence that the disease has been contracted through a person's occupation and not through community transmission. This is because data shows that community transmission was the primary means of transmission. It is important to note that even if Ireland did recognise Covid-19 as an occupational disease, this would not encompass long Covid and would only apply to new claims for new cases of Covid-19. As such, it would not benefit those who contracted Covid-19 during the pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, the Department's range of income supports, including illness benefit and invalidity pension, at the same or higher rates of payment as occupational injuries benefit, are available to people who cannot work due to the effects of long Covid. It is important to note that entitlement to these supports is generally not dependent on the nature of the illness or disability but on the extent to which a particular illness or disability impairs or restricts a working age person's capacity to work. With regard to additional supports, the Department also provides an additional needs payment under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme to help to meet essential expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. This includes certain supplements to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from a person's own resources and are deemed to be necessary.

With specific reference to workers in the health services, the report found that the temporary scheme of paid leave for public health service employees was the appropriate channel through which a targeted sectoral support should be considered. This temporary scheme was a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, who extended it a number of times. The scheme ended on 31 December 2025. Any employee of the public health service remaining unwell after that date may utilise the full provisions of the public service sick leave scheme which will provide further support.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. The people who are affected by this have had an absolutely horrendous experience with long Covid. The Minister of State heard about the impact it is having on my constituent. Her life has totally changed. Many people have had to give up the job they love. They stepped up during the pandemic at a time that was very dangerous. When there was huge uncertainty, they put themselves in harm's way to protect others. They are heroes and they deserve recognition and acknowledgement.

According to the Minister of State's response - it has been said previously - the Department's view is that Covid-19 does not fulfil the definition of an occupational illness because the main area of transmission was in the community. That is a cruel approach because, as I said, these

people put themselves into a really dangerous situation where their chances of contracting the disease were very high, and much higher than any other member of the public. That is a poor excuse and a little bit insulting to those workers. There has to be acknowledgement of the unique circumstances here and some arrangement put in place because the workers in this position are finding it difficult to access supports. They are finding it difficult. The woman I outlined earlier is finding it difficult in terms of having to battle to get the supports that she is entitled to. Recognising long Covid as an occupational illness would allow for them to receive ongoing financial supports without a specified expiry period. We are an outlier in Europe in this regard. As far as I know, it is just Ireland and Greece that do not recognise Covid. There has to be some arrangement put in place here, perhaps comprising the alternatives that were outlined earlier. I ask Government to reflect on its position in relation to this. It is not a very large group of people. It will not cost an absolute fortune but it is the right thing to do, as I say, for healthcare workers who went above and beyond to protect us all.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this important matter. As I said, I am taking this matter on behalf of Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary. The Government and I recognise the great work of healthcare workers during Covid and, in fact, the continual great work of healthcare workers.

As referenced in my opening statement on behalf of Deputy Calleary, the Minister for Social Protection, in November 2022 the European Commission made a non-binding recommendation on the recognition of Covid-19 as an occupational disease. The Commission did not make a recommendation in relation to long Covid. Recognition as an occupational disease confers different entitlements in different member states, with employers paying the compensation in some countries and social insurance systems paying in others. It is important to note that, even if Ireland did recognise Covid-19 as an occupational disease, this would not encompass long Covid and would only apply to new claims for new cases of Covid-19. As such, it would not benefit those who contracted Covid-19 during the pandemic. The Government acted early and without hesitation to support all workers who contracted Covid-19 during the pandemic. Workers outside the public sector could avail of an enhanced illness benefit payment and eligibility criteria were set to include the largest cohort of workers possible, including the self-employed. This scheme paid some 578,000 claims at a cost of €350 million. Special leave with pay for Covid-19 was also introduced for public sector workers. As mentioned earlier, the Department's range of income supports, including illness benefit and invalidity pension, at the same or higher rates of payment as payments under the occupational injuries benefit scheme, are available to people who cannot work due to the effects of long Covid.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.59 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 27 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.59 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 May 2026.