



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 17 Meitheamh 2026

Wednesday, 17 June 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): 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 Joe Cooney - To discuss industrial development and employment opportunities in the mid-west region.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss provision of a permanent two-classroom SEN facility and PE hall for Balcadden National School.

Deputies Sorca Clarke and Martin Kenny - To discuss the Peterhead Ten.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the status of the assessment for the drug givinostat for patients with Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss emergency winter funding for rural roads in Wicklow and Wexford.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss funding for a building to include an autism unit in a Kerry school (details supplied).

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss access to, and staffing for, the summer programme for 2026.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the national child poverty target.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss an application for an interim ancillary grant by a national school in Mitchelstown.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the development of Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the recruitment of a consultant ophthalmologist in south Tipperary.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the proposed reforms of the criminal legal aid system.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss the decision of South Dublin County Council to increase council, HAP and homeless HAP rents from July.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss funding for the roll-out of BusConnects in Limerick city.

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss the proposed relocation of An Post's Harmonstown sorting office and the impact on local postal services.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the timeline to progress the Cork southern distributor link multimodal route.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss appropriate school places for children with challenging needs in County Louth.

The matters raised by Deputies Barry Ward, Ruairí Ó Murchú, Darren O'Rourke, Robert O'Donoghue and Joe Cooney have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Medicinal Products

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge that the Minister is here in person. It does not always happen for Topical Issues but I am grateful for the fact that she is here. It is probably a reflection of the fact that she is getting the same emails I am getting from people in our constituency who are affected by Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

I am sure the Minister already knows about it but Duchenne muscular dystrophy is a condition that affects muscular restoration and muscular development, mostly in boys although not exclusively. It occurs from about the age of four. It is a degenerative condition. Over time, it restricts the ability of those boys to do things that all our children take for granted, simple things, whether that is getting up after a fall, getting up out of a chair, getting in and out of a car or climbing stairs. Over time, that gets worse and worse until eventually they cannot stand independently or cannot stand up at all. Unfortunately, the nature of this condition is that as it gets worse and worse, boys who suffer from it will often not be able to walk by the age of 12. This is, therefore, a heartbreaking condition for parents as they watch their young children unable to do the things their peers are able to do. That degenerative nature of the disease must be extraordinarily difficult for them. It is a rare disease. I know there are different assessments as to how common it is. Ultimately, it does not affect a huge number of people but those people whom it does affect are deeply affected by it, not only the families and the extended families but also, obviously, the people who suffer from it themselves.

The Minister is aware that families were in here last week, a year after they first brought this to our attention, to have a meeting to inform many of the Members of this House about the situation in relation to Duchenne muscular dystrophy and the treatments that are available. Many Members will have attended that briefing in the audiovisual room. The families referred specifically to givinostat, a drug that is available for the treatment of the condition. Givinostat is really important because it is a turning point in the treatment of Duchenne muscular dystrophy. It cancels out some of the enzymes that prevent muscular development and muscular restoration. The muscles of young boys who suffer from Duchenne's are generally wasting away; they cannot restore themselves. Now there is a drug that is available and has been approved, for example, in the United States and provisionally in the European Union and that can treat that specific cause and deal with the enzyme that prevents the muscles from regenerating and being restored. It acts as a pause or a stop on the progress of the disease.

There are a couple of difficulties with it, however. The first is that it is not something that can be taken at any stage in a sufferer with Duchenne's. There are boys who are no longer eligible to take givinostat because of the delays in getting the drug approved in this jurisdiction. There are other boys who are approaching the point at which they will not be able to take it. Time is therefore of the essence in this matter. As one parent who wrote to me said, time is muscle when it comes to Duchenne's. Again, I am sure the Minister is familiar with these issues.

Those parents who have children who suffer from Duchenne's are therefore incredibly anxious that this drug will progress. I know that was a meeting - last week, I think - of the senior management team or that this is progressing through the Minister's Department. What I would really like her to tell us, though, is the progress in relation to givinostat; whether the families can expect that this drug will be available not only to them but on the same terms that it is available in other parts of the island - for example, in Northern Ireland; and if she can tell parents, conscious that time is muscle and conscious that there are kids who need this drug urgently, if this will progress in such a way that it will be available to them in the short term, or when it will be available to them. This heartbreaking disease can be stopped in its tracks for some patients, and we should be doing everything we can to ensure that happens.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Deputy Ward for raising this issue. This is something I have been working on with families for over a year now, since this drug was approved by the European Medicines Agency. I have met many of those families. I met them when they were here last week, before they had their audiovisual room briefing, I have met them four, five or six times online and I met them past year in person - I have met them so many different times. Together, we have been working to try to get this drug approved within the Irish system.

As the Deputy will be aware, when a drug is approved at a European Medicines Agency level, it does not necessarily mean that it will be available in Ireland. Why? It is because it is necessary for the drugs company to make an application to have the drug available in Ireland. It is not as though Ireland simply gets it as a matter of course. The HSE needs an application to be made. The drug company has to choose to want to sell it here. We have been trying to encourage Italco Pharma for some time to make the appropriate application.

The drug was approved in June of last year. I immediately met families in relation to the next steps. We did not get an application from the maker of givinostat for some time, so we all engaged in a lobbying campaign in different ways. I met the Italian health minister, Mr. Schillaci, in Luxembourg to encourage him to ask the company to make an application in Ireland. I made the same ask of him again at a later stage, in November, in South Africa, at the G20 meeting. The Taoiseach has been involved in this, asking Prime Minister Meloni to get involved to ask the Italian pharmaceutical company to make the appropriate, complete application here in order that the HSE could respond. I was on my summer holidays in August of last year waiting to see every day with the HSE whether the application had been made. Eventually, on 6 August, the HTA application was first made. I thank Michael Barry and the people in the HSE for the speed with which they processed that part of the application, which was exceptionally quick. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics did a rapid review. The application was made on 6 August, the rapid review was completed on 14 August and a full HTA commissioned on 26 August. That is unprecedentedly fast, and I am very grateful to the HSE for its speed, reflecting the seriousness of this.

On 30 September the HSE met with Italco Pharma to assess the HTA process. The assessment of the pricing and reimbursement application could not proceed until the full HTA was received from the Italian company.

That was eventually received on 15 January 2026. We were updating the families at every stage, discussing and giving them full information and transparency as to what was happening. I am grateful to the HSE for concluding the assessment on 3 March, which was a matter of 26 days or so. That was very fast. The HSE's corporate pharmaceutical element, which is the interface between the HSE and the pharmaceutical industry, held a meeting with Italfarmaco on 27 March 2026. A commercial offer was received from Italfarmaco on 8 May 2026. Again, we were waiting for these applications to be made.

The HSE drugs group continued that application at a meeting one month later on 9 June. When we bring together all of the different experts, it is not something that is stood up quickly. We have to review the documentation and have the scientific experts there. The drugs group supported the reimbursement of givinostat. Yesterday, the senior leadership team in the HSE supported that application and the drug will now proceed through a managed access protocol.

We have discussed in detail with the families how a managed access protocol works. It is a matter of clinical decision making as to who gets the drug. Of course, as the Deputy has referenced, not every boy is suitable for it. The question of being ambulatory, being able to stand and all of those things are not decisions for the Deputy and I but are decisions for clinicians. We want to make that drug as broadly available as possible but, ultimately, it is a clinical decision as to who should get the drug and who should not. I am so thankful to the HSE and thankful to the families for their constant engagement with me in relation to this, not just in our constituency, but around the country.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister. I join with her in thanking the HSE for the work that has been done and also acknowledge her commitment to this. Anybody who has dealt with families who are suffering with this disease understands both the heartbreaking nature of it and the urgency involved.

Listening to what the Minister has said in relation to the progress and the managed access protocol, do we have a timeline for when it will be available? I accept entirely what the Minister has said about the clinical criteria for the application of the drug. That is entirely appropriate and, unfortunately, there will be boys, because of the delay in the application outside our control, who may not be eligible to receive the drug now.

For those who are still eligible and those who can still stand up independently or who can stand up, can we give them a timeline for when they might be assessed for that and the conditions under which it will be made available to them? I am conscious of the fact that muscle is time and the fact that this drug is the very best way available to sufferers of Duchenne muscular dystrophy to stop the progress of this disease and to stop the degeneration of their muscles, which is irreversible. For the families the Minister has been dealing with and I have been dealing with, can we give them a particular timeline for when they can hope to be clinically assessed, if that still has to happen, but more importantly to have access to this drug in the same way it is available, for example, to our cousins in the North of Ireland under the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, protocols? Will the drug be available under the same conditions as it is available in the UK under the NHS?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It was Úna Ennis who coined the phrase "time is muscle". I am grateful to her for her engagement and advocacy all the way through. The first thing is that we are trying to get the drug physically into the country. My officials have been working on that for some time in anticipation of what we hoped would be a positive response. Of course, it is not just a decision whether to give the drug or not. It is also a decision about whether the drug is effective and for whom it is effective. It is a complicated balance and we must always defer to the scientists on these decisions as well, recognising that Ireland remains a country that believes in science.

We are trying to get the drug physically into the country. This is a high-tech drug and not one that is put on the back of a van and sent to a pharmacy. Due to the way in which it is given, we are trying to work out whether this is something we can do more quickly in acute settings and how we can most quickly get this drug to the boys who need it so badly. Our broad approach is one of trying to give maximum access to it but I will defer to clinicians on who the appropriate people are to get it.

Yesterday, I was meeting with the European health ministers. We had a working lunch specifically on medicines and the challenge of most favoured nation, MFN, access to medicines. We have been trying to work in different ways on two things. As a small country Ireland, like the Benelux countries, Croatia and other small countries, have a difficulty with access to drugs. If we look at drug companies making applications, they are making it to the likes of France, Germany and other huge markets. We are just not in the same space. We do not have the same visibility. We are trying to partner with other countries to create a bigger market so we can be more attractive and also so we can negotiate on more attractive terms.

I feel that the only group with all of the information are the drug companies and that the member states are working somewhat against each other in terms of each of them making individual negotiations because of the way the European treaty is structured and health being a national competence. It is something we need to reflect on. I am working with other European health ministers to find a way to streamline the way the HTA process works, reduce

some of the national country administrative burden, make Europe a more powerful block, and rebalance that balance of power, crucially so that patients get access and so the Irish State can spend as much money as possible in getting as many drugs as possible for the broadest range of people. That will not always result in positive decisions by the HSE. I need to say that loudly. We have had difficult days on that, too, but we are desperately trying to take the right approach in every way.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister for taking this. When we talk about finding an appropriate place for children, particularly those with special needs and challenging needs, it is a constant battle for those parents. It is a constant battle even at times for elected representatives who are contacted in relation to this, whether it is contacting the special educational needs organiser, SENO, contacting schools individually or even in instances when we have to bring it to the floor of Leinster House.

Obviously, I have made the Minister of State aware of some of these cases and if we are lucky enough to meet afterwards and deal with this, unfortunately, there will be more names I have to add to that list. I will use these as examples. Again, we are not only talking about children going from primary into secondary school where the roadmap should be a lot clearer and straightforward on the basis that they are not coming from Mars. They are already in the system.

We also suffer from the circumstance where a child is probably put in an inappropriate place and that may fall apart, and then they are left with no school place whatsoever. We are talking about cases where the educational welfare officer, EWO, is checking why the child is not at school and realises there is an issue. There is then no pressure on the parent from the point of view that the child is not at school, yet there is no solution. That is not taking away from the work done by SENOs and EWOs, but we need a far better system to actually deliver.

I am going to use a couple of examples. One is an eight-year-old named Hollybelle from Dundalk who has Down syndrome and an autism diagnosis. At this point in time, she has mobility issues and is non-verbal, so I am not taking away from the complexity of the case. She was given a special class within a school. That fell apart and now, months on, she does not have a place. Unfortunately, there has been a huge number of representations made by her mother over and back, particularly with the National Council For Special Education, NCSE, which I have contacted also. However, we are not in a place that we have a solution.

Another example is Tristan, who is a 12-year-old from Dundalk. The recommendation is for a special school or special class catering to autism spectrum disorder, ASD. I could talk about the multiple representations this mother has made to special schools and to schools with units and, in fairness, others and I have been in contact with all the services and there have been parliamentary questions placed. In some cases, it is schools that have not necessarily had their requisite ASD places or classes commissioned. Nonetheless, the Minister of State can imagine the pressure that these parents are under.

I am dealing with a young boy of 12 years old from Dundalk who is on the autism spectrum and there is no place whatsoever. His father has been in and out of my office and is under severe pressure.

There is another man with an 11-year-old boy. The school place he had previously then fell apart and at this point in time the child has been languishing at home.

There are sometimes issues that need to be dealt with around transport and whatever. I accept that-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): I thank the Deputy. He will have a further two minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this question regarding County Louth. I will first give him an overview of where we are and then address the specifics, if that is okay.

We are extremely committed to the provision of additional places for children with exceptional educational needs. The number of special classes provided across the country has doubled over the last few years. In addition, 16 new special schools have been established in recent years. School capacity has also been expanded across a number of schools nationwide. Four of these special schools are in County Louth, educating approximately 450 students with complex educational needs. These schools are supported by the Department of education and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE.

As the Deputy will be aware, an earlier notification deadline was introduced last year to support forward planning. This also meant that the NCSE was equipped earlier with local information as to what students would be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary specialised places or seeking specialised places and entering the education system for the first time. This information is crucial when examining where places must be provided to meet demand.

The National Council for Special Education started sanctioning special classes for the 2026-27 school year in January, several months earlier than the previous year. To date, 565 new special classes have been sanctioned by the NCSE for the 2026-27 school year. By way of information, between September 2025 and September 2026, close to 1,000 extra special classes will have been sanctioned and opened across the country. The vast majority of these new special classes are for children with autism. The new special class sanctions mean there will be over 4,300 special classes operating in mainstream schools across the country in the next school year, up from 1,836 in 2020. The earlier notification has given us insight into the need. The Department has worked extremely well with the NCSE and with school communities across the country to open extra classes at both primary and post-primary levels.

On the issues the Deputy has raised regarding education, we have those who are entering primary school for the first time and those who are transitioning from primary to post-primary school. These are the pinch points or challenges we face. We are acutely aware of the breakdown of places. We are working extremely well with the new teams within the NCSE across all counties to make sure we are meeting the needs of children with additional educational requirements.

The Deputy mentioned a number of children. While it would not be appropriate for me to discuss these cases on the floor of the Dáil, the Deputy shared the details with me yesterday evening and I will certainly take these matters up and respond to him offline. I fully understand.

One of my motivations in my role is that, a few short years ago, I met a parent at a school gate whose child was finishing primary school in June of that particular school year. This parent did not know where that child would go to post-primary school that September. That has really guided me in making sure we have appropriate places. On being appointed, I looked at moving the date to earlier in the year so that we would have earlier sight of educational requirements. We are working to ensure that again next year. It is proper to engage in forward planning to make sure we have sight of the need.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all welcome the attempts to streamline the system. The problem is that too many children are still falling between stools. I am not taking away from the particular issues but I spoke about Hollybelle. One of the schools she applied to was a special school that she did not qualify for. Her intellectual disability was seen as too severe. As much as we have an insufficient number of places for those who have autism - I accept that there have been increases, which is necessary - there are also a number of children who fall into the bracket of intellectual disability who have no place to go. We really need to look at this across the board and come up with a comprehensive solution. The Minister of State can imagine the absolute disaster this is for families and the pressure they are under. I spoke to Tristan's mother. I believe she will be here later to protest because she is at the end of her tether and does not know where to go.

I welcome the fact that we will continue this conversation offline. I did not expect to hear the solutions in here today. However, we need to get them.

On a point of information, when we talk about situations breaking down, a mother wrote to me about her son Matthew, who is going to secondary school in September. She could not get him a place in an ASD class, so he has to go into a mainstream class. The problem is that the SNA co-ordinator has told her that they cannot promise him SNA access as there are only six SNAs available between first year and sixth year. She has detailed Matthew's issues to me. We are going to have cases like that across the board. We need to find a way to deliver. I will follow up with the Minister of State afterwards.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There are a number of issues to discuss. The Deputy mentioned a case. I do not want to go into the specifics on the floor of the Dáil but that is one of the pieces we are concerned about. We are concerned about meeting profound levels of need within an appropriate school. We are doing a number of things. We have sight of the need earlier in the school year. We will continue with that programme over the next while. We are also gathering information from other Departments, including information from the access and inclusion model and the domiciliary care section, to make sure that we have full sight of this need, particularly at primary level. In addition, during the school year, school placements may not work out for a whole variety of reasons. We really need to work on that. While primary schools right across the country have done a huge amount of work with regard to additional special classes and working through the system, we have more work to do with regard to post-primary schools. Students will be going from primary school to post-primary school. We will be looking very carefully at that issue over the next while. We are also looking at where placements break down and the supports we can provide through the NCSE, the SENOs and team leaders right across the country.

The Deputy asked about County Louth. We are investing in special schools and special classes right across County Louth. Of course, we are supporting students in mainstream education as well. I assure the Deputy of that. It is extremely important. I know and understand the pressures families are under, particularly as we are now galloping towards the end of the school year with a new one on the horizon. Families need certainty on that. I will follow up on the queries the Deputy has shared with me and report back to him.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The level of support provided by the summer programme and its recognised benefits are very clear. It is recognised by school communities, parents and children themselves. There is increasing demand for the programme and, in recent years, an increased number of places have been provided. However, very real problems have been identified this year. Something different is happening in the administration of the scheme this year. In some cases, this means that children who were intended to benefit from the programme now will not.

I have my suspicions about what is going on here. We all hear about the budgetary challenges in the Department. I believe they are at play here.

We raised the issue of the very narrow application window, which the Department revisited, and that was welcome. I am hearing this from school communities and parents across the length the breadth of Ireland. A thread running through all of the complaints is that an entirely different approach is being taken now by the Department regarding SNA allocation.

I have specific examples. In County Offaly, a school does tremendous work in special education and has an above-circular allocation in recognition of the complex needs in the school. It has nine SNAs but has been told it will have six for the summer programme. In Trim, a school with a tremendous track record in special education has 18 SNAs but has been told it has 12 for the summer programme. This means that children with additional and complex needs will be locked out of the scheme. There is another case in a DEIS school in County Cavan. It wants to roll out a literacy and numeracy camp but will have to exclude children with additional needs because of the lack of SNA allocation. This is one very important issue that I want addressed by the Minister of State.

The other is the home-based programme. There is an absolute delay in sanctioning this to the extent that children, particularly secondary school children but also some in primary, might not get the opportunity at all. We know that in previous years the sanction happened way earlier. We are now running towards the end of June, and this has not been sanctioned. Schools that applied earlier in the year were told that it would be late May or early June before they would get the sanction letters but they are now told it will be the end of June. In some cases, tutors, teachers and SNAs are only available in the month of June. Their own children are at primary school and they are working in secondary schools, so they have the flexibility in the month of June that they do not have in July and August. These children are going to miss out on the summer programme as a result of these delays. What is going on? Can the Minister of State urgently address those deficiencies?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. Like the Deputy, we recognise the importance of the summer programme as a vital piece in the education system. It is vital for children at primary and post-primary school. It is specifically designed for children with complex educational needs or those at risk of educational disadvantage. While it is delivered during the summer months, it is an educational programme and it is important that it is viewed as educational rather than as recreation in summer camps.

Since 2021, the Department of Education and Youth's inspectorate has evaluated the programme annually. The findings consistently highlight the programme's positive impact on the many children and young people who have taken part, with parents, staff and the children themselves reporting improvements in confidence, attitude and readiness to return to school in September. The original intention and continued emphasis of the summer programme is to mitigate the impact of learning loss on those children while schools are closed. An increase in special educational needs prevalence rates, particularly of autism, and the presentation of children with more complex needs, has meant that the summer programme is more important than ever.

Details of the summer programme were communicated to schools and stakeholders in early May. While it is acknowledged that the details of the programme are typically announced earlier, the Department has continually kept in touch with stakeholders who are querying when the summer programme might be announced. This ensured that schools understood it would be forthcoming and that they should start their preparations. As a result, the online application portals for both the school-based and the home-based programmes were opened from 6 May to 15 May. Both the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I were aware of the deadline, and the application portals were reopened again from 2 to 5 June. Details of this reopening were announced in May.

The summer programme has been well established for several years, so even though there was a shorter window for applications, schools were prepared in advance. The Department subsequently received more applications for the school-based scheme this year than in 2025, with increases across primary, post-primary and special schools. In addition, the number of home-based applications has significantly increased on last year. The Department has been engaging with schools on an individual basis in relation to the running of their summer programme. Schools have now received their sanction letters with their staffing allocation. This allocation is based on the number of children who are taking part in accordance with the published terms and conditions of the programme.

In instances where schools believe they require additional supports, they can engage, and many are engaging, with the Department to outline the unique circumstances that require additional resources. I know the Department has been working with schools on an individual basis to ensure they can meet the needs of all the children taking part. Equally, it is acknowledged that there are some children with complex special educational needs whose school is not running a school-based programme or that a place on the school-based programme is not available. In this instance, these children can avail of the home-based provision.

The Department is working hard to ensure it is communicating with families as a matter of urgency. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, we are in the second half of June, and we need to get certainty to all communities. Many schools have been liaising with us in the past week or ten days in particular, and the Department has been engaging with them. Where a need is

demonstrated, additional staffing is being made available. This will continue to work until the summer programme is up and running. We are very serious about making sure that the summer programme works this year and into the future.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I would be interested to know the numbers. I recognise they have been increasing year on year. My understanding from replies to parliamentary question that I have received from the Department is that the budget has increased but it has not increased in the past two years and has been static. I know there were 1,800 schools and 71,000 children last year. How many schools and children are there this year? Will the Minister of State indicate whether more schools will participate this year and whether more children will be accommodated?

I know many schools are engaging in the appeals process. I implore the Minister of State to ensure timely responses. I am dealing with a number of schools that have appealed. They engaged in good faith and outlined their particular circumstances but it is more than ten working days later and they have had no response from the Department. That has to change.

When will the sanction letters for the home-based programme be issued to give people a clear indication that they can go about making arrangements?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There has been an increase in the number of schools. More applications were received for school-based programmes this year than in 2025, with an increase across the primary, post-primary and special schools. In addition, there has been an increase in home-based applications, which significantly increased last year. We are working across the system to ensure we are delivering decisions and appeals. Further information has been sent in by school authorities to the Department in recent days, and that is being worked on in a timely manner. Certainty is being issued to schools, and we understand the need for that.

There has been an increase. This shows the value that the families and school communities put on the summer programme. I am pleased to see that more primary, post-primary and special schools are engaging in the programme. That is what we want. We want to make sure the programme is open to all. In the past few years, there has been an increase of 210% in child participation. That is welcome. It is what it is all about. It is to ensure that children who require further education, those with additional educational needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity of the summer programme.

This programme was devised many years ago and it has been successful and has been running across the schools. We understand the value of it. The engagement between the Department and the school authorities is ongoing. A lot of documentation was issued over the last day or so in terms of staffing and that will continue. On the home-based tuition, or the home-based programme, we are working to bring clarity to families because I know families need certainty at this point in the year.

School Accommodation

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to highlight a deeply concerning situation facing Balcadden National School in my constituency in Dublin Fingal West. The school is simply

asking for appropriate educational provision for children with additional needs. It has been informed by the Department that it will only provide a single special educational needs, SEN, classroom through a modular build. This decision appears to be based on the assertion that a two-classroom unit would require planning permission and would delay the project. However, the information available to the school raises serious questions about this justification. A report has suggested that a septic tank would need to be relocated to accommodate the two-classroom unit. The school disputes this and believes that the tank does not need to be moved. Furthermore, if planning permission is required, the additional timeframe is estimated at about 12 weeks. When we consider that the most optimistic opening date would be spring 2027, and that September 2027 would be a more realistic target in either scenario, it is difficult to understand why a long-term educational need is being sacrificed for a relatively short administrative delay. The reality is that the single SEN classroom would be filled immediately. Once it reaches capacity there would be no further places available until pupils reach sixth class. So what happens to the children who are coming in for 2028, 2029 and beyond? Are the families expected to wait years for appropriate provision? Are children expected to travel long distances because sufficient capacity was not provided from the outset?

There are also significant concerns about the quality of provision being proposed. A singular modular unit comes with fewer facilities for children who will use it. In addition, the Department proposes providing only 50 sq. m of soft play space. The school believes this is wholly inadequate to facilitate meaningful reverse integration and inclusive educational opportunities. The Education Act makes clear that every child is entitled to the most inclusive education possible. Inclusion cannot simply be spoken about; it must be properly resourced and designed into our schools. A restricted space of 50 sq. m does not allow the level of interaction and integration that children deserve.

Finally, the school community has been informed that its playground will be disrupted and effectively removed during construction. It is entirely reasonable that playground damage or loss as part of this project should be fully reinstated when the works are complete. I call on the Minister of State and the Department to urgently review this proposal, engage constructively with the school, provide a two-classroom SEN unit that meets future demand, ensure adequate outdoor space for inclusive education and guarantee the full replacement of the playground following construction. Our children deserve planning that looks beyond next year and provides for the future needs of Balscadden National School.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. I appreciate the question and thank him for his ongoing engagement on matters of education, not just in the House but also his own engagement in it. It is important that we do so.

I want to go to the school the Deputy raised. I assure the Deputy that the Government is fully committed to supporting students with special educational needs to fulfil their full potential. The programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this important objective.

I can assure the Deputy that the Department has been working closely with the school authorities in relation to the school's accommodation requirement and will continue to do so. The Department of education appointed a project manager who visited the school to examine the feasibility of providing two special educational needs modular classrooms at the school's

preferred location on the school site. The Department was advised that due to a site-specific technical constraint only one unit could be accommodated at the school's preferred location. However, I commend the school's strong preference for proceeding with two special educational needs classrooms, and the project manager is now undertaking a revised viability assessment report, including examining the possibility of relocating the modular accommodation to an alternative location on the school site. The Department of education will endeavour to assist in facilitating this option. Once the process has been completed, officials from the Department of education will be in contact with the school authorities.

The Deputy will appreciate that the Department is required to utilise the funding available to it to ensure that every child has access to a school place, and indeed there is a large demand for school places and class provision in the Balbriggan school planning area. I assure the Deputy that the Department is fully committed to the optimum special education needs accommodation solution at the school and will continue to engage with the school in this regard.

It is important to note the project manager has been appointed and has gone out there. I could not but strongly commend the school authorities for wanting to go ahead with the two special classes. That is not universal but perhaps the Deputy might convey to the school authorities that we do appreciate that they are looking to the future as well. One of the things we have to bear in mind as a Department and a Government is the large demand for special education class provision in the Balbriggan school planning area. That is one thing we have to be very cognisant of as we move forward. I will give a commitment that we will work very closely with the school authorities to ensure we find the best possible solution there and to ensure engagement with the school authorities on it.

By way of information, the Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is the statutory body for the provision of special education and allocating supports for children with additional needs. The Department is guided by the NCSE in relation to requirements for special classes in the first instance. In order to respond to the urgent need for special educational needs class provision identified by the National Council for Special Education, my Department is progressing urgent building projects that involve providing modular accommodation for SEN class provision. This delivery method and modern methods of construction offer an extremely high-quality carbon-friendly building combined with fast delivery. In overall terms, it is important to have a range of delivery mechanisms for delivering school accommodation to support the very strong and ambitious roll-out of school building projects across the country.

I assure the Deputy that the Department will be working very closely with the project manager and the school authorities in order to progress the delivery of special education class accommodation as quickly as possible. My officials will engage directly with the school again on the next steps for delivery of this accommodation.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State. I will convey this to the school principal, Mr. White. While seeking the two SEN classrooms is probably not as common as it should be, it is good to hear that the Department is working closely with the school. I feel that myself and my Dublin Fingal West colleagues are like a broken record at this point. It is the fastest-growing local authority area in Ireland. I am glad to see that facilities like this are being

taken seriously, as is coming forward from the Department. From my own point of view, I am asking the Minister of State to continue that engagement with the principal, Mr. White, and the school community on this issue. It will certainly be used in the coming years and without a doubt it will future-proof one area of the north county. The school community is willing to provide the Minister of State with any solutions or any further input he might need that will work to find what we perceive as a better solution than that originally put forward. Engaging with them can bring a better conclusion. That is the outcome we are all looking for. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In all school projects when the Department engages, the Department is one side of it, the planning and building unit is one side of it, and there is the National Council for Special Education, which has sight of the numbers that are notified on a yearly basis. The most important ingredient as well is the school authorities and we have to bring them with us.

The school authorities have the best interests of their communities at heart and they want to see what is the best option for them. In this instance, they are very clear in demonstrating that a quick fix in relation to one classroom will not meet the needs into the future. Where population growth is anticipated right across the country, we have to be very mindful that we have to future proof, so that we are not trying to catch up year after year and make provision for specialised education. There must be reflection on the points that have been made and the really serious engagement the school authorities have had with the Department on pushing the two classes in the overall decision that we are making. I assure the Deputy that the Department will continue to work with the school authorities and bear in mind the challenges that will arise not just in 2026 but into the future in the greater Balbriggan area as well. We will work closely and we will report back the Deputy.

Industrial Development

Deputy Joe Cooney: Ireland is at a crossroads. Dublin is bursting at the seams, housing is scarce, costs are out of control, infrastructure cannot cope and commuters spend hours of their lives on packed roads every day but two hours west of this Chamber, we have an asset of great national potential, Shannon and the wider region. Developing Shannon as Ireland's second economic engine is not just good for County Clare, it is essential policy for Ireland. With excellent road and rail connections and port access at Foynes, Shannon has the freight and logistics capacity that any foreign direct investment team would find compelling. Shannon Airport is the only airport outside Dublin that can handle long-haul flights. It is critical national infrastructure that needs to be used more. The Shannon Airport Business Park is the largest outside Dublin with hundreds of companies employing thousands of people across a range of businesses. It has 130 acres of land available for new development, doubling the park's current capacity and driving the economy of the entire region.

What Shannon offers that Dublin cannot is space, which is vital. Physical space for companies, space in the housing market for workers who can afford homes within reach of their workplaces, and space in the planning system to move with ambition and speed. There are 9,000 students graduating every year from the University of Limerick, UL, and the

Technological University of the Shannon, TUS. Shannon itself is home to the Shannon College of Hotel Management.

Pharma, medtech, ICT, financial services, aviation, agrifood, and green energy sectors all have a natural home in the Shannon region. The Roche site in Clarecastle is a prime example of the region's industrial capacity. It is a flagship location that is perfectly placed to attract the next generation of global life sciences and clean-tech investment directly into County Clare. With Ireland's offshore wind potential off the Atlantic coast, Shannon is ideally placed to be the industrial hub for new energy-intensive and net-zero industries. The national planning framework commits to regional balance in principle. Successive Governments have promised balanced regional development but promising it and actively delivering it are two very different things. What steps is the Minister taking to back up those promises?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Cooney for raising this very important Topical Issue on the mid-west region, Shannon Airport and County Clare. The mid-west region is uniquely positioned to drive balanced regional development, with assets including Shannon Airport, Foynes Port, excellent road and rail connectivity and a highly skilled workforce. There are strong links to leading education institutions. The region has all the fundamentals required to support sustained industrial growth and job creation. Government policy is fully aligned with unlocking this potential. Through the White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030 and our regional development agenda, we are focused on ensuring every region, including the mid-west region, can realise its full economic and employment potential.

My Department contributes to this agenda through the work of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the local enterprise offices, LEOs, and nine regional enterprise plans, REPs. The regional enterprise plans have proven effective in fostering regional collaboration, bringing together key stakeholders to identify challenges and opportunities and to take action in areas such as cluster development, manufacturing and knowledge economy.

Since 2017 my Department, through Enterprise Ireland, has made available over €150 million in regional enterprise development funding. Looking ahead, Enterprise 2035, as set out in the programme for Government, will build on this progress. It will support long-term enterprise growth and job creation, focusing on key enablers such as skills, infrastructure, digital connectivity, access to finance and sustainability.

The LEOs play a vital role at grassroots level, supporting job creation in small businesses across the region, providing targeted grants for scaling and exporting firms, including support for specialist hires, and driving digital, green and lean transformation across sectors. Enterprise Ireland also supports over 700 client companies across the mid-west region, with employment growing in 2025 to almost 27,000. This growth is driven by strong performance in key sectors like medtech and healthcare, as referenced by Deputy Cooney. We are seeing this in major announcements, including Aerogen, Ireland's largest indigenous medtech company, announcing this year the creation of 725 jobs between its two manufacturing sites in Shannon and Galway and Vitalograph's expansion in Clare and Limerick which will see it take on an extra 200 employees.

In May 2025, Enterprise Ireland announced the high potential start-up, HPSU, class of 2024 in which €27.6 million was invested in Irish start-ups, supporting over 157 start-ups in 2024

through HPSU or pre-seed funding, of which six were in the mid-west. The region is already delivering strong results. There are 158 IDA client companies in the mid-west region employing 28,125 people, with employment among IDA clients increasing by 18% in recent years. Key sectors include technology, life sciences, international financial services and engineering.

The strategic location, excellent connectivity through Shannon Airport, and a skilled workforce supported by the UL and TUS make the mid-west region an attractive environment for multinational corporations. Some of the major FDI companies have expanded their operations here, citing access to talent, quality infrastructure, and Government support through IDA Ireland as key factors. Adjoining Shannon International Airport, Shannon Free Zone remains a cornerstone of international investment, hosting one of the largest clusters of North American investment in the State, with continued growth in traded services and technology investment also accelerating. Looking ahead, continued investment, infrastructure and collaboration will ensure the Shannon region can fully capitalise on its key advantages.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister for his update and his commitment to Shannon and the wider mid-west region, which is very much appreciated. The overdevelopment of Dublin is not a Dublin problem, it is a national failure of planning and political will. Shannon and the wider region are not asking for charity. They are asking for the investment and commitment to do what they have always been able to do: contribute in a meaningful way to Ireland's economic future. Let us stop managing congestion in Dublin and start building prosperity in the west, which is important. Let us recognise the strategic importance of Shannon and the wider region by investing in our airport, in the roads and in the public transport network and in public services that will ensure its future growth. The Shannon Chamber, which I have worked with on raising this issue, the Shannon Airport Group, Clare County Council and the wider business community in the region are willing to support the Government in delivering on its commitment to balanced regional development. We need the political will to match.

Deputy Peter Burke: I again thank Deputy Cooney. I had a great visit with him to County Clare and Shannon focusing on some of the key businesses that are there.

10 o'clock

We visited the Roche site, where there is huge potential, and we saw the works that are being carried out to remediate that site. We also visited Beckman Coulter, another exciting life sciences company, and we will see significant investment from other companies in the region, like Jaguar Land Rover, which is really working to invest significantly, and also PPG and Zimmer Biomet. There is huge opportunity. Working with Deputy Cooney and the key support he has provided to me and the Government, we hope we will have a very significant announcement during the summer by a leading Irish-born company in relation to Shannon. This will be a strong testament to the work of the Government in providing the key infrastructure but also in ensuring that we have a highly skilled workforce, and that we are getting key training opportunities into our workforce to meet the challenges of artificial intelligence, getting our skills observatory up and running, and ensuring that the high-performance in Enterprise Ireland that looks after our homegrown entities is excelling. We see right now that of the 196 high-performance graduates, half of them are grounded in AI. That is where we need to be as a country to take those key opportunities.

I assure Deputy Cooney of my purpose and delivery and we will work very hard together to ensure we are delivering for the west and Shannon as a key economic hub and a driver for the mid-west and our country, as the Deputy has pointed out. I know it has been very successful at getting additional funding under the regional airports fund and it will be important to keep up that commitment from Government. I assure the Deputy of my support and I look forward to the announcement later in the summer. Last year, on a trade mission, as the first time ever for an Irish Minister, I visited the top Irish-born companies in Ireland over two days and sought what their issues and challenges were. Right now in this country, the top ten Irish-born companies employ 450,000 people globally, which is a very strong testament to Irish-born companies and the indigenous economy.

Data Centres, Energy Use and Climate Change: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- climate change resulted in Irish temperatures in excess of 30°C in May, breaking a 29-year-old record by more than two degrees;
- a United Nations report has described Ireland as a cautionary tale on the environmental impact of data centres;
- the Government is implementing policies that will increase fossil fuel use, by facilitating further new data centres through the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Large Energy User (LEU) connection policy, the introduction of private wires legislation, and the construction of a floating terminal for the importation and storage of liquid natural gas, including fracked gas;
- over 22 per cent of our electricity is already used by data centres, this will rise to over 30 per cent by 2030, and to 55 per cent if growth continues as projected, using more power than every other electricity user in the country combined;
- in May, the Climate Change Advisory Council noted that all new renewable energy being developed in the State is being cannibalised by new demand created by data centres, rather than going towards decarbonising homes, transport or industry;
- research projects that the 5.8 gigawatt (GW) of additional data centre capacity under the LEU may result in a doubling of the State's peak demand for electricity generation, and lead to an increase in gas consumption by 2030 against the current projected decline, should capacity be constructed ahead of new renewables capacity; and
- no offshore wind power generation capacity will be available before 2030 despite a 5 GW target;

further notes that:

- Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the European Union, and over 500,000 households are in arrears on their energy bills;

— the increased and inflexible energy demands of data centres means that more and more often gas generation sets the wholesale price of electricity, rather than renewables, resulting in higher prices for households, while Eurostat shows that large energy users pay lower network charges;

— research by Friends of the Earth Ireland, shows that Irish households paid an estimated €715 million more in electricity bills from 2015 to 2023 due to data centres, equivalent to €360 per household, and face an additional €1.43 billion in costs up to 2034, costing each household up to €644 more; and

— the Economic and Social Research Institute has shown that recent energy price increases hit low-income households harder, and that more targeted support measures are needed;

regrets that:

— the Climate Action Plan 2026 still has not been published;

— the final, phase 2 oversight group report of the Land Use Review, was submitted over a year ago and has still not been published; and

— planned legislation to prioritise critical infrastructure will bypass statutory climate obligations;

recognises that:

— data centres are essential infrastructure for the modern digital economy and the development of artificial intelligence technology but are overly concentrated in Ireland, are using an ever-increasing amount of energy, resulting in higher costs for households and businesses, and increased development is now at odds with our climate targets;

— discussion by Government of nuclear power is a nonsense and a form of climate obstructionism which distracts and blocks real climate action; and

— the Government will further increase carbon emissions by lifting the Dublin Airport cap, promoting unsustainable housing and economic development, and by no longer prioritising public transport and active travel investment over roads construction;

condemns the decision of the Government to use the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, to disapply Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021 from designated projects; and

calls on the Government to:

— publish the Climate Action Plan 2026, and the final phase 2 oversight group report of the Land Use Review without any further delay;

— delete Section 7 of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, and publish the legal advice confirming the constitutionality of the provision to disapply Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021;

- suspend the CRU LEU connection policy, and commission an independent study of the impact of data centres on electricity prices, carbon emissions, water usage and grid stability;
- introduce a moratorium on the further construction of data centres until renewable energy from offshore wind comes online, and households and businesses can benefit from lower energy costs;
- introduce a levy on the energy usage of data centres, to recover the higher electricity costs now being imposed on Irish households and businesses;
- confirm by how much Ireland will miss our binding 2030 emission targets, what the cost of securing additional carbon credits will be, and how the next Government will pay for those; and
- immediately reintroduce targeted energy credits and more targeted Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland supports for households in advance of Budget 2027.

We are bringing forward this motion today out of a genuinely held concern that this Government is giving up even the pretence of caring about our climate ambitions. Earlier this year, we had what felt like three months of non-stop rain, leading to severe flooding in parts of the country, including my constituency of Dublin South-West. Just a few weeks ago, Ireland recorded record temperatures above 30°C in May for the first time in almost three decades, shattering a record that had stood for 29 years by more than 2°C.

Speaking of breaking records, I increasingly feel like a broken record when I bring up our climate crisis in this House. In Ireland and globally, we are seeing much more frequent and severe weather events, from droughts to floods to extreme heat. We have moved beyond the point of warning about the potential consequences of climate change. It is here. These consequences are already being felt. Urgency is required to prevent the most catastrophic outcomes - urgency in bringing down our emissions, in our energy transition and in addressing the costs of this perpetual fossil fuel crisis.

However, this Government is failing to acknowledge that there is any urgency. It still has not yet published a climate action plan for this year. It is June. It has failed to publish the land use review, which has been sitting on the Minister's desk for over a year now. The Minister, who is not here, is trying to make a virtue of admitting that we are going to fail miserably in reaching our 2030 carbon reduction targets. What is another few years? This Minister will be long gone from the climate brief by the time any of this matters.

Not only is this Government failing to act with any real urgency to decarbonise; it is also actively pursuing policies that are moving us in the opposite direction. This motion seeks to address some of this Government's failings when it comes to climate, starting with the most obvious example - the rapid expansion of data centres and the consequences their growth is having on our climate obligations and on household energy bills.

None of us here are Luddites. We accept and understand that data centres are part of a modern economy and industrial strategy. We all have a mobile phone; we all use cloud services. Many of us even use artificial intelligence, AI, though certainly not for parliamentary questions. This is not a question about whether data centres should or should not exist, and I hope the Government does not try to reduce the debate to those binary terms again. The debate has

moved on. The question is whether we are content to continue to allow unlimited expansion of these data centres without regard for the very real consequences on people and our environment. This is a question of the Government's industrial and economic strategy as much as it is a question of our climate obligations and the cost-of-living implications of this strategy. The Government must be honest about the consequences and costs of allowing more and more of our energy to be used by data centres. It must be honest that much of the legislation it is pushing through is designed to facilitate and placate large energy users. I refer to the private wires Bill, the strategic liquefied natural gas, LNG, emergency reserve, which will import highly polluting fracked gas, and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU's, new large energy user policy. Who knows what kinds of fossil fuel-guzzling projects a future Minister might deem to be critical infrastructure if that particular Bill passes?

The UN has described Ireland as a cautionary tale regarding the environmental impact of data centres. I would hope that would be a wake-up call for the Government but I will not hold my breath. Perhaps the Friends of the Earth report published a couple of weeks ago will be more impactful. It concluded that €715 million had been added to household bills between 2015 and 2023 as a direct result of data centre energy demands pushing up prices. A further €1.5 billion could be the price households pay for data centres over the next decade. This is at a time when, according to the latest figures from the CRU, more than 500,000 households are in arrears and cannot afford to keep up with their energy bills. We already have the highest electricity prices in the EU and this is, in part, directly attributable to data centres.

As our motion says, the massive energy demand from data centres means that gas is setting the wholesale price rather than renewables, making everyone's electricity more expensive. This is only going to get worse if we continue to build more and more of them. Data centres currently consume 22% of the electricity in this State. This is projected to grow to 30% by 2030 and they could ultimately consume as much as 55% of all the electricity demand in Ireland. This is insane. That is more than every household, school, hospital, small business, farm and factory combined. An entire energy system is increasingly organised around the demands of a small number of large corporate users and their interests.

That is why we are calling for the introduction of a levy on data centre energy usage. It is about fairness. Not alone are data centres pushing up prices for everyone else but we have a ludicrous situation where they are actually paying less than your average punter in network tariffs. If data centres are contributing to higher costs across the electricity network, then it is reasonable that they should contribute more towards those costs. It is not about punishing data centre operators or deterring investment. It is simply about making sure that ordinary households are not left footing the bill, which is currently the case.

What is particularly alarming is that the Climate Change Advisory Council has warned that all new renewable energy is being cannibalised by the growth in demand from data centres rather than decarbonising out transport sector, agriculture, industry or home heating. The Government's response to all of this has basically been, "Yeah, but jobs". However, the recent KPMG report commissioned by the Government makes the absolutely laughable claim that 900,000 jobs are attributable to data centres. The actual number of jobs directly created by data centres is around 19,500, the vast majority of which are in construction and are temporary in nature. The actual figure is about 3,000 ongoing jobs. That is not to be sniffed at, but is it

worth building an entire energy system around and dumping our climate targets for? I would say the jury is out on that one.

The Government will say it is encouraging more renewables because 80% of the energy for our new data centres must come from renewables, but even with that, the remaining 20% will lead to a potential doubling of our peak gas demand. This means more imported fossil fuels, more emissions, more exposure to international energy price shocks and, ultimately, higher bills for hard-pressed Irish households. That is why we are calling for a moratorium on further data centre expansion. We want a pause until we have sufficient renewable capacity so we can ensure they are not impacting on our decarbonisation efforts or pushing up prices for ordinary households.

An additional concern addressed in our motion is the Government's Critical Infrastructure Bill and the disapplication of section 15 of the climate Act. Of course we want to see Ireland's infrastructure deficit filled. We have had a decade of wasted prosperity under Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments and it is typical that they would now seek to point the finger for their failures to build our necessary infrastructure at anyone but themselves.

They are punching down on the environment. However, we need to be clear that seeking to uphold our environmental and biodiversity laws is not the cause of the delays in getting vital infrastructure built in a timely fashion in this country. It is resourcing issues. For years, our planning authorities, courts and public bodies have been under-resourced. That is the reason we are seeing decisions taking years and years, delaying delivery. That is not the fault of environmental law. It is a fault of Fine Gael's and Fianna Fáil's lack of strategic planning. None of the 20 delays to the completion of the National Children's Hospital is due to the environment. Section 15 of the climate Act exists for a reason. It ensures that our public bodies act consistently with our climate objectives. Removing it suggests that those objectives apply only when it is convenient and can be set aside when it is politically inconvenient. I will continue on this later.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend my colleague and our climate spokesperson, Deputy Ahern, on proposing this motion, which I am delighted to second on behalf of the Labour Party. In my constituency of Dublin Bay South, we saw the largest mobilisation of young people in the first school strike for climate in 2019. My constituency is also home to a great many people working in the tech sector. However, it is also a constituency where many households are now struggling to make ends meet, in part due to the outrageously high cost of energy.

I make these points at the outset to illustrate the strong connection between the climate crisis, the cost-of-living crisis and the future of our economy and our workplaces. The connection here is so clear for the working families I represent. Every month, and the Minister of State will be aware of this, people open electricity bills they can scarcely afford. They watch prices rise, while they see people in other countries like Spain, which have invested heavily in renewables, availing of cheaper, cleaner energy. Ireland still has some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. More than 500,000 people are in arrears on their energy bills. Energy security is a buzz word for Government when it comes to justifying liquefied natural gas but less so when it comes to being honest with people about data centres.

As Deputy Ahern pointed out, data centres are now consuming more electricity than all urban households combined and that demand is set to grow. It seems the demands of

multinational tech corporations have an outsized influence on national energy policy for this Government. I say none of this to diminish the importance of tech jobs. I know it well as local TD. However, there is a balance to be struck with the needs of working families and, indeed, other sectors and other businesses matter too. At present, what renewables we do bring on stream, the capacity is immediately being swallowed by the growing demand from data centres instead of reducing bills for households or improving our energy security. That is why in this motion, the Labour Party is calling for a levy on energy used by data centres and a moratorium on the introduction of new data centres until bills come down. We need to see offshore wind generation operating and capable of supporting that growth. We need that renewables revolution that we have seen driven by a socialist Government in Spain and that we have seen in other countries. We need to see a Government that is using evidence to drive energy policy, not just acquiescing to the calls of tech giants and fossil fuel lobbyists.

Before I finish, I want to emphasise that for Labour and for all of us, the debate should also be about jobs because the same artificial intelligence, AI, revolution driving demand for data centres is reshaping our labour market. Companies are selling AI and marketing its use as a way to flatten teams, which is a euphemism for cutting jobs. Young graduates are seeing diminished job prospects as early-stage AI lay-offs really cut deep. Generative AI is also having serious ethical implications due to the risk of mass theft of intellectual property. The Government is sleepwalking through an AI revolution. As a tech hub, we have an opportunity to lead on a just green transition for quality jobs, a renewables revolution and finally being able to meet our climate targets.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to acknowledge my party colleagues today for bringing forward this motion because ordinary working - people I represent Dublin Fingal West - are to the pins of their collars trying to pay for heating their homes, filling the cars and putting food on the table. Ireland has the highest costs of energy prices in the EU, and why? It is because this Government continues to hand incentives, discounts and preferential treatment to some of the wealthiest corporations on the planet for their data centres. These are companies and tech billionaires who do not need a subsidy from the Irish taxpayer. The cost of these decisions is being carried by ordinary people struggling through crisis after crisis. We are living through a series of crises. It is an omnicrisis happening all at once: a housing crisis; a fuel crisis; a food and cost-of-living crisis; a childcare crisis; health and mental health crises; and a disability crisis. People are exhausted, angry and frustrated. That frustration is turning into resentment because they feel that the system is working for powerful interests and not working for them. At the same time, millions of euro are being poured into data centres, AI infrastructure and corporate expansion, while households are told to tighten their belts and accept ever-rising bills. This is where the climate crisis comes in.

The climate crisis is deeply connected to every one of these pressures I have mentioned for working families. However, too many people have been led to believe that climate change is somehow a distant issue. There is no point in telling people that temperatures are rising when what they are living through is extreme weather, such as flooding that is ripping up the roads and damaging homes. The climate crisis is driving food insecurity through higher food prices and reduced access to good, nutritious food. It contributes to energy instability and rising fuel costs. It places greater pressure on public services in the communities that are already stretched to breaking point. If we continue to protect corporate profits while asking ordinary people to

bear the burden, we fail on both social justice and climate. The answer is not to make working families pay more. The answer is to make the biggest polluters and wealthiest beneficiaries of our energy system pay their fair share. We must use that revenue to lower bills, strengthen public services and build resilience against the crises people are facing every day. For the people struggling to keep the lights on, fill the tank and feed their children, that will be the understanding of climate crisis - it is not separate from their lives; it is woven into them. Until we address those realities together, we will solve none of them.

Deputy Duncan Smith: This Government is going backwards with climate change. I commend Deputy Ahern on this motion and his commitment to bringing home to all the people of Ireland the impact that data centres are having not only on our climate but also on their household bills and the cost-of-living crisis. The UN has referenced us as a cautionary tale. Yet, does Ireland listen? No. When the tech bros call, this Irish Government jumps and asks, “How high?” Its amendment to the motion is absolutely embarrassing. It opens with the point that the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, states that we are moving in the right direction. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, did a media tour two weeks ago and admitted that we are nowhere near hitting our carbon reduction targets. He admitted it. This Government admits that, at best, if everything goes in the right direction for it, it will get a 25% reduction in emissions. It is, quite frankly, embarrassing. What is this Government also allowing to happen? What is this Government allowing to be brought to the debate? It is allowing its own backbenchers to start to talk about nuclear power and bring that into the debate when so many other European states have either ended their reliance on nuclear power or are phasing it out. Italy, Germany, Lithuania, Belgium and Spain are all at different levels of either ending nuclear power or have pledged to reduce it. What is Ireland doing in 2026? We are going to bring nuclear power back in, so let us have a grown-up debate about it. It is absolutely pathetic.

This Government and this Minister are all over the place on climate and not just the big level in terms of power generation and data centres, but right down to public transport. I do not accept that this Minister is new in the brief. He understands from his previous brief the importance of climate mitigation measures when it comes to transport. In the constituency we share in Donabate where there has been an awful lot of house building, we have only seen one new bus in the morning with no return bus in the evening. We have seen no movement on the four-track solution for the northern commuter line, which is the most congested commuter line in Ireland. My colleague, Deputy O'Donoghue, will attest to that. It is absolutely pathetic. I also want an answer in terms of what this Government is allowing to happen with Dublin Bus routes. Our understanding is that Dublin Bus is now going to have to take 35 old EV and AX models in to busy routes in Dublin city centre while Go-Ahead Ireland is going to get 35 new electric or hybrid vehicles on less busy urban routes because Go-Ahead Ireland is failing to deliver a service on those routes. Air quality in Dublin city is one of the worst in Europe and this Government is forcing Dublin Bus to take old buses and disimprove that air quality. It is an absolute disgrace from top to bottom.

Deputy Ged Nash: As my colleague Deputy Smith said, the Government's countermotion is embarrassing and shameful. Really, it is a Comical Ali-type approach to politics.

It does good government, and the idea of good government, a disservice. Frankly, we need to put the breaks on the development of data centres, at least until our grid capacity increases and household bills come down.

If this Government put more energy, pun intended, into developing our offshore wind capacity rather than developing more data centres, we might build the kind of resilience we need in our grid for industry and domestic customers to avail of plentiful and cheap energy, but as usual the Government is putting the cart before the horse and is left wondering why the cart is not pulling. The Government has made, and will make today, all kinds of thin arguments to say we are wrong. It will argue that data centres create jobs. The reality is they take up massive acreage and resources and create only a comparatively small handful of long-term jobs. As the motion lays out, over 22% of our electricity is already being used up by data centres and by 2030 that will be over 30%. At the current rate of growth, it will not be long before over half of our electricity is eaten up by this one source.

As colleagues have said, Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the EU. The fact we are also the European leader in data centre permissions is no accident, and this Government needs to join the dots. There is a direct link between the proliferation of data centres in the country and ever-rising energy bills. Research by Friends of the Earth shows that Irish households paid an estimated €715 million more in electricity bills from 2015 to 2023 directly due to data centres. That is an equivalent of some €360 per household. In effect, in Ireland, under this Government, each bill payer is charged a data centre tax. The same research shows that Irish households face a further €1.43 billion in rising bills up to 2034 because of the projected growth in data centres. That will mean an extra €644 per household on household bills.

These are the same bills for which the Government used taxpayers' money to help pay for energy credits in recent years. Think about that – these are effectively more taxpayer subsidies for data centres. These increases I referred to will disproportionately impact on lower income households. That is why in this motion we are also calling for targeted energy credits and SEAI supports for households in budget 2027.

The motion also makes clear Labour's opposition to the decision made in the Critical Infrastructure Bill to disapply section 15 of the climate Act. This is constitutionally dubious and is wide open to challenge. That Bill is concluding in the Seanad this week and it is not too late for the Government to change course.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Gabhaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire Stáit nua. Go n-éirí an t-ádh lei ina phost nua. I offer the Minister of State many congratulations on her new role. I call on her to move the Government's amendment.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that in relation to Climate Action:

— last month, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched its latest Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Projections 2025-2030, which show that we are moving in the right direction and improving our performance compared with the previous year;

— for the first time, the EPA now projects that we are close to meeting our first carbon budget, following a consistent trend of improving projections for that budget over recent years;

— the EPA is projecting a decrease in emissions of between 13 per cent and 25 per cent by 2030 (from 2018 base);

— emissions are reducing across many sectors while our population is growing, and our economy is growing;

— we now have the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, and we have decoupled growth from emissions;

— Ireland is at the forefront of transitioning to an electricity system dominated by variable renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, and indeed renewable sources generated almost half of Ireland's electricity in February, March and April of this year;

— significant investment has taken place in increasing the technical flexibility of Ireland's power system to enhance its renewable integration capabilities – through storage and other technologies;

— the electricity system in Ireland can operate with up to 75 per cent wind and solar at any given moment; and

— there are now 241,000 electric and hybrid vehicles on Irish roads;

in relation to, energy affordability:

— the Government is deeply aware of the pressures placed on households and businesses by high energy costs, and has taken a number of steps to support households and business;

— the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) was established in June 2025 to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewables commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— in recent months the Government introduced a €750 million package of fuel supports, which is among the largest per capita of any European Union state, while Budget 2026 had a range of other measures;

— the Value-Added Tax (VAT) rate on electricity bills has been reduced to 9 per cent VAT until 2030;

— enhanced social protection payments have been introduced, including an increase to the fuel allowance rate and an expansion of the eligibility rules, which applies to about a quarter of Irish households; and

— the NEAT continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year;

in relation to, infrastructure delivery:

- a record allocation of €640 million in Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) retrofitting schemes;
- since 2019, we have invested over €1.8 billion in retrofitting, and we have been able to provide energy upgrades for 268,000 homes;
- in the first quarter of 2026, over 12,000 homes have been upgraded through SEAI schemes, including over 1,500 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;
- since the formation of this Government, over 70,000 homes have been upgraded, including over 9,000 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;
- Ireland currently has over 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, and onshore wind is the largest contributor to this, with over 5 GW of wind generation capacity and 2.5 GW of Solar Photovoltaics installed, with hydro, biomass, and other small sources contributing the remainder;
- Government approval was received in July 2025 for €3.5 billion investment in EirGrid and ESB to facilitate the investment programme of up to €18.9 billion out to 2030, and connection of 5 GW offshore wind; and
- the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, is a timely and important piece of legislation and will make a significant contribution to the prompt delivery of nationally important infrastructure, whilst maintaining robust regulatory, environmental and planning safeguards;

in relation to:

- data centres are a very important part of Ireland's economic and digital present and future, and a key part of our value proposition for foreign direct investment;
 - the recent KPMG study on data centres, undertaken on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, reports there are 19,500 directly employed in the industry;
 - Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy, this is our core energy intensive industry;
 - the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Data Centre Connection policy published in 2025, clearly set out what is required for a new data centre connection, including the requirement to get 80 per cent of its energy through new renewable sources; and
 - the CRU decision simply refers to market research data on 5.8 GW of prospective interest in data centre growth, rather than linked to any contractual demand in place at present; and
- further recognises that:
- the Government is committed to taking further action to deliver on the twin objective of decarbonisation and digitalisation in a sustainable and affordable manner;

- the Government is committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis, and work remains ongoing right across Government to implement climate mitigation measures every single day of the week;
- the priority is driving implementation, particularly on high-impact measures with multiple societal and economic benefits;
- the Climate Action Plan will be more focused on the most impactful measures and will report on the ones that make the biggest difference;
- the NEAT continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year; and
- the Government's Large Energy User Action Plan, published in January 2026 sets out a 'plan-led' approach for very large and energy intensive investments, which due to scale and energy consumption will benefit from coordinated national infrastructure planning."

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Labour Party Private Members' motion on data centres, energy use and climate change. However, the Government proposes to reject this motion and put forward a counter-motion. The Government is fully committed to delivering on Ireland's climate ambition across all sectors and to progressing climate action in a planned and coherent way.

Our approach ensures that sustainability, affordability, competitiveness and energy security remain central to this policy. This is reflected in our counter-motion, where we demonstrate through effective and focused policies and measures that we are making tangible progress towards objectives of decarbonisation while supporting sustained economic growth for wider societal benefits.

With regard to climate action, Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, decoupling population growth and economic success from emissions. The EPA now projects that we are close to meeting our first carbon budget, and a decrease in emissions of between 13% and 25% by 2030. The work remains ongoing right across government to implement climate mitigation measures. The priority is driving implementation, particularly on high-impact measures with multiple societal and economic benefits.

Climate action plans 2024 and 2025 provide the basis for this progress. Work is under way on the next climate action plan, with public consultation launched this week. The plan will continue to focus on the most impactful measures. For example, Ireland is at the forefront of transitioning to an electricity system dominated by variable renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, and we have achieved record breaking levels of renewable electricity generation, reducing our reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Most notably, emissions from electricity generation are estimated to reduce by between 53% and 60% by 2030. Significant investment has taken place in increasing the technical flexibility of Ireland's power system to enhance its renewable integration capabilities. The electricity system in Ireland can operate with up to 75% wind and solar at any given moment. The International Energy Agency, IEA, recognised this achievement as remarkable and a global milestone.

Ireland currently has over 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, with over 5 GW onshore wind and 2.5 GW of solar PV installed, and hydro, biomass and other small sources contributing to the remainder. The Government has also prioritised unprecedented investment in our grid - of up to €18.9 billion, underpinned by €3.5 billion Government equity investment - and expanding our electricity energy generation, with an emphasis on renewable energy sources, which will be advantageous for all customers and will ensure Ireland's electricity grid continues to provide capacity to support the delivery of Government targets across society and the economy.

Infrastructure delivery, and having a grid that is fit for purpose to support this, is critical to future success. The Critical Infrastructure Bill is a central pillar of the Government's accelerating infrastructure report and will make a significant contribution to the prompt delivery of nationally important infrastructure while maintaining robust regulatory, environmental and planning safeguards. Accelerated delivery of infrastructure does not disapply our climate commitments or our national level targets, but recognises an urgent need for the completion of major infrastructure projects in the State.

The Bill provides for the disapplication of section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 in very limited circumstances for programmes and projects designated as critical infrastructure. It does not disapply our climate commitments or our national level targets. It will lead to a better balance in decision-making that will lead to accelerated infrastructure while also preserving the rights of the public to access the courts on the legality of the decisions of public bodies.

The motion also raised a number of concerns with respect to data centres. Data centres are central to Ireland's modern economy and play a critical enabling role across a wide range of digitally intensive sectors, enhancing the competitiveness of the Irish economy. They strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge intensive regional hub for the ICT sector and also support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that supports billions in annual economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and supplier ecosystems.

According to independent analysis, the industry employs 19,500 people directly. Our technology sector, underpinned by data centre infrastructure, accounted for approximately 7% of our total workforce and over half of total services exports. Their value is evident and the Government remains committed to supporting sustainable data centre development as a result. It is important to note that unlike countries like the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, Ireland does not host a large, energy-intensive industrial sector. Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. This is our core energy-intensive industry. Germany and other countries consume more electricity to support their heavy industry sites like car manufacturing, steel and chemicals.

Connecting such large energy loads is a challenge many energy systems are grappling with across the world. In response, the Government's large energy user action plan, LEAP, published in January 2026, set out a plan-led approach for very large and energy intensive investments, including data centres, which due to scale and energy consumption will benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning.

LEAP will enable Ireland to capture next generation investment in a planned and managed way and unlock significant associated economic, employment and renewable energy opportunities. Alongside LEAP, the CRU data centre connection policy sets out what is required for new data centre connections, including the requirement to get 80% of its energy through new renewable electricity generated in Ireland.

The Government is acutely aware of the pressure faced by high energy costs and is taking action to help households and businesses with the cost of energy. In recent months the Government introduced a €750 million package of fuel supports, which is among the largest *per capita* of any EU state. Previously, the Government included a range of measures in budget 2026 to help households with energy costs, namely, an extended VAT reduction on electricity and gas bills until 2030, an increase to the fuel allowance payment and expanded eligibility, which applies to about a quarter of Irish households, and a record allocation of €640 million for SEAI retrofit home energy upgrade schemes.

Since 2019, we have invested over €1.8 billion in retrofitting and we have been able to provide energy upgrades for 268,000 homes. These upgrades protect those homes and families from energy shocks and reduce their costs and energy consumption.

The national energy affordability task force is working intensively on an energy affordability plan, which will be submitted to the Government in quarter 3. It will include measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewables commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability.

In closing, I reiterate that the Government's amendment reflects the reality of the commitments in place and more importantly the tangible progress being made and further actions being taken to support and reduce emissions and to retain a prosperous and competitive economy, with targeted supports for households and businesses as required.

The Government is committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis, and work is ongoing on the next climate action plan. Work across our governance structures, key sectors and in government is under way to outline the key deliverables to continue to reduce our emissions in the most impactful of ways. The national energy affordability task force continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year.

The Government's LEAP advances a plan-led approach for very large and energy intensive investments that will facilitate future investment while unlocking Ireland's renewable energy opportunities. I reiterate that the Government rejects the Labour Party motion, and I propose the Government amendment that more accurately reflects the reality of the situation.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment, and that is probably where the good news ends.

I am very disappointed with the Government's amendment. In fact, I found parts of it quite laughable. "Sustainable data centre development" almost sounds like someone coming along 30 or 40 years ago and saying that we need to move sustainable smoking, and that if a person smokes a packet of Marlboro Lights, it is not as bad.

It is not just about electricity, water and carbon emissions. We have seen that data centres place considerable strain on local infrastructure. We are literally halfway through the year. Notwithstanding the fact that the climate Minister is not here, where is the climate action plan? We need to introduce a levy upon data centres to help offset the costs and to drive down the extraordinarily high bills that the people we all represent are struggling with.

The concern that I have is that we are in the middle of an industrial revolution when it comes to artificial intelligence, and this Government is fumbling around in the dark. There was a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, a couple of months ago that found that one in 14 jobs could be affected by AI. We could be looking at widespread labour displacement, yet I am hearing nothing from the Government that inspires me with confidence that it knows how to navigate its way through this. Any data centre growth must be aligned with offshore renewables.

In the time I have left, I want to talk about housing because climate can and must be a critical consideration of the Government's response to the housing crisis. The Government set a target that 500,000 homes would be retrofitted to a BER of B2 by 2030, and that 400,000 heat pumps would be installed. According to the SEAI, we had only 80,000 retrofits between 2018 and 2025 and only 18,765 heat pump installations. These numbers are way off target.

I do not understand what the Government is doing in respect of this new electric car grant because the biggest issue that my constituents raise with me about the transition to electric vehicles is the lack of an adequate charging infrastructure. Electric cars are actually getting cheaper and outselling diesel and petrol cars at the moment, which means that the market is working. Instead of gimmicky grants, we need to see investment in the charging infrastructure.

Deputy Mark Wall: I want to start by thanking my colleague, Deputy Ciarán Ahern, for bringing forward this very important motion and for all of the work he is doing on this issue.

Ireland has one of the highest electricity costs in Europe. Eurostat recently reported that prices in Ireland were nearly 40% above the EU average. It seems that every other week an energy provider is upping its prices once again. The Government cannot continue to sit on its hands while this happens.

Many workers are just surviving, going from bill to bill, while those hardest hit like older people, carers and people with disabilities are afraid to turn on the lights or heating. Over 500,000 households cannot afford to pay their gas or electricity bills. We need a targeted energy credit to help workers and families that are struggling with the high cost of energy. The Labour Party has continued to call for this because it would provide immediate relief to those struggling, but the Government continues to turn its back on workers.

Workers, older people, carers and people with disabilities must be prioritised when we talk about targeted measures. We need to get greater investment in supports and grants that help these households retrofit their homes, so that they are protected from ongoing price shocks like we are seeing at the moment.

We need to look at fully funded grants for these households. I want to give the Minister of State the example of an older man who called into my office this week. He is trying to access the SEAI's one-stop-shop to retrofit his home, which is in a very poor condition. He was quoted €850 for a survey and consultation, with a grant available of €350, meaning that he would have

to come up with €500 of his own money just to start this process. That is simply not money that people like the person who came to my office have lying around.

I acknowledge that the Government has made increases in these grants. The warmer homes scheme grant is one of the best grants for those who qualify, but waiting an average of two years for works on many homes, and particularly for those who need it most, is just not sustainable. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis where every euro is being counted. People do not have the money to make these upgrades to their homes, and the Government needs to do more.

Workers and families are facing higher bills because the Government supports data centres more than working people. We need to put an immediate stop to the building of data centres, which are using more than 20% of Ireland's electricity and are on track to be largest electricity users in this country. We cannot let this continue. We cannot become the data centre capital of Europe.

The Labour Party's motion calls for the Government to put workers first, tackle the high energy bills they are facing and provide fully funded grants so that households can retrofit their homes. The Government must take this issue seriously and finally show up for workers.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish my former public accounts committee colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, the very best in her role. It is probably remiss of me to mention that there are the Minister and two Ministers of State in this Department, yet none of them is able to show up for this debate. I commend my colleague, Deputy Ciarán Ahern, and his staff for the work they have done in bringing this motion to the Dáil Chamber.

When we discuss the rising costs in energy bills being paid by households, it is vital that we look at where the energy from the grid is going, what it is being used for and what we, the Irish people, are getting out of it.

Data centres employ relatively few people. The level of employment relating to data centres is in the construction of them and, of course, those projects are time limited. In turn, I strongly encourage Ministers to stop trying to muddy the waters between the employment within a data centre and the employment in the construction of a data centre. It is dishonest and we should not have such conflation coming from Ministers.

In the pre-election budget of 2024, the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government introduced energy supports. Post election, the new Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government scrapped these supports. I am not in favour of introducing one-off measures, but targeted supports are necessary, and the Government failed to provide them to the carers and people living with disabilities, the most vulnerable people in this society.

However, when there is no short-term solution, an advancement in the construction of renewable energy and renewable energy infrastructure is not a swift process.

The State must act to ensure that households are not being pinned to their collar just for heating and running their homes, for which they already paid extortionate prices to buy or to rent. For the average worker and household, it feels like there is no end to the rising cost of living. This is all while wages remain stagnant.

The lack of a climate act plan is very concerning in relation to progress and for meeting our targets. While some in the Opposition also profess to care about the climate, voting in favour of gutting it in the Dáil and the Seanad undermines progress on climate action. On a national level, there must be a renewed interest from central government to get more capacity in our bus and rail network, to invest in a lower emissions fleet, and to reduce the cost of public transport for commuters. The State must ensure that those living in our towns, cities and villages can be assured that public transport is cheaper and genuinely viable for commuters. The fact that many multinationals in Ireland - I look at Apple on the northside of Cork city - continue to run their own bus services from the cities and towns for their staff speaks to the lack of faith in the State's ability to ramp up public infrastructure routes and capacity. This has to change. I will always acknowledge efforts by the Government to increase services. Services by rail in Cork have improved and there are ambitious plans for the rail network and for the Cork Luas. However, these are long-term projects that must overcome funding hurdles. We need to see the delivery of proposed bus routes linking rural areas and towns, and we need to see a reduction in fares to ensure affordability and encourage more people out of their cars.

This motion is ultimately about supporting the most vulnerable people in this society, who feel there is no end to the cost-of-living crisis they are facing. I am disappointed that the Government has failed to realise that this motion of constructive solutions, created by the Labour Party to give the most vulnerable people in this society an opportunity to deal with the cost of living they are facing, is appropriate for these very people.

Deputy Pa Daly: First, I congratulate the Minister of State on her elevation. It is obvious that she has to take one for the team, given that no Minister or Minister of State from the relevant Department has come in to deal with this. Fair play to her. However, I am disappointed with what has been prepared as the amendment by her colleagues in government.

The Government maintains that it is acutely aware of the pressure faced by people due to high energy costs and mentions the national energy affordability task force. It has been sitting for over a year but we are still going to have to wait until quarter 3 of this year to have the action plan while families and households are suffering. The EV scheme, even though there have been some recent amendments to it, has for the main part been nothing more than a wealth transfer to people who can afford cars that are worth €55,000 or more. The retrofitting scheme has been unaffordable for many people in rural areas. Regarding offshore wind, a Minister of State said on Radio Kerry that the Government had been sitting on its hands and navel-gazing on it. I cannot say I disagree with the wise words from that particular Minister of State. All in all, the Government has been failing on climate action. We have huge potential with the hopeful vision of the 540 GW of renewable energy in offshore wind. We can achieve energy independence but we need State investment.

As the Minister of State knows, we have the highest electricity prices in the EU. Recent reports from the ESRI and Eurostat show we are paying 40% more than the European average - €480 more than the average bill - and have the third highest increase in costs behind Austria and Romania. There are a record number of households. Their debt levels are higher and lasting for longer than ever before. The ESRI called for an independent investigation and for the regulator to release the data for independent analysis, but the Government and the regulator have refused.

One of the key drivers is network costs. The Government has not intervened. It is saying that we must get the balance right, keep our powder dry and there is nothing it can do. It is saying that it is all the fault of the war in Ukraine and the war Iran and that it is too complex and technical to fix. However, that is not the case. We used to have the lowest electricity prices in the EU and now we have the highest. Fine Fáil and Fine Gael have presided over this change. Not only did they do nothing to stop it, but they reinforced the system. They chose not to intervene and the energy giants are posting about enormous profits, profits that have been driven by crisis, war and instability.

There are solutions, though. We believe in transparency and fairness, a just transition, and an energy system that delivers for the public good rather than for corporate profit. We have tabled legislation with commonsense measures to give the energy regulator the teeth it needs to hold energy companies to account, including a prioritisation framework. However, we need immediate action on that. That is why Sinn Féin called for the reintroduction of energy credits. I see that is in the motion that is being proposed by Deputy Ahern. I commend him on bringing his motion to the Dáil to allow space to discuss this. We wanted the electricity credits to give families breathing space while we fixed the deeper structural problems that have left Ireland with some of the highest energy costs in Europe. To reduce prices long term, we need to address the flaws. We wanted to strengthen oversight of energy companies' pricing and hedging strategies, allow the regulator to investigate and sanction anti-competitive behaviour, and increase transparency.

Let us come to the Government's reckless approach to data centres. They consume massive amounts of electricity, drive demand and put strain on the grid. Who is footing the bill only ordinary workers and families paying six, eight or maybe ten times more on network charges than data centres are, and double the unit price? What did Eurostat identify in its report as the leading factor in Ireland's extortionate energy costs? Network charges. We must address one of the glaring injustices in our system, which is the imbalance between what households and large energy users like data centres are paying. Households are effectively subsidising the corporations that are driving up demand on our grid and, therefore, prices to boot. The biggest users are paying the least and households are paying the price for these grid upgrades. Data centres must pay their fair share. We need to restructure the charges and the public service obligation, PSO, levy and prioritise the use of our grid for the public good rather than unfettered data centre expansion. Families are dealing with soaring electricity bills. Data centres now consume 22% of Ireland's electricity, and that is only increasing. A stall needs to be put on them and we are calling on the Government to act to rebalance the system.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The continued growth of data centres and their growing energy demand is having a significant impact on our electricity grid and the cost of electricity. Data centres are responsible for approximately 20% of Ireland's electricity demand, and the Government's hands-off approach to their expansion is going to increase this share of demand in the coming years. A recent report found that rising electricity demand from data centres is putting upward pressure on electricity costs for households, coming at a time when households are facing rising costs right across the board. According to Eurostat, Ireland has the highest household electricity prices in the European Union and the average household in Ireland is paying around €480 more a year for its electricity when compared to the EU average. It comes then as no surprise that there are over 500,000 households in arrears on their energy bills. In

recent weeks, energy companies have once again announced that they are going to be hiking up energy prices further.

Earlier this year, Sinn Féin introduced two Bills that would have empowered the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account. We have consistently brought forward proposals to increase the powers of the energy regulator to ensure oversight of hedging practices, protect against price gouging and profiteering, regulate standing charges, and make the PSO levy and network charges fair. These are the tools needed to protect consumers, yet the Government refuses to support this legislation and these proposals when so many households are being hammered by the cost of energy.

This is not the first time that the Government has sat on its hands and refused to protect households. In last year's budget, it decided to withdraw the energy credits that many households depended on. It knew the effect this would have, especially on the most vulnerable, but it went ahead with it anyway. We saw this cold approach once again when it came to the recent fuel crisis where the Government had the opportunity to support households, but it decided to dither and delay. When it decided to act, it only delivered half-measures. Now, the Government is telling everybody to wait for next year's budget for support. This is at a time when the Government has unprecedented resources. It is no comfort to the 500,000 households in arrears right now. The only commitment that the Government has been able to give is that it will be increasing the carbon tax on home heating oil in October's budget.

Households are struggling now. The Government has the tools available to support them.

The Government must use them to ensure households can afford the essentials needed to live, hold energy companies accountable and deliver supports to those who need them most.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta Ahern as an rún Chomhaltaí Príobháideacha seo a chur chun cinn. Over 22% of the electricity we currently use is used by data centres. That is up from 5% in 2015, a rise of 531% over that period, the equivalent of almost 400,000 households. This is set to rise to over 30% by 2030 and 55% if projected growth continues. All the while, our grid is creaking at the seams. Major upgrades are needed immediately and well into the future if we are to build the houses and infrastructure we so desperately need to support our citizens. Speaking at the climate committee in March this year during a session on private wires, ICTU noted a scarce resource of labour, giving us a stark warning that we can either throw our resources at housing, reinforcing the grid and protecting our infrastructure or we throw those resources at data centres. Expanding grid capacity to facilitate data centre expansion is not only costing households more in electricity bills, it is also leapfrogging housing for electric connections. We are at a crossroads. A recent UN report on the environmental cost of AI's energy use cited Ireland specifically as a cautionary tale of energy demand running ahead of infrastructure. AI's growth completely outpaces energy planning. This is particularly concerning my constituency in north Kildare where the Herbata data centre proposed for Naas will create serious difficulties for future housing developments in the area and water quality. The truth is AI completely outpaces energy planning. We have to be concerned about the growth of data centres increasingly being driven by AI and numerous social media bots that spread disinformation and manipulate public debate. At a time when households are struggling with high energy costs and we, as a State, are striving to reduce emissions, serious questions must be asked about why

we are dedicating so much energy infrastructure to activities that undermine the people's democracy in a Republic. Expecting the people in my constituency to pay to subsidise it beggars belief. Not only are data centres increasing household bills, they also directly impact the state of our environment. They will continue to contribute to our carbon footprint and our nation's emissions as they expand. Fines could be as much as €28 billion. We need a moratorium on data centres immediately and for the Government to properly tackle energy costs.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I congratulate the Minister of State on her new post. I alert her that the Government continues to fail the ordinary people struggling to keep the lights on and their homes warm. A new record of more than 500,000 are now in arrears on their gas and electricity bills. The most impactful action by this Government was to pull the plug, withdrawing energy credits that were for many people just keeping their heads above water. There are an additional 200,000 households in arrears since the Government made that cruel choice. Even that does not take into account those who cannot afford to top up their pay-as-you-go meters or reflect those who cannot afford to keep their homes warm with home heating oil because not one cent was reduced. The Government imposes a carbon tax on the people yet at the same time it stands aside and allows our constituents to be hammered on energy costs. It takes a light-touch approach to energy companies especially data centres which now consume 22% of all electricity. Government is not responsible for the root cause of this crisis but it is utterly shameful that its policy choices are responsible for the scale of the impact on ordinary households. The Government needs to act for the people. Action needs to be taken to end the practice of ordinary households subsidising energy bills for big tech companies and for households in need of relief through the restoration of energy costs. I ask Deputy Ardagh as a new Minister of State to stand up to this supposed Government, stand by the consumers and make the big tech companies pay for their electricity.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The electricity grid is out of date. It simply does not work. It is not capable of meeting the growing demand across all sectors in particular data centres which are causing huge problems. Ordinary people and small businesses are under strain to try to pay very high bills. We are told we have the highest in Europe. If you looked at it globally, we are probably among the highest. We need to look at our situation. It goes to the core of the difference between Government and Opposition. Government has continually over the years set out everything essential to private providers. From the point of view of those in opposition, it should be provided by the State. That is the difference. When we had the lowest electricity prices in Europe, the ESB was run by the State. That is the difference. We are told when all these things are done, it will be good for the consumer because competition will bring prices down. When you go back and look at all these situations, two things happen - prices go up and infrastructure crumbles. That is the case in all of these situations. It is no different here. The reality is we do not have the capacity in this Government to provide the kind of infrastructure we need. I recall when the Green Party was in government it said we had the equivalent of a Gulf oil stream off the coast with wind if we could only get it in and there was the notion that we would be the richest country in the world with all the wind power we were going to generate to export everywhere. We have not done anything with regard to putting that infrastructure in place. Government is totally failing in respect of all of this.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I visited the new data centre in Clondalkin last month at the invitation of Echelon which is installing two centres outside Arklow. I heard extraordinary and fantastical claims of the benefits in terms of employment and income for Arklow and the wider area. We shall see about that. Even if I was to believe it all, once the plant is operational the benefits to the community of Arklow and south Wicklow in local employment may be minimal. I am sure their electricity will not be any cheaper. On my visit, I stressed that local contractors and local labour from south Wicklow and north Wexford must be a priority in the building of the two centres and that a large community fund should be made available to local community groups. Echelon's two data centres in Arklow are supposed to be the first of such centres to open which must generate renewable energy to run their own systems. It will be exceptional if this happens. Currently, there are 89 centres in Ireland which is straining the national grid. I attended a meeting on this with Professor Hannah Daly in the audiovisual room. She highlighted how they are straining power grids enormously, gobbling up 22% of the grid and that may become just under one third shortly. This can affect home connections to the electricity grid which need to be the number one priority. If the new data centres in Arklow do go ahead, I hope they will be the exception to the other 89, as claimed. Last year, I attended the launch of the long-awaited Arklow wastewater treatment plant which should facilitate desperately needed housing in the Arklow area. I attended the Echelon launch an hour later. The Taoiseach was at both. We cannot ever tolerate data centres taking precedence over young families and new home owners when both are competing for connections to the electricity grid. That would be unconscionable as I am sure the Minister of State would agree.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I too would like to wish the Minister of State the best in her new post. A single data centre uses as much energy as the entire city of Kilkenny. In the middle of a housing crisis, this Government has prioritised powering data centres faster than powering new homes across Carlow and Kilkenny. Homes are in urgent need but due to lack of infrastructure they cannot proceed. Nearly one quarter of our entire national grid is consumed by these centres. Ordinary families and workers are subsidising multinational profits. That is simply unfair. We now have nearly 100 data centres across the State. At the same time, the Government is rushing to build wind turbines across rural Ireland but much of that energy is wasted because our national grid is simply not fit for purpose. The community of Ballytobin has a modest, reasonable ask - no more wind farms until the national wind energy development guidelines are updated. It has been 20 years since they were last revised. Building regulations are updated constantly to keep people safe and ensure best practice so why does the safety of rural communities matter less than that of our houses? We have seen what happens when regulations are not kept up to date; the people and the State end up paying the price.

11 o'clock

I support this most modest of requests from the community of Ballytobin and I call on the Minister of State to stop stalling and provide updated regulations and guidelines. This climate crisis is not letting up. We are seeing more and more extreme weather across the world. At the start of the year, devastating floods hit County Carlow. Ministers arrived for photo opportunities and grand announcements. A sum of €4 million was pledged to repair damaged roads. Here we are in the middle of June and these funds still have not been released to the councils. It is simply unacceptable that the communities across County Carlow are treated with such a lack of respect.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I too congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment. I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward the motion. I am a member of the Oireachtas committee on AI. We have listened to many academic and expert contributions concerning data centres, energy and climate change. As stated, 22% of our electricity is consumed by data centres. The country coming anywhere close to this is Singapore. To put this into context as it stands, this is an unprecedented percentage *per capita* in a developed economy.

The Minister of State must also be aware that EirGrid has already acknowledged it will be a challenging position to keep supply to these data centres until 2028 and will likely stretch beyond that. We in Sinn Féin challenge the Government's postcolonial strategy specifically on industrialisation by invitation. We must have meant governance and tackle the environmental impacts and implications on our own citizens. For example, taxpayers are footing the bill for grid upgrades. Between 2015 and 2023, Irish taxpayers paid €750 million extra for their electricity. We had the second-highest electricity prices in the EU in the second half of 2025. We also have more than 500,000 people in gas and electricity arrears. On 1 July, we will see the price of domestic electricity and gas units increase by 9.5% per unit. At present, domestic units are charged at roughly 36.8 cent per kilowatt while data centres' prices are 19.1 cents per kilowatt.

The Government's amendment refers to its large energy user plan. We ask the Minister of State to revisit this plan as it has the potential to lock in our energy sector, effectively locking private tech solutions, including more fossil fuel gases, into our energy grid. This action threatens our public energy legislation that has been in place since the foundation of the State. There should be no unnecessary trade-offs or cost of doing business if it allows mechanisms of backdoor privatisation on our national energy sector.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I congratulate the Minister of State on her new role and wish her the best in it. I thank the Labour Party for this very important and extensive motion. Any time we get to debate energy, climate action and the cost of living in this Dáil Chamber it is very worthwhile. I have just read through the amendment the Government has tabled. I understand the normal process is that the speechwriters do the speeches but I ask the Minister of State to cast a critical eye over it because the amount of spin in the document is incredible. The one thing we need to be with the public is honest when it comes to not only the risks of climate change but also the level of climate action. If the Government gives the impression that all of these actions are happening and all of this momentum and change is happening and it is not actually happening, there is a huge risk from a climate and environmental perspective. This is such an important area because there is also a huge level of risk when it comes to social cohesion. We have seen that in Ireland to a small degree, but when we look at the UK, the US or other countries in Europe, there is a real divide in some societies and climate action is being blamed and utilised as the scapegoat for that divide, and it is not. The reason that divide is happening is because a huge number of people feel they are being left behind and there is a focus on the big players - the big corporates and businesses - and they are the ones benefiting from high energy prices and any of the climate measures. A lot of people are feeling very left behind. When they go to blame someone or point the finger because they cannot afford electricity or food or there is no bus to bring them to work, unfortunately we have elements, very bad actors in some areas, who will point to climate change and say it is the reason, that it is a made-up issue and Government is using it to essentially leave them behind. Climate action

is not just about the environment or living more sustainably; there is such an important element of social cohesion that needs to be dealt with. That is why we have all of those discussions about just transition and the importance of that. That language has fallen off the table and I am sort of happy about it to be honest, because most ordinary people have no idea what just transition is. Ultimately, when the Government is doing its policies it needs to make sure people are not being left behind.

If we use, for example, how people are experiencing and being impacted by the proliferation of data centres, in their real lives the way people are being impacted is through pricing. People have seen their electricity prices go up. There are a whole lot of other elements to it as well; I understand that. However, data centres are absolutely increasing prices. The demand placed on our electricity grid on the markets is pushing up prices. We heard this as recently as last week, when Friends of the Environment gave a presentation with a really in-depth analysis that showed that household bills have gone up by €360, primarily in the time between 2022 and 2024. That was purely based on the additional demand put on by data centres.

We also have the costs of keeping our grid updated and robust because, obviously, a number of years ago there were major issues with grid security. We were looking at the potential for blackouts and brownouts. As a result, we had to spend a lot of money bringing in temporary generators. That was primarily because we saw this huge increase in data centres and our grid was not able to cope. The PR6 at the ESB – the €18 billion or €19 billion that has been put into the grid by the ESB – is not to support the grid for future data centre development; it is only to support and keep the grid robust for existing data centre development. Anything additional we put on it is going to cause problems.

Professor Hannah Daly, a professor in sustainable energy at UCC, was in Leinster House last week and she has written a blog post on data centres and the risks. I do not know if the Minister of State has read it, but I would certainly advise her to take a look at it. Particularly in her role, it will be really important that she get independent advice in relation to the impact. Professor Daly states the CRU estimates there is potentially 5.8 GW to come on stream. She goes through all the risks. It is quite stark from both cost and demand perspectives.

The motion states 80% of the energy will have to be from renewable sources, but there is six years before that has to be hit. Even the fact that 20% does not have to be from renewable sources is crazy when we are trying to move away from fossil fuels. If a target is to be in place, it should be 100%. There are data centres currently operating now which are claiming they are essentially 100% renewable because they are buying credits from Germany in relation to biomethane. There are all of these loops built into this system which will cause us problems down the road. There will be difficulties with it.

In 2021, the Social Democrats asked for a moratorium on data centres. We called for one because we said it is really important to get our facts right on this. We need to know how many we can have and at what cost. How many can we afford from price, energy demand and climate perspectives? I so wish the previous Government had taken the opportunity to pause back in 2021. If it had done so, we would be in a much better position now. If a tree was not planted 20 years ago, the next best time to plant it is now. I ask the Minister of State to take a really close look at this now and do the analysis. This is a risk we cannot afford to take.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I congratulate the Minister of State. We need to cut through the AI hype. I talk a lot about artificial intelligence in this Chamber and at committee meetings. It is often about the policy of its use, its governance and so on, but it is absolutely vital that we also look at the infrastructure that props up this technology.

Time and again, the conversations around regulation, energy and infrastructure are muddled by a lack of understanding of what AI is and the attempts of AI companies to associate energy-guzzling generative AI, which by and large has little social benefit, with positive AI technology such as weather prediction. This is a clear effort to cause confusion and to imply that all data centres are there for positive advancements when we know that the vast majority of these centres have nothing to do with science or social uses but are there for private companies generating slop and profit on the Internet. That is why these "gotcha" arguments of, "Well don't you use email? Don't you use websites?" do not wash because email and web hosting processing demands pale in comparison to the behemoth of generative AI data centres. It was put best by Professor Hannah Daly at the Oireachtas Committee on Artificial Intelligence last week when she said that the question is whether unregulated growth of that industry follows logically from the fact we need it and that the rapid and unmitigated growth of data centres has made the United Nations brand Ireland a cautionary tale.

How is it actually benefiting the average citizen? I do not see a return on investment on this permissive strategy - not in the form of a just transition, not in the form of communities benefiting and not in terms of jobs. The recent KPMG report commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment exposed this when, in trying to get creative with the numbers, it went too far. The dogs on the street know that 870,000 is not a credible figure of jobs attributable to data centres despite what that report tried to claim. In doing so, it highlighted the problem we face when it comes to the regulation of big tech for the common good, which is that these decisions are led totally by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and that our policy on whether tech practices or tech infrastructure are good for society lacks any consideration or nuance beyond "what the industry wants, we must provide". That is not an industrial policy. That is the result of a complete lack of backbone or consideration of what the needs of our industry, communities, infrastructure and economy actually are.

We are facing a situation where our energy use is increasing at a time when it should be decreasing. That cautionary tale told about Ireland is one where we are failing to displace fossil fuels as a source of energy because all of our new renewable energy is being eaten up by an ever-hungrier network of data centres. If we do not drastically change course, it will cost us and our children their future. We need a moratorium on data centre expansion. We cannot continue to expand our energy use and think there will be no consequences. We do not have a planet B.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: If ever there was a Government policy that was just so reckless and servile, it is this policy of welcoming and allowing data centres at the cost of our environment but also now at the cost of the pockets of ordinary working-class people. For the second month in a row, Ireland has the highest electricity prices in Europe. They are 52% higher than the European average. The average household in the country is paying around €400 a year more for its electricity compared with the EU average and, incredibly, it pays twice

as much per unit of electricity compared with some of the big data centres and the big companies.

Plans for data centre expansion would see data centres use the same amount of power as every other electricity user in the country combined. They are already using up 22% of all electricity in the country, which is the highest figure in the world. Ireland is now the warning - the bogey man for other countries - in international publications of what not to do. We hear that €400 more a year is being paid for electricity. A total of €360 of that, on average, is estimated to be down to high data centre energy demand. Lower-income households - ordinary working-class people and single parents - are the victims of this because they pay more for energy than other people do. Ireland in particular has been singled out by the UN.

I previously raised the Minister for Climate, Energy and Environment's complete fixation on AI. Apart from the social issues of AI making people less critical and more stupid and causing problems academically, the impact on the environment is massive and it is not worth it. Any attempt to use renewables now is eaten up by the corollary of data centre usage. Ireland will significantly go past its greenhouse gas emission targets. We now have to say that we must stop any more data centres being established but there should also be a levy. These data centres need to be taxed to the hilt to pay for the damage they are doing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Momentum is growing against data centres and the Government's slavish adherence to the policy on demands of big tech because more and more people are seeing the reality of the threats data centres pose to our environment, our energy supply and the cost of living. In our alternative budget last year, People Before Profit proposed a €1 billion energy levy on data centres to fund a €500 universal electricity credit. The effect would be to charge data centres roughly the same amount for electricity as households pay. At the moment, they pay half as much per unit as households do.

On top of that, data centres are driving up electricity prices for everybody by pushing the system into peak rates more often through their constant insatiable demand for energy. Data centres are the main reason that standing charges are being increased to fund investment in the grid, which they have completely maxed out in the greater Dublin area. The consequence is that housing developments are being stalled because they cannot connect to the grid, Dublin Bus has not been able to charge new electric buses for up to three years and vital public transport projects like DART+, MetroLink and Luas are being delayed as a consequence. The ESB has warned that MetroLink construction and further electrification of Dublin Bus will have to rely on "timed electricity connections" to avoid winter peak loads. A briefing note prepared for the Government's major project governance oversight group in April 2025 warned that there was insufficient power in the ESB network to support DART+. Then we hear that funding for DART+ South West and Luas Finglas has been delayed until 2030. It does not take a genius to figure out why. There is no point in building the system if we cannot power it because data centres are using up all of the electricity. It is embarrassing enough for the Government not to be able to charge a few hundred buses but entire train and Luas lines would expose the Government's incompetence completely.

At a meeting last week of the Oireachtas Committee on Artificial Intelligence, we heard that we have no chance of achieving our emissions target because of Government policy to allow unfettered expansion of data centres as long as they build their own power plants. This means

privatising our electricity supply, enabling big tech to use fossil fuels indefinitely to power them and smashing through our climate targets. Despite the Government's bluster and despite the nonsense about almost 900,000 jobs, listening to the industry itself, it is clear that it employs about 1,800 people in this country. A giant empty box is coming for your job and the Government calls it progress.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this important and timely motion. Global digital transformation and accelerated AI technology adoption are driving a rapid expansion of data centres in Ireland. While data centres are one part of the infrastructure for business operations, they pose significant social and environmental concerns. Ireland's current power grid cannot support the energy demands that data centres require. We know that they use up a tremendous amount of energy, currently at 22% of Ireland's electricity. Our current available renewable capacity cannot meet this demand, which is only going to result in higher prices for consumers. It is described as the data centre effect. The average household paid €360 extra in additional energy costs between 2015 and 2023 due to the pressure that data centres are exerting on the grid. It is estimated that consumers could pay up to €644 extra between 2025 and 2034 if data centres continue to expand at this rate.

The current solution to reduce grid strain is to use dispatchable generation or back-up generators. These generators are often gas-powered, release emissions and, therefore, undermine our climate goals. It is most likely that there will be even more reliance on these generators in the future as data centre infrastructure continues to outpace renewable infrastructure. In 2022, my colleague Eamon Ryan introduced the Government's statement on the role of data centres and the result of this was that there were no new data centre connections to the grid after that intervention. Yet now, through the large energy user action plan, the Government is actively trying to source more AI data centres in our country. On 2 June, just a few weeks ago, a 600 acre data centre was granted planning permission by Westmeath County Council. That data centre is expected to rely primarily on gas-powered solid oxide fuel cells and solar power.

The data centre, and this is from its own application, is expected to omit 493,000 tonnes of CO₂ per annum, again actively undermining our climate goals. As well as the energy concerns, there is also deep concern about the amount of water used. Right now, it is about 1.3% of Uisce Éireann's annual water but that is only set to grow.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and support this motion and fully support the points made previously by my Independent and Parties Technical Group colleagues. I want to take the opportunity to highlight a number of retrofit and insulation issues affecting middle and low income families across the country. The warmer homes scheme available to families in receipt of fuel allowance is an excellent scheme in itself but it is underfunded and under-resourced. This results in a huge backlog of applications, with it to increase due to more families qualifying for key social welfare payments which underpin the scheme. Currently, it takes two years to complete a retrofit under the scheme. It takes two visits and 14 months to do the survey and it takes a further ten to 12 months to have the works commenced and completed. That timescale is obviously unacceptable and the scheme needs to be resourced and funded to ensure retrofitting is completed in at least 12 months.

In regard to the retrofitting of local authority council houses, the National Oversight and Audit Commission has confirmed the target to retrofit 36,500 social housing units to B2 standard by 2030 will not be met, and not by a long shot. The target is low anyway and lacks ambition but the report states that even this low target is compromised by insufficient financial resources and by the operation of the scheme on an annual rather than multi-annual basis.

The third issue is the lack of access by middle income families to various energy efficiency schemes. Representatives from the SEAI recently told the Oireachtas climate committee that cash upfront is a serious issue for middle income families, who have neither excess cash nor access to cash to avail of these schemes. After Government grants, a retrofit can cost up to €43,000 per house. This is leading to a green divide, where homes in affluent areas have access to the schemes as they have moneys and funds available for these upfront costs. I urge the Minister to take these issues on board and to act on them urgently as they are affecting families right across the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: There is one point in this motion that nobody in this House can dispute. Irish families and small businesses are being crippled by electricity costs and if anyone doubts the scale of that crisis, they only need to look at the figures. At the end of last year, nearly 320,000 households in this country were behind on their electricity bills. That is roughly one in seven homes struggling to keep up. The average amount owed is around €466 per household. That has gone to over €500 now and is rising. That is the reality facing people - not theory and not projections. What happened? At the same time the Government removed electricity credits from the most recent budget, credits that had already been scaled back year after year.

People will remember that in budget 2023, households received €600 in electricity credits. That dropped to €450 the following year and then to €250 in budget 2025, paid in two instalments. This year, there was nothing. At the very moment when families are under the most pressure, support has been taken away. It is no surprise arrears have surged. Our energy system is under serious pressure. Our grid is stretched. Our reliance on gas remains far too high and the delivery of offshore wind and renewables has been far too slow.

That is not the fault of ordinary people. That is a failure of Government planning and delivery over many years. We hear a lot in this House about climate being blamed for flooding, and yes weather patterns are changing and we accept that. However, before we blame everything on climate, we need to look at what is happening on the ground. We have walked away from the basics. The ditches are blocked, the drains are choked and the rivers and waterways are all not being maintained any more. Years ago, this work was done as a matter of routine and it made a difference. Now people are tied up in red tape. They are afraid to clean a ditch or clear a drain and the result is simple; water has nowhere to go. When water has nowhere to go, it floods homes, farms and roadways. Yes, we can talk about climate but let us talk about common sense. Start by clearing the ditches, maintaining the channels and doing the basic work we know prevents flooding because until we do that, we are only dealing with half the problem.

Independent Ireland would be slow to support a blanket moratorium on data centres. That approach risks jobs, undermines investment and sends out a damaging signal that Ireland is closed for business. Data centres are part of the modern economy. They bring employment,

tax revenue and opportunity, particularly to regional Ireland. The problem is not growth; the problem is that the infrastructure has not kept pace. Nowhere is that clearer than in our approach to EVs. We are telling people they must transition. We are setting targets and deadlines but the reality on the ground is that the system is simply not ready. The public EV charging infrastructure in this country is not fit for purpose; it is far from it. It is too complicated. There are too many providers, too many apps and too many accounts. People are expected to download app after app just to charge their car. When they finally arrive at a charging point, it is out of service, blocked or so slow it is practically useless. That is happening every day across the country. Then we ask why people are reluctant to make the switch. If you want people to move to electric vehicles, the system must work and it must be simple. Anyone should be able to pull up, plug in, tap their debit or credit card and charge their car. It should be as simple as buying fuel with no apps, no confusion and no barrier. As a matter of fact, the only place I have been told about in Ireland - there probably are more but people have checked it out fairly well - is in Schull in Jeremy Brosnan's Centra. You drive up, plug in the car, tap your debit card and the car gets charged. It is simple and all people want. They do not want complications. We are nowhere near that standard around the rest of Ireland.

There is also a rural reality here that cannot be ignored. In many parts of rural Ireland, there are simply not enough charging points, if any at all. People are being asked to change but without the infrastructure to support them. That is not a fair ask. A lot of people, particularly older people or those not comfortable with technology, are completely turned off by the system as it stands. It is a major barrier to progress.

The same disconnect applies when we talk about solar energy. Families are being told and encouraged to install solar panel and want to do so but the numbers simply do not stack up. For a typical household to install a system that would truly meet all their needs, powering their home and perhaps an electric car, they are looking at a cost of €20,000. What is the grant? It is €1,800. It is probably the lowest in Europe, the UK and Scotland. That is not an incentive. It is nowhere near enough. It does not bridge the gap for ordinary families.

Again, the issue is not willingness. The issue is that supports do not match reality. If we had invested properly in grid infrastructure, in renewables and in practical supports, we would not be in this position today. Instead of shutting down investment through moratoriums, we should be building capacity. We also have serious concerns about the proposals for new levies on data centres. We know how this works. Costs introduced in one part of the system often end up being passed on elsewhere.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Rural Ireland is bearing the brunt of the country's energy policy and getting very little in return. In Mayo and right across the west of Ireland, planning applications for huge wind turbines are landing at massive rates. These structures are not small. Indeed, they are bigger than the Dublin Spire, Big Ben and the Statue of Liberty. Community consultation is simply inadequate. In some cases, it is not being done properly at all and it is restrictive in terms of who can access or engage with developers. These are the communities who are responsible. These are the communities who will live with these turbines for decades to come. The truth is that the Government has resisted Aontú's calls for planning guidelines. The guidelines are 20 years out of date. The Minister knows this.

Turbines are being situated dangerously close to families and their homes and it is unacceptable. It is unacceptable at a time when applications are coming at such a significant rate. Right across Mayo, planning applications are being submitted. Meanwhile, the Minister is sitting on the guidelines that are 20 years out of date. It is unacceptable. We have called for updated guidelines and, indeed, many other parties have called for them. It is only fair. The Minister should provide updated guidelines for families in relation to wind turbines.

Meanwhile, households right across Ireland are paying the highest electricity costs in Europe. More than 500,000 energy bills are now in arrears and data centres are the primary driver of this. They are causing an inflationary aspect to household bills.

The bigger issue in relation to all of this is that the EPA has told us in black and white that even if all of the planned measures are delivered, Ireland will achieve a reduction of 23% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and not the target of 51%. The target is out of reach and has been for a number of years. Under the EU's effort-sharing regulation, that gap comes with significant fines. I have raised a number of times on the floor of the Dáil that these are fines the Minister simply ignores. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council have outlined that we are going to face fines of somewhere in the region of €6 billion to €26 billion. This has been confirmed the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Minister can smile but I have asked him what his plan is and he has no plan to address this and no plan to provide protection for rural communities. It is simply unacceptable.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In its countermotion the Government mentions that it is close to meeting the first carbon budget, according to EPA projections. There are several issues raised, including that any emissions that exceed this budget have to be deducted from the second budget. There is also the fact that, as others have mentioned, the five-year budget will not be anywhere near being reached. It will be exceeded in all major sectors, tracking well above the legal limits by 2030 targets. It will be at just half of the required 51% national reduction target going past 2030. This is absolutely inadequate. We are the laggards of Europe.

We are trying to push data centres. We will have huge revenue potential down the line from data centres. We are an ideal location but only if we have surplus capacity. As I have said in multiple debates, we are not investing in getting the offshore wind we already have up and running, we are not investing in tidal energy, and we are not investing in solar energy or wave technology as countries such as Denmark are. We could be leaders. We could have the deep-sea ports preplanned. We could be exporting twice our own requirements and have all of this extra spare capacity, through converted hydrogen and battery storage, to operate the data centres and make good revenue to pay for a good social system and a good education system in this country. We have to put the medium-term investment in now. We have to put our surplus into a short-term, what I would call wartime, effort. We have to ramp up massively over the next ten years. It will cost us money and we may even have to borrow money but the returns would be infinitesimal and we have to do it. Otherwise we will not meet our climate change targets and we will put our people in jeopardy.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I want to be clear from the outset that I agree with the sentiment of what the Labour Party is trying to do and I believe the frustration is real. The Minister is well aware that energy is one of my key priorities. Irish families pay too much and it is very clear that data centres are consuming an ever-increasing share of our electricity. These are facts

and they do deserve to be addressed. However, I will not support the motion and there are several reasons for this. The moratorium on data centres would cost Irish jobs and the development of our country. These are real jobs, real wages and real families in my area. We cannot simultaneously say we care about the cost of living but then vote to put people's jobs at risk.

Deputies in favour of the motion really need to tell their constituents that they are against section 7 of the Critical Infrastructure Bill. What would happen to the hospital in their ward, the housing development that needs a wastewater connection and the water treatment plant that every home and growing town needs? Without section 7, every one of these will be exposed to legal challenges, which we are all aware have cost the State billions. The existing legislation is consistent with the climate energy pact because the EU climate law still applies in full and the environmental impact assessment directive still applies. What section 7 does is remove the legal uncertainty. Removing section 7 will not help the climate but it will help lawyers, which I know some Deputies may have been in a previous life.

The problem is not that data centres are here but that they are running on the wrong energy. Today I will introduce a Bill that is trying to fix this, and I welcome the Minister's engagement on it. It would give data centres, SMEs and community energy the ability to use renewable energy more easily. I will welcome the development and progression of the Bill. While we are talking about the cost of living, thousands of apartment dwellers are waiting for solar plug-in to be legalised. I know there is an ISO standard that needs to be removed. Will the Minister do a pilot scheme for new-build social and affordable housing, whereby solar plug-in can be installed by Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council, in conjunction with an inverter and battery, and save people money immediately?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: This motion is mad. It states that Dáil Éireann recognises that the Government will further increase carbon emissions by lifting the Dublin Airport cap, promoting unsustainable housing and economic development and by no longer prioritising public transport and active travel investment over road construction. The message must go out loud and clear from here today that the Labour Party is against tourism and economic development, it is against house building and it is against the construction of roads. This is a very clear message by the Labour Party here in the motion.

Targets underpinned by the climate action Bill, which 129 TDs across all parties voted for, are wholly unachievable and always were. The people paying the price for unachievable targets are not politicians in Dublin but farmers, families with two cars who are working hard, small business owners and rural communities who have no alternatives. The Government is removing the cap for Dublin Airport. What will this do? It will help us an awful lot. It will bring more people into the country. It will bring economic development here. When I see the Minister prioritising road safety, saving lives by spending money on roads and infrastructure, I welcome it. I see the Government targeting housing and then a motion like this comes along trying to undermine this type of work. That is why I say the motion is mad and makes no sense. Again, let the message go out clearly that the Labour Party is against tourism and economic development, it is against house building and it is against the construction of roads. This makes absolutely no sense to me or to the people from Kerry whom I represent, whom I want to continue to fight for, argue for and be there to support. What the Labour Party is trying to do

in undermining the work that is being carried out is absolutely crazy and insane and I do not agree with it. I certainly will not support it in any shape or fashion whatsoever.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I just want to say that the Member did not speak to our motion.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad to be able to speak on the motion today. I know the Minister is walking a tightrope and it is very difficult to get the proper balance. We have been waiting for the wind energy guidelines for 21 years. Fine Gael promised two elections ago that we would have them in 12 months. Councils are at a loss. It is the same with the solar situation. The best of land in the country is being taken over by solar. With regard to data centres, the United Nations, which I do not often pay a lot of attention to, is even issuing a cautionary tale about us in Ireland for allowing data centre growth to run far ahead of our energy and water capacity. When the UN is warning us, something must be amiss. We need to cut our cloth according to our measure.

I am not opposed *per se* to data centres or any other development. However, I am against what is going on with the huge amount of electricity they use and the great need they have for water to cool their systems and everything else. The proposed Shannon pipeline is like a runaway train. It will be a second children's hospital. It is to bring water to Dublin when there are plenty of aquifers and water in the vicinity of Dublin without having this mad project. I call it madness. It will do huge ecological damage to the mid-west. Uisce Éireann has gone off without planning and without any licence from the EPA or anybody else and has spent a fortune compensating farmers and paying them 25% upfront. Does Uisce Éireann have some inner contact line whereby it gets the nod to go ahead and do this and to hell with planning, An Coimisiún Pleanála and anything else and it can do this and start spending money? It is out of control completely.

As I said with regard to data centres, people are trying to heat their homes, the cost of living is going up and data centres are having an inordinate impact. Most of them are in the capital city, which is bursting at the seams. We need more balanced regional development. Several speakers referred during the motion to the home support scheme for ordinary families to try to make savings on their energy and do something for the climate and have retrofits in a timely fashion so they can avail of them.

No families have €45,000 in their back pockets that they can dish out to pay for these retrofits, so there is a lot to do. I know it is a hard balancing act, and the Minister is doing his best, but we have to get a better balance and listen when people like the United Nations tell us that capacity here is all wrong and we have too many eggs in one basket. We must try to redress that and have more balanced regional development as well.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this topic, even though I have only a couple of minutes. I could talk for a whole day about it. I do not agree with many people here. The climate is changing but the climate has always changed. It is not man-made. We are not causing it here on this Earth. The climate changed back over the centuries, and those are the facts. History will show that to us at different times. We had periods of severe cold and severe rain. A famine in the 1740s was caused by two years of incessant rain, when one third of our population and most of our cattle and sheep died. If we all walked off

the island of Ireland today, it would only mean a difference of 0.13% of 1% in the whole worldwide context. That is another fact. With all these ideas that the Government has about the climate, I honestly say that no human being here can have any effect in changing the climate and never will.

We have the highest ESB charges now simply because we are told we cannot buy turf or burn fossil fuels, yet Germany has opened two new coalmines. It is in Europe as well. I wonder what the Minister will say about that.

In 2019, there was a vote here on the targets for 2030. I believe I was the only TD who voted against those targets at that time because I knew then, as I know now, what it would mean to hard-working people. It would put pressure on them financially. This is what the Government is trying to do now in every sector because of climate change. Massive amounts of taxpayers' money are being spent to address this issue, but it will fail because it is not possible to change the weather. No matter what we do here, we do not have the power to change the weather. We cannot do lesser things or things closer to home or to the needs of the people. We cannot achieve those things.

I will just mention one thing. We do not have enough houses for the number of people coming into the country and the way our population is exploding. Then there is this carbon tax. People are being charged massive amounts of carbon tax. Farmers should be completely exempt because they are sequestering more carbon than they are emitting. Growing grass sequesters carbon. They are planting hedges and trees, and they are sequestering more carbon.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke): Go raibh maith agat. I thank an Teachta.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are still being charged carbon tax. They are using AdBlue. They are doing everything possible and yet the Government is charging them carbon tax.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Labour Party for tabling this motion, and I will deal with elements of it in my response.

I have been struck by many of the responses, many of which have been constructive and well-meaning. Others have not been. Turning specifically to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, climate change is real and is happening now. The science is indisputable and climate action is critically important to counter climate change. Climate action is also important because it affords us great opportunities here. There are great opportunities in the context of climate action in relation to new technologies for the electrification of our country, which will make us more competitive and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Even if one were to argue, therefore, which I never would, that fossil fuels do not impact the climate, which they do, Ireland is still too dependent on imports of fossil fuels. To state the very obvious, we are an island nation. We have low interconnection rates. We import 80% of our gas from our nearest neighbour. We produce the other 20%. What do we need to do? We need to accelerate the deployment of renewables. I will return to this aspect later in my remarks.

We have tabled a countermotion. I do not do that lightly, but there are elements in the Labour Party motion that I profoundly disagree with. It is interesting that things like the airport

cap were thrown into this debate. As someone who represents an airport constituency, I remember a time when the Labour Party was a supporter of airport workers. Even in advance of the debate on the Dublin Airport (passenger capacity) Bill 2026, it is clear that this is not a side that the Labour Party is taking any more, which is regrettable. If I take the example of the airport, and I will move on to data centres and ICT in a moment, 130,000 direct and indirect jobs derive very good incomes from Dublin Airport alone. We are growing Shannon, Cork and Ireland West airports as well, so it is not just one instead of the other. I do not think anyone can argue that an 18-year-old planning condition is appropriate and serves Ireland well right now. I agree with much of what Deputy Michael Healy-Rae said in that regard. I ask people to reflect on this issue. It does not set aside environmental considerations either. That is purely incorrect in the motion. I ask people to look at the legislation. An Coimisiún Pleanála will be the organisation that evaluates the environmental assessments and not me as the Minister. This change needs to happen if we are serious about growth in jobs and protecting our connectivity and competitiveness. This needs to happen, and I would warn against a move towards populism in that regard.

On energy pricing, I was at the Energy Ireland conference earlier, so the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, took the first half of the debate but I listened to it on the way back. Many Deputies threw out this figure of there being 500,000 households in energy arrears. That is not correct. What was reported on RTÉ was not correct, and it took it quite a while to even correct it. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities actually called that out. Arrears are too high and energy prices are too high, and we need to get them down. I do not dispute that at all. All that has been done to get that 500,000 figure, though, is adding the figures for gas arrears to those for electricity arrears. Unfortunately, many households are across both, so saying 500,000 households are in arrears is just not true, and the record should be corrected on this. It should have been corrected on our national broadcaster but it was not because it did not suit its narrative. Everyone in arrears is counted from the first day, from day one when a bill is not paid. When we look at the figures for those who have been 90 days in arrears, and we do need to help people to get out of that situation, we are looking at about 8% of electricity customers, which amounts to 184,000 households. It is still too high, absolutely, but let us deal with the facts and not go down that route of effectively looking at the bigger figure because it will get more prominence.

It is good that we are having a discussion, particularly on data centres and ICT. It is a pity Deputies Paul Murphy and Copping are not here. They are always giving very constructive remarks here in the Chamber. They opposed the climate Act, by the way, which has been able to ensure that Ireland is moving towards meeting those climate obligations that we have.

On data centres, Ireland is not a large industrial nation. We do not make cars or military equipment and do not have large industrial companies. We do, however, have a substantial ICT sector employing just short of 200,000 people. It is around 185,000 people. The figure is 19,000 people in the data centres, but they support all those other jobs at the leading edge of technology. Many of our young people are the best in the world at this. We need an infrastructure that supports that, and data centres are part of that. When people say 22% of our energy is used by data centres, that is correct. If we went to Germany, however, we could ask how much energy there is used for large industrial developments, including car manufacturing and all those various things.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: How many jobs are attached to it?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is why we brought forward the large energy user action plan and the decision of CRU in relation to large energy users. It is a plan-led approach going forward. Any new data centre connections will have to be on the basis of using 80% renewables - new renewables, not existing renewables. This idea that existing renewables will be used up is not correct. We need that plan-led approach. I support the ICT sector, new jobs and new technologies. It is good for us as a country and a small, open economy. We cannot be complacent about that. The idea that we would pull the shutters down again on this area is not correct, but it has to be done in a planned way. I agree with many contributors from the Opposition who have said this. The question now is how we can continue to protect families and businesses in the short term.

Retrofitting is critical. Many people, including Deputy Healy, were talking about middle-income families being able to access grants. That is why I have specifically brought forward the retrofitting passport for households and broken down the grants such that we are not just doing deep retrofits but are allowing for the inclusion of windows and doors, attic insulation, wall cavity insulation and all those different things, including solar at scale as well. If we go back to when we started retrofitting, about 268,000 homes across the country have now been retrofitted to different degrees.

That protects them to a large degree against future price shocks, reduces their energy usage, reduces their emissions and makes them warmer and more efficient. We need to accelerate that. In the first quarter of this year, 12,000 homes were upgraded under the scheme, including 1,500 under the warmer homes scheme for those at risk of energy poverty. Since the formation of this Government, 70,000 homes have been retrofitted.

The purpose of the change in the grants is to ensure that households can access them. We have seen an absolutely incredible response, with over 50,000 applications in the first four months of this year, including significant applications for solar. We want to do more with regard to batteries. That is the position on households.

Five thousand businesses have been retrofitted. Of course, we can do more, but we are targeting 73,000 households to be retrofitted this year. It will be the largest number done in any given year. We are actually building up a really good domestic sector and domestic expertise, with new Irish companies, particularly in our rural areas. This really speaks to regional development.

What are we doing at a national level regarding our grid and energy? We have now reached a really significant figure of 8 GW of renewable energy integrated into our system. Yes, of course we need to do more. One gigawatt powers about 500,000 homes. That is what we are talking about. Our wind capacity has doubled in ten years. We have added 5 GW of renewables in just a ten-year period. The figure for solar will probably be 3 GW by the end of this year alone, with over 1 GW from rooftop solar. We want to continue to support households in this regard.

I am considering measures with regard to domestic batteries. I have asked the ESB to examine the whole area of balcony or plug-in solar, as it is called. These are things that are critically needed.

What is also critically needed is investment in our grid. For argument's sake, I will use the example of a capital project that should have been completed already and that needs to be completed without delay, namely, the North-South interconnector. There have been four reviews of the interconnector, including in respect of whether it should be underground or overground. The reviews are done now. There are no more and it needs to happen. Three local authorities need to discharge the planning consents and we need to get building it. I returned from a conference this morning with my colleague in the North, Caoimhe Archibald. The Executive in the North is in absolute agreement on this as well. This one piece of infrastructure will do more for the resilience of our electricity grid than any other project, and that needs to start. I expect cross-party support, from both the Government and Opposition, to commence work on this and to deliver the project by 2031, which is still exacting. That will deliver affordability.

On offshore wind, the target was 5 GW by 2030, as Deputy Gogarty mentioned. There have been planning consent delays all the way through. We hope to have positive planning decisions on two projects this year. My target is to get them to construction this year. That would be a game-changer for us. I absolutely agree in this regard. In the meantime, we need more onshore wind and more onshore solar.

To answer the questions some Deputies have raised about the wind energy guidelines, the revised guidelines will be published and made available this year. I get the point in that regard. The revised guidelines will be produced this year through the work I am doing with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne.

I thank Labour Party colleagues for the motion. This has been a decent debate. I will not be accepting the motion but I look forward to continuing to work with the Deputies on a constructive basis.

Deputy George Lawlor: Listening to the Minister's comments about the arrears issue, I noted he turned it into a maths equation. I cannot believe how disconnected he is from the reality on the ground. If he needs another reminder, we had fuel protests some time ago. The entire nation was convulsed. Even the former Minister of State Deputy Michael Healy-Rae was so convulsed by it that he stood up and said he had no confidence in the leadership of the Government. He went out and held his fist up in support of the protesters. This morning, of course, he is back in love with the Government as he tries to get himself back into some sort of ministerial role.

I am very glad to support the Labour Party motion, my party's motion, because it speaks the truth that can no longer be ignored. Of course, data centres have a crucial role to play in much of the economic development of this country, but there is no use having them if, in a few years' time, people will go home from working in companies that have benefited from them and there is no electricity to turn their lights on. This has happened in other parts of the world. We should learn from the experience of other areas.

The evidence on the climate is stark. Last month, temperatures in Ireland in May exceeded 30°C. If that is not an indication of climate change, what is? I do not know what weather they have in Kerry, but Deputy Danny Healy-Rae seems to have no confidence whatsoever that climate change is taking place. He should say that to those in places like Enniscorthy and other parts of the country that are decimated almost year in, year out as a result of it.

A recent UN report described Ireland as a cautionary tale for the environmental impact of data centres. That should alarm every single Member of this House. We now have over 22% of our electricity consumed by data centres, and this is projected to rise to 30% by 2030, and potentially to an unbelievable 55% if growth continues unchecked. That would mean data centres would be using more electricity than every home, farm, small business, hospital and school in the country combined.

The Minister spoke about retrofitting. Retrofitting would be a most welcome addition to every home in the country. However, when you ask people to come up with €30,000, €40,000 or €50,000 in matching funding, you might as well be asking them for €1 million. They just do not have it. It is too expensive for ordinary decent working people to invest in. They do not have the money. One of the things I have proposed in the past is a fair deal-type scheme for retrofitting, whereby the Government would invest to ensure the people have access. There is no use having a great scheme if people cannot access it. There is a great scheme, but you have to have tens of thousands of euro in addition to the grant.

The Government's own policies are making the situation worse. The CRU's large energy user connection policy, the private wires legislation and the proposed LNG terminal all point in the same direction: more fossil fuels. The Climate Change Advisory Council has already warned that all new renewable energy is being swallowed up by new data centre demand. Where there are vast solar farms, and there is one in Gusserane in Wexford, people have no real problem; however, they do have a problem in a very rural area where 100 battery energy storage system, BESS, batteries are being installed, each the size of a container. We have to look into this again.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank my colleague Deputy Ahern for introducing this really important and timely motion. It is frankly shambolic that, more than six months into 2026, we still have yet to see a national climate action plan. That speaks volumes about this Government and its commitment to climate mitigation in this country. Instead of a Government prioritising clean, cheap energy for the many, we have had to introduce this motion because of the huge drain that data centres represent to our grid at this point, with real-world consequences for so many households across the country. It is absolutely shambolic that the vast majority of the renewable resources being developed are going towards data centres as opposed to reducing bills and making a meaningful impact on the utility bills of households across the country.

Some of us here accept that there is a role in many economies for data centres. However, when one notes that data centres account for 22% of our energy, and when the Minister for enterprise, Deputy Burke, talks about data centre activity being a strategic opportunity for the Irish economy to bring forward the green transition, nothing could be further from the truth. The reality is that data centres are sucking up the renewable energy generated in the Irish economy, which needs to be going to real households. We need to see a significant change in the approach of the Government. It has become the cornerstone of industrial policy. We need to see that changed for the households I deal with in Dublin Central and the 14% of low-income households that are in dire circumstances. A woman who came to me yesterday had a bill of €1,200 in the middle of May. There are thousands of others like her across the country. I hear the Minister dancing on the head of a pin about 500,000 household energy accounts that are in long-term arrears. That is what we are talking about. For the Minister to get defensive about

the level of arrears in this country is simply wrong. He needs to engage regarding the level of need that exists.

We believe there needs to be a complete change with regard to how we retrofit households across this country. At the moment, those who are able to access the grants have means. The many who do not have those means week in, week out, and who are living from week to week, cannot access the grants. We need to change the whole framework of grants to ensure those in both social and private housing can collectively receive support from the SEAI to make meaningful changes to retrofit their homes and permanently lower their costs.

12 o'clock

We feel that the Minister has his head in the clouds with regard to the true level of the issue out there in terms of the energy bills and arrears that households are dealing with. We want to see a real change in how the Government deals with the level of need out there.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: "The Minister has his head in the cloud computing" is what my colleague might have wanted to say. I thank him for gracing us with his presence for the second half of this debate. It was disappointing that neither he nor the two Ministers of State from the Department were able to turn up for the first half. If nothing else, I am pleased that we have helped to reunite the Healy-Rae brothers over their joint passion for climate denial. It was lovely to see that collectivity back in the House. Do not say the Labour Party never did anything for you, lads.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: You will not change the weather. It would be too late for that.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: We have today been accused of being anti-growth, anti-jobs and even populist in what we are talking about, but Deputies are missing the point. We are legitimately questioning the Government's industrial strategy. Even Deputy Michael Collins accepted that we were relying too much on imported oil and gas. The Government policies, promoted by the Minister, are leading to more oil and gas dependence and undermining any chance we have of energy security, which the Government seems to say is so important. Data centres, car dependence, lifting the Dublin Airport cap and all those measures that the Government is taking are going to lead to increased use of fossil fuels. How is the Government going to square that circle? How is the Government going to continue to grow the economy, which we all want to see, while meeting our legally binding climate, biodiversity and decarbonisation targets?

We are not alone in questioning the continued roll-out of data centres. Just last week, the EU Commissioner for the environment was before the climate committee. She expressed her reservations about the massive amount of water that was going through data centres. She is trying to avoid a water crisis. Communities in the US, including in Pennsylvania and other places, are rising up against huge data centres being built there. Paschal Donohoe, our former finance Minister, in his new role has expressed concerns about the proliferation of data centres across the Continent. How many data centres are enough for this Government? How much are they going to be allowed to add to households' bills.

We are calling for a pause. We are calling for fairness for households and families. We are calling for the Minister to show us his homework on this issue. The Government says it can do it all, so I ask it to show us the climate action plan. In the remarks prepared earlier, we were told that a public consultation on this year's climate action plan was only being opened this week. It is going to be open for another two months. At the time we are debating the budget for 2027, we are only going to be seeing for the first time the climate action plan for this year. That shows us what the Government's priorities are. I ask the Minister to stop undermining the climate Act, bring us the Government's climate action plan and support the Labour Party's motion.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The division is deferred until the weekly division time.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, without amendment.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today, the families of those killed or injured at Creeslough will bring their fight for answers to the Dáil. They will be here to speak to Members later this afternoon and we will make them most welcome. Every one of us remembers that fateful Friday afternoon in October 2022. We remember the reports of an explosion at an Applegreen service station and apartments in the small Donegal village and how that shock later turned to disbelief as we learned that the explosion had claimed the lives of ten people. It took the life of five-year-old Shauna Flanagan Garwe, the youngest victim, and that of her doting father, Robert; 13-year-old James Monaghan and his mother, Catherine O'Donnell; 14-year-old Leona Harper; Jessica Gallagher; James O'Flaherty; Martin McGill; Martina Martin; and Hugh Kelly, aged 59, who was the oldest to die. It was a tragedy that spanned generations and is etched into the collective memory of the people of Donegal. Families were left heartbroken, shattered and bereft.

Both the Taoiseach and I visited Creeslough in the immediate aftermath of the explosion and I certainly will never forget the devastation. No doubt, neither will the Taoiseach. For nearly four years, these families have fought for answers, for the full truth of what happened to their loved ones and how it happened. Families are calling for the establishment of a public inquiry. The Government's response is that a public inquiry cannot be granted while the criminal investigation is ongoing, but the former Garda Commissioner was clear. He stated that it was possible to hold a public inquiry without compromising that investigation.

The families' reasons for wanting a public inquiry are very well-founded. They are concerned that the criminal investigation may not examine regulatory oversight and safety standards, that without a public inquiry, the full circumstances of the disaster may never be established, and that criminal proceedings may take years, thereby delaying answers.

It is wrong that the families had to campaign publicly simply to secure a meeting with the Minister for justice. The Minister, the House will recall, initially spurned the families' request for engagement. That caused real upset, anger and frustration. Finally, after sustained pressure, the Minister changed his mind and met the families on 9 April. Following that meeting, Darragh Mackin, the legal representative of some of the families, stated, "The minister has now confirmed unequivocally to these families that he will consider holding an inquest with a senior judge or the senior coroner, something similar to Stardust". Yet nearly three months later, there has been no progress and the families are left feeling like they are in limbo. That is why they bring their campaign for truth and justice to Leinster House today.

Tá freagraí tuillte ag na teaghlaigh a maraíodh agus a ngortaíodh a ndaoine muinteartha i bpléascadh an Chraoslaigh. Tá siad ag éileamh fiosrúchán poiblí chun an fhírinne iomlán a aimsiú. Caithfidh an Rialtas freagairt dá n-éileamh gan a thuilleadh moille.

These families have endured years without answers about the deaths of their loved ones. What exactly happened? How did it happen? Could it have been prevented? After four years, they need clarity. They need to know what the Government is going to do. Please, will he tell them today that the Government will establish a public inquiry?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I do of course recall the horrific events at Creeslough where ten people died. It was an horrific tragedy in its impact on all those individual families of those who died and on the wider community. It is important that the survivors and families get comprehensive answers, but also accountability and justice. The real issue and debate here are about the best mechanism to get answers, accountability and justice.

It is important that the Garda has been leading a tripartite investigation alongside the Health and Safety Authority and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. Seven arrests have been made in relation to the case. The most recent occurred on 12 September 2025. No charges have been brought at this point. An Garda Síochána submitted a primary investigation file to the Director of Public Prosecutions on 29 September 2025. A supplementary file was submitted in March 2026. The supplementary file includes formal recommendations from An Garda Síochána.

That file is being considered by the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP. We must acknowledge that there is, and in my experience there has always been, an issue with public inquiries while a criminal investigation is under way. It is not as simple as the Deputy articulated. I genuinely think there is an issue. We should allow the criminal justice system to conclude. Quite a significant degree of the case would be in public, if a criminal investigation is to be initiated or if charges are served and so forth. The question is what is the best mechanism to get the full answers about what transpired and to get accountability and justice in the event of any criminal negligence or wrongdoing being found.

All the advice I have received down through the years, and particularly Attorney General advice, has been that inquiries can compromise criminal investigations. However, we are open to an inquiry. If there were a criminal case, or if a case were to be heard in court, it would reveal a substantial amount of information, but if there are ongoing and outstanding issues and concerns that remain after the conclusion of a criminal investigation and an inquest, consideration can be given to the establishment of a public inquiry. I understand that, in April, the Donegal coroner met the families of those who died, explained the inquest process to them

and reiterated to the families that the Garda investigation would take precedence, as it is the most important investigation at the time.

I understand fully. It must be awful to be waiting so long for answers about what transpired. Our thoughts are with the victims, their families and loved ones, the survivors of the tragedy and the wider community of Creeslough, which was so impacted by what happened more than three years ago.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not I, but the former Garda Commissioner, who offered strongly the view and advice that there would be no compromising of the criminal investigation in the holding of a public inquiry. Be that as it may, we are now nearly four years on and the families have to have clarity on the direction of travel from the Government. The Taoiseach seemed to indicate an acceptance of the idea of an inquiry and that the question might be what the outstanding issues are and how they might emerge. Will he meet the families and hear from them directly? Undoubtedly, there is a need for accountability, including criminal accountability in open court. I do not dispute that for a second. The Garda and other statutory authorities must do their jobs, but the families have additional requests and questions. Will the Taoiseach make clear the direction of Government travel and meet the families at a time of mutual convenience?

The Taoiseach: I will make two points. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, met a number of family members and their legal representatives in April of this year. It is unfair to say he spurned them. Generally, the position has always been, when a criminal investigation is under way, that Ministers for justice have to keep a distance from the case, given the separation of powers and so forth. I have no issue with meeting the families and will do so. That is to be worked out.

However, there is a fundamental point, if the Deputy thinks about. Regarding the viability of having a criminal investigation and a public inquiry at the one time, as a layperson - this is not a legal observation - I think it would be problematic and challenging as regards witnesses and so forth. The Government's position is clear. It is that we want to see the criminal justice system bring this to its conclusion. I accept the point about doing so in a timely manner and I am assured that the Director of Public Prosecutions is assessing the file and will make her decision.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Today, we have another damning report from the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, on Ireland's declining water quality. Nearly half of our rivers are ecologically unhealthy. They are dying, as is all the wildlife and biodiversity in them. Our high status water bodies are deteriorating. These rivers are hugely important ecologically. They are refuges for some of our protected species, such as kingfisher and salmon. Almost 10% of these rivers have declined in quality in the past year alone. More worrying, we have seen a net decline of 25% in the number of high quality rivers since 2012. The trend is clear and undeniable, and we all know why it is happening. It is predominantly because of agricultural run-off, with wastewater discharges also being a major cause. These are the facts. That is the science.

We can see the devastating impact of Government policy and inaction. In many cases, that impact will be irreversible. Last week, the journalist Ella McSweeney shared a graph of wild salmon returns to Irish waters in recent decades. From the mid-1970s to today, salmon returns collapsed from 180,000 per year to fewer than 20,000 per year. Ms McSweeney rightly referred to it as extinction in our time. That is what we are witnessing and what the Government is facilitating.

Just last week, there was another major fish kill incident in the River Glyde in County Louth. Drone footage captured 25 km of pollution and tens of thousands of dead fish, including adult and juvenile Atlantic salmon and European eel. The source of the pollution has been confirmed to be agricultural discharge. A file is now being prepared for a potential prosecution, but even if that happens and the prosecution is successful, the fines are so small that they barely register. There is a reason Ireland is now the only country in the EU with a nitrates derogation. It is because the derogation is simply incompatible with good water quality.

The Taoiseach will accuse me and the Social Democrats of attacking farmers, but nothing could be further from the truth. As a party, we just do not peddle obvious falsehoods and inherent contradictions, so we do not claim it is possible to spread disproportionate levels of nitrogen on soil and keep our rivers clean, not when we all know that agricultural run-off is our biggest pollutant. That is not anti-farmer. It is just fact. Does the Taoiseach accept that fact? If not, will he just come out and say it, that protecting our waterways and biodiversity simply is not a priority for the Government?

The Taoiseach: First, it is a priority for the Government. The EPA report has serious findings. There were some positives in terms of some areas that had improved, and I think the report recommends that they be studied more, particularly in the Bannow area, to understand what is being done there that could be replicated elsewhere.

The Deputy will be aware that we have set up a Cabinet subcommittee specifically on water quality to oversee the implementation of the programme for Government commitments. A number of key Ministers are on it.

In terms of investment in water quality, there is an overall national development plan allocation for water. The Government has allocated about €12.2 billion over the next few years for water services and water quality, of which 95% or €11.7 billion is earmarked directly for Uisce Éireann. There is a further €230 million for rural water infrastructure, including group water schemes and so forth. Regarding river, lake and coastal water quality restoration, about €306 million has been allocated to that. A substantial amount of the money for Uisce Éireann is for capital projects, which means upgrading water treatment plants, removing supplies from the EPA remedial action list, eliminating contamination risks, new wastewater treatment plants, upgrading sewerage infrastructure, eliminating untreated sewage discharges into rivers and coastal waters, water mains replacement, pipe upgrades and the national leakage reduction programme. That is the level of investment we are putting in, which is unprecedented. The Deputy cannot say that the Government is not prioritising water quality, because that is one very effective way of improving it.

By the way, I will say in passing that Uisce Éireann needs to dramatically reduce the pollution emanating from its own discharges, half of which are operational issues, which in my view is absolutely unacceptable from a governance and management perspective.

In terms of agriculture, there is a significant issue there. We have never said there was not, but we have again, in a range of initiatives, provided supports for farmers to take additional measures to improve water quality. The farming for water European innovation partnership, EIP, with funding of over €60 million, was launched in 2024 and involved Teagasc, Dairy Industry Ireland and the local authorities water programme, LAWPRO. There were about 5,500 applications from the farming community. Since 2015, close to €200 million has supported investment in manure storage and low-emission slurry-spreading equipment. There are about 54,000 farmers participating in the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES, while the agricultural sustainability support and advisory programme, ASSAP, will continue providing free, confidential water quality advice through to 2027.

Deputy Holly Cairns: In the 1980s, we had over 500 pristine rivers. Now, we have just 20 - actually, it is probably less than that because that is a 2018 figure - so for the Taoiseach to say this is a priority for the Government simply is not credible. Agricultural run-off was responsible for pollution in approximately 1,000 water bodies and the Government consistently fights for a derogation for Ireland to be able to apply more chemical applications to the soil, which inevitably run off into the rivers. Not that we needed further evidence that this was not a priority for the Government, but research has been done on alternatives to applying chemical nitrogen and we know that red clover can be as effective at fixing nitrogen into the soil, and the Government shelved that scheme only last month. The Taoiseach should stand up again and tell me how it is credible to say that the Government is prioritising water quality in terms of agricultural run-off.

The Taoiseach: On the maintenance of the nitrates derogation, we have been availing of the derogation since 2006 primarily because our grass-based farming system is much different to systems across the Continent. About 7,000 farmers have participated in that. By the way, those participating farmers probably have a higher and better record than those outside the derogation.

It is more complex than the Deputy is articulating. In some tillage areas, you can have significant run-off. It is not all dairy. Depending on-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: I did not say it was.

The Taoiseach: Please, I did not interrupt the Deputy. It depends on soil composition and other factors.

I looked at the data on estuaries. There has been quite a significant improvement in terms of phosphorous in estuaries, although not so much in terms of rivers and lakes. It is not where it should be - there is no question around that - but we have a number of fronts. You could end the directive tomorrow morning but that would have huge impacts on the dairy industry and other industries.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has not spelled that out-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: -----and has not even articulated that either.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I have many times.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We actually did today, Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik, please.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Blame the poor farmer.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. No woman who lived under the shadow of the eighth amendment will ever forget its impact. Many of us will recall the X case, the A, B and C case, the PP case and the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar. We all know that there are thousands of other women who were harmed and whose lives were deeply impacted by Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion between 1983 and 2018. Thousands had to travel abroad for necessary healthcare. In later years, many self-medicated with pills purchased online and far too many, in the early years, had to resort to using underground phone lines to get abortion information. As students union president in Trinity in 1989, I will never forget taking calls from women and girls in crisis pregnancy who were seeking the phone numbers of abortion clinics in England and had nowhere else to turn. Women who were panicked and desperate would describe their terror to me. Their bodies were no longer their own. Their futures were no longer their own. Due to the eighth amendment, they had to resort to calling a Trinity student's phone line to ask for help.

After many decades of campaigning, we succeeded in repealing the eighth amendment in 2018 and in legalising abortion here. That was very welcome but far too many women are still travelling. At least 1,500 have done so since 2019. Women across Ireland are still feeling the loneliness of rejection by their own health service, so we must address the barriers to accessing necessary reproductive healthcare. Resources are not the issue. The constitutional ban is gone. What is preventing women from getting the care they need is political squeamishness and cowardice.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is a residual, insulting, patriarchal mistrust of women that forms the basis of the mandatory three-day wait and the Government's unwillingness to engage with the evidence that other change is needed.

I welcome the Taoiseach's confirmation that he will vote in support of the Private Members' Bill to remove the three-day wait on Second Stage tonight, but even if that reform is introduced, it will not be enough. It will not be enough, in particular, for women who receive a devastating diagnosis of fatal foetal abnormality and who still have to travel abroad because of the unnecessarily restrictive provisions in the current law.

The Taoiseach asked barrister Marie O'Shea to lead a review into how abortion care was working in Ireland. Her report was published three years ago. From that moment, he and his colleagues were on notice the system was failing women and that arbitrary and paternalistic processes were failing women and, indeed, doctors. Therefore, we need to go further than removing the mandatory three-day wait. We need urgent reform of the overly restrictive provisions on fatal foetal anomaly and implementation of all the recommendations from Marie O'Shea's report.

The three-day wait is just one serious obstacle and women cannot wait any longer for it to be repealed, so can we have a timeline for this change? None was forthcoming from the Government yesterday. Three years on from the O'Shea review, when will we see all of her recommendations implemented to deliver effective reproductive care and abortion rights?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I recognise that this is a very sensitive issue and I appreciate the Deputy raising it in the manner she has. She campaigned consistently over a long period for the abolition of the eighth amendment. On reflection, in my view, this area should never have been in the Constitution in the first instance. It came out of a particular era in the 1980s.

Be that as it may, the people spoke in the referendum. In the context of that referendum, there was a general debate on what would follow. If we look at what has happened, there is now safe and equitable access to termination of pregnancy services. The Deputy did not really acknowledge that in her presentation. Significant steps have been taken in this regard, including the expansion of hospital services, a sustained increase in community providers - there are about 492 now - the introduction of safe access zones and the continuation of the revised model of care for termination in early pregnancy. These measures have substantially reduced barriers and increased access to services for those who need it.

There is a broad spectrum of sincerely held views on this issue. We should respect that, and the Government respects that insofar as we have a conscience vote on these issues, and we have had. The constituent members - Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Independents - allow for a conscience vote on this. That is what will happen in respect of the vote this evening on the three-day wait period, and we should respect everybody's perspectives and views on this question.

Deputy Mary Butler: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: On the three days, it is interesting if you look at the unplanned pregnancy and abortion care, UnPAC, study commissioned as part of the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. It explored the experiences of individuals accessing abortion services under section 12 of the Act. The findings indicate that the mandatory three-day waiting period was a recurring feature of discussions across the majority of interviews conducted. Participants expressed a range of views regarding its value and impact. While some regarded it as a procedural requirement that had to be navigated, others viewed it as a barrier or deterrent to accessing care. Very few participants considered the waiting period to have been beneficial to their own decision-making process, although some acknowledged that other women might value additional time for reflection. Those availing of the services now

illustrate the degree to which the services have proved to be quite comprehensive in scope and access.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I absolutely acknowledge the progress that has been made since 2018 and since the legislation commenced in 2019, but we still have to acknowledge we are failing far too many women.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Fifteen hundred women is not a small number, and in each situation, there are really difficult circumstances. I am glad that we are seeing a change of heart from the Government on the three-day waiting period after years of insisting that, because it was inserted into draft legislation late in the campaign just prior to the vote, the Government was prevented from looking to abolish it.

I welcome the Taoiseach's change of heart on this but supporting this modest measure through the first stage of a multi-phase legislative process is not enough. We need a timeline for its passage into law, if indeed Government is going to support that.

We also need to see the crucial change on fatal foetal anomaly. I am looking at Marie O'Shea's report. She talks about the challenges in clinical practice and the potentially unfair outcomes for parents arising from implementing the current section. I have spoken with doctors and with women and couples affected. We need to acknowledge the language in that section needs change. That is another crucial part of the reforms necessary to guarantee women and their partners decent healthcare.

The Taoiseach: The timeline for the amendment is subject to the Oireachtas. It is going to go to the committee if it is passed; if it is not, it will not go to the committee. That is where we are. It will be subject to the vote this evening and, subsequent to that, it will be considered by the committee. The Minister has already engaged with Deputy Cullinane on this. The Minister will be co-operative and in constructive mode if the amendment is carried this evening.

We have to be careful when generalising about the reasons every single person had to go to the UK. One of the issues here is every case can be different. Legislative attempts to deal with that could have unintended consequences. I voted against the Social Democrats Bill two weeks ago because I felt it went too far. Legislatively it was imprecise and poor in terms of wanting Government to interfere in clinical decision-making. Maybe that was unintended but it was clearly in what was proposed. This is not simple. We will continue with a conscience vote in terms of the members of our party.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We are living in a rip-off Republic at the moment and the Government is the architect of it. Families are being hammered on a daily basis by ever-burgeoning prices on a range of necessities of life. The price of electricity has risen by 57% in just five years. Ireland has the highest household cost of electricity in the whole of the European Union. The ESB, a semi-State operating on the basis of Government policy, made €636 million in profit last year. It is an incredible fact that a semi-State operating under

Government policy is making supernormal profits at a time when 500,000 people are in energy arrears. That works out at €300 profit for every household in the county.

Last year, according to replies we received to parliamentary questions, the Government made €4.3 billion in fuel taxes. In the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis, it made more in fuel taxes than ever before. Its plan is to increase carbon tax. Carbon taxes were €1.2 billion last year - 80% higher than they were five years ago. They will increase in October this year and every year to 2030. The cost of diesel is 40% more than last year and carbon tax is the main driver of that.

The Taoiseach: It is not the main driver.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is the main driver of the increase in the price of diesel. It is a blind tax. It takes no consideration of people's ability to pay. In actual fact, it hurts those on low incomes the most. This is the most detached Government in generations. It simply does not get it. It does not understand what is happening in people's kitchens - the pressures, the stress, the anger. People are a toothache or a timing belt away from debt. They are living from overdraft to overdraft. People are working all the hours they can get, yet they are struggling to keep the lights on and pay for fuel to commute to work.

We had a warning from the Central Bank last night that inflation is about to get worse. Gabriel Makhlouf said global supply chain pressures intensified in March and April and will put upward pressure on goods prices. It is spreading across all sectors - retail, services, industry, construction. All this has pushed mortgage rates up in recent weeks. Despite all this, despite the crisis families are in, at midnight on 31 July, away from the political spotlight, when Dáil Members are sunning themselves on holiday-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Ridiculous. What kind of populist-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----it is the Government's plan to raise petrol by 27 cent per litre and diesel by 32 cent per litre. That is an incredible thing. Is this not the ultimate two fingers to the people of this county who are in trouble in terms of the cost of living? Will the Taoiseach commit today not to increase fuel taxes on 31 July and to give the people of Ireland some respite?

The Taoiseach: I will be working throughout July. I hope people get a bit of sunshine in July but the way things are going it is a fairly rare occurrence these days.

The issue the Deputy raised is serious. The one issue he studiously avoided mentioning, bar indirectly when quoting the Governor of the Central Bank, was the war in the Middle East. He ignored the two wars - ignored them completely - and he said other things were the drivers of increases in energy prices. The driver has been clearly the war in Iran. Everybody knows that and he ignored it in his presentation.

We acknowledge there is a cost-of-living issue. The Deputy quoted from the Governor of the Central Bank. What did the Governor say? The Deputy can quote it back to me if he

wishes. It was that global pressures will create inflationary pressures here. That is true across Europe.

When the governor of the European Central Bank spoke to the EU Council at the commencement of the war, she said things were going in the right direction. Inflation was coming down to around 2% and growth was happening again in the European economy more widely. The war hit and we saw what happened in Qatar. The positive news is we have, hopefully, a sustainable peace. That will lead and already has led to a reduction in the global market price of oil and gas. That will continue for the rest of the year and into the new year. Even better outcomes could develop from that.

We are very conscious of inflationary pressures. That is why in the budget and in the recent package of €750 million, we intervened to alleviate pressures as much as possible on people. Some reductions in the budget were of a permanent nature. We increased core social protection rates by €10 and introduced a significant targeted increase in child support payments. The fuel allowance was increased and expanded to take in those on the working family payment. A one-adult household on the lone parent payment with one child will see an increase of 9%, that is €1,800, from the Department. A two-adult household will see an increase of just over 8% or €2,300, in their payments.

On the broader issue of those in arrears, there are about 184,000 in arrears on electricity over 90 days. The Department of energy and the Department of Social Protection will further analyse that and see how our resources can be targeted on that issue as they have been in other areas through MABS. We have helped families and so on deal with situations that they are in.

They key issue of course is we have to replace fossil fuels with renewables. The Deputy mentioned the carbon tax. Substantial money goes to farmers - 60% of ACRES is from the Exchequer. Substantial money goes on retrofitting. Since 2019, over €1.8 billion has been spent on retrofitting. We have been able to provide energy upgrades to 268,000 homes. We could not have done that if we did not have the carbon tax in place.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are global pressures. There is no doubt about that, but this country is an outlier in terms of many of the costs people are paying. It is the Government's effect that makes this country an outlier. The Taoiseach talks about the carbon tax. We have shown through parliamentary questions that hundreds of millions of euro from that have gone back into the Exchequer and have never been used. These are parliamentary questions answered by Ministers.

The price of a shopping trolley has increased by 40% since 2021. This is the second most expensive country in the European Union. Groceries cost 15% more than the European average. Average rents have increased by 36% in five years, up to €2,700 in Dublin. In one year over the last five years, the cost of living has gone up €4,000 on average per household. That is the definition of a rip-off. We are one of the richest countries in the world, yet middle-income families are so squeezed as a result of Government decisions. The Taoiseach studiously stopped answering that question. I simply asked him a question. He might address it. Will he stop the increases in taxes on petrol and diesel on 31 July?

The Taoiseach: The Government is monitoring the situation and will make clear to the Dáil before the summer recess our position on that and how we deal with that. The permanent reductions in cost of living the Government has introduced include free schoolbooks at primary and secondary level, expansion of free hot school meals, universal childcare subsidy, €280 new baby grant, hospital inpatient charges abolished, expanded free GP care, free contraception for 17- to 35-year-olds, free HRT. I could go on in terms of the interventions the Government has done to create a permanent reduction in the cost of living, notwithstanding the huge increases.

We have had the Covid pandemic. The supply-chain crisis led to inflation. The war in Ukraine led to inflation and an energy crisis-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The ESB.

The Taoiseach: -----and so did the war in Iran lead to very substantial increases.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is from the dysfunctional system of electricity generation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Increases in supply.

The Taoiseach: We need to get to renewables and we need a better grid, but Deputy Tóibín opposed the North-South connector.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No, we support it; we just think it should be underground.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: You do not support it. You want it delayed.

The Taoiseach: You oppose it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: You oppose it. That is the bottom line.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not built because you want it overground.

The Taoiseach: If we keep doing that in this country, we will have more crises.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: We have to expand the grid and we have to get more renewable energy. That is it-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Just before I move to Other Members-----

The Taoiseach: -----but Deputy Tóibín does not support any of that deep down.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Stand on the back of a trailer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I have two welcomes, one is to Ale, Sallyann, Gail, Emma and Dara from Gorey who are here as guests of Deputy Ó Súilleabháin.

I also welcome the Athboy Tidy Towns group. The Athboy person of the year is present, Lily Mangan. They are in the Gallery and they are guests of Deputy Aisling Dempsey. You are most welcome, everybody.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Keira Keogh: Sunday was a proud, historic and, I think the Taoiseach will agree, unforgettable day when we welcomed Prime Minister Mark Carney to Westport, Mayo but, more importantly, to his ancestral family home in Aughagower village. I thank him and his wife, Diana, as well as the Taoiseach and his wife, Mary, for coming and for being so gracious with their time.

It is also really important to thank Colette O'Toole, chairperson of Aughagower Community Council, and all of the community there for the powerful moment that they took for their small village where they were on the international stage and the amount of work that they put in to make the place look spectacular. I thank Rosaleen Heraty, her staff in Westport Town Hall Theatre, and all of Mayo County Council who put on a civil reception that showcased the warmth and the pride that we have in our community; the Hughes family in the historic Westport Estate; as well as Joe Gilmore and all the staff at Knock. I think the Taoiseach will agree that this was a deep, meaningful homecoming that celebrated the enduring bond between Ireland and Canada and anybody who painted a wall, swept a street, waved a flag or came out to just see the occasion deserves a big buladh bos.

Today, I want to talk about housing. I welcome yesterday's announcement that a project on the Lodge Road in Westport was one of 82 successful under the new housing infrastructure investment fund. This has the potential to unlock 200 houses on local authority land and potentially 300 more. I thank my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, whom I see in the Chamber.

I want to talk today about the thresholds for social housing. In 2023, all local authorities got an increase of €5,000 under the Housing for All review. However, Mayo currently is under band 3, which is only €30,000, and this threshold is locking people out of social housing for earning too much. Meanwhile they are not earning enough to survive the private market. I understand that this is a complex challenge and that if you increase the housing threshold you might add to the already overwhelmed list, but right now what option do I have for a working family who are slightly above the threshold and may get a notice to quit and present in my office as homeless? I offer them emergency accommodation 60 km away - away from their jobs, away from the schools and away from the community. As they are above the housing threshold, there is no hope.

I was contacted by Councillor Peter Flynn, chairperson of the housing strategic policy committee, SPC, on behalf of the members there, to ask if the bands will be reviewed. They pointed out that our neighbours in Galway are in band 2, which is €35,000, €5,000 more than Mayo. When we look at prices in Mayo last year, in Westport the average price was €327,000 where as in Kiltimagh in Mayo it was €155,000. This shows the significant variation across the county.

I raised this in a parliamentary question in December. I was informed that the Department was examining the existing income limits and work was ongoing, but I would really appreciate the Taoiseach's thoughts on this today.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I could not agree more with the Deputy in terms of the wonderful day we had on Sunday with the visit of Mark Carney and his wife Diana back to their home town of Aughagower. I pay tribute to Colette O'Toole and the entire community in Aughagower, including Fr. Tod and all involved, for the celebration of the mass there and the wonderful sense of community spirit which illustrates the strength of community spirit in Ireland - it is still very alive and well. There was a certain degree of pride that the grandson of one of their own was returning as Prime Minister of Canada and, in addition, strengthening also the political and economic links between Canada and Ireland and Canada and the European Union, and we will have more of that during the Irish Presidency of the European Union. On Westport, the Deputy was right to mention Rosaleen Heraty. The people of Mayo did themselves proud in terms of how they organised at community-based level and that was evident in the civic reception.

I want to give a mention to Cuimsiú, which Chuck and Mairéad Dunford created, which facilitates special needs children participating in live traditional music. It was fantastic to witness. It was their own child coming back home in the car said to them, "When will I be playing in the Fleadh?" They went to Comhaltas and a Comhaltas branch in Mayo has started this. Now two or three Comhaltas branches are doing it, which is sending out a signal to the rest of the country and the world that we want Comhaltas branches ultimately trying to embrace this. They put on a show and performance which was heartwarming and fantastic, and their daughter, Hannah, led the way. Hannah has a wonderful personality and performed on a number of instruments and sang, etc. It was a wonderful experience.

In terms of social housing income thresholds, I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy James Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, and we have had discussions on this. Yesterday's announcement was very significant. The €1 billion announced by the Minister will unlock thousands of houses.

I am in favour of increasing social housing income thresholds substantially and significantly. There are issues in terms of the coupling of that with housing assistance payments and so on, but we need to bite the bullet on this because working people need an opportunity to access social housing, particularly workers who will not be at a level that they can borrow. I said to the Department that there are all these traditional reasons we cannot do something but we did it in 2023 with the €5,000 increase.

Family composition should be weighted more as well. If a family have two children or three children, there should be a higher weight to family composition and eligibility for a social

house also. It is interesting there have been misleading articles and so on. Because we are nearly at 10,000 social houses a year being built-----

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

The Taoiseach: I will deal with that argument later.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, thank you.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I agree Hannah was the star of the show and that whole group and that powerful moment of inclusion was really special.

I welcome the Taoiseach's comments. I am happy to hear that he is talking about family composition. Councillor Donna Sheridan also contacted me. She is working at present with a separated single mother with two children who is trying to leave the family home. The mother is only slightly above the threshold but does not qualify for social housing. She is looking at her options. Does she ask her boss to reduce her hours so that she can come under the threshold, does she stay in the family home where things have broken down, or does she potentially accept substandard housing or move away from her community? She is salaried at €36,000 and, even with the allowances for her children, she does not qualify. Councillor Sheridan put it strongly when she said that we are excluding from social housing our SNAs, our carers and the people who keep the backbone of the country going, and we really need to increase the thresholds. I am glad to go back to the housing SPC and say that the Taoiseach agrees with and is moving towards that.

The Taoiseach: Indeed, I must pay tribute to Councillor Sean Carey as well for the leadership he gave to the council at the weekend.

One of the challenges is that somebody could be on a list for four years, five years or even longer in cities and then an increase in income could suddenly take them out of the eligibility. We have to watch that as well. The Minister is examining it and will come back to us with his proposals on this. The Minister will come back to the House on that because there are many cases similar to what the Deputy articulated and illustrated. That is the general direction of travel that we want to go in as a Government.

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

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Payment of the TV licence fee has collapsed. Fewer than 300,000 licences have been sold so far this year. It is a significant drop on last year.

It is no surprise that far fewer people are willing to pay the licence fee. People are turned off by the financial scandals at RTÉ, the waste of public money, the culture of arrogance and the lack of accountability.

We need vibrant, diverse and financially sustainable public media in Ireland but the funding model, through the TV licence, is broken. People are voting with their feet. It is time to scrap the TV licence.

It is time for a modern funding model that strengthens public broadcasting and builds a thriving, secure and independent media sector in Ireland. Will the Government deliver that?

The Taoiseach: Will the Deputy tell me what his model is?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We have set it out in policy.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's question was rhetorical, Deputy O'Rourke.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is the licence creates significant revenue, notwithstanding that it has come down somewhat. The Deputy just cannot have it each and every way. Saying "scrap it" sounds good - it is populist; it is grand. However, the Government cannot be paying for everything all the time and that reality needs to sink in as well. The licence fee is there and it complements what the Government has invested in public service broadcasting and in public service media more generally through Coimisiún na Meán, various schemes and so forth. We all need a bit of a reality check here.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What about the report of the Future of Media Commission?

An Ceann Comhairle: All questions have been put.

The Taoiseach: People cannot be looking for extras everywhere across the board-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We can look at taxation.

The Taoiseach: ----and saying we should just get rid of this model and do this and that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The progress of our business is dependent on getting in all Members. It is not dependent on the Taoiseach asking rhetorical questions. They are not to be answered. Deputies' questions must be delivered within the minute available to them, including-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Taoiseach asked me a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: It was rhetorical. Deputies can take such questions as rhetorical. Responding is not allowed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It was a challenge.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Has the Taoiseach any idea what is happening in the Department of justice at the moment? There seems to be an impulsivity driving and leading the Department that has scant regard for consequences. In our courts, for example, the criminal legal aid system is on the verge of collapse. Solicitors have taken to removing their labour for three days and

that will continue into next week. Over the past couple of weeks, when the spokespersons asked for the analysis that is the basis on which the flat fee is being introduced, we got nothing back from the Department. Yet, I was able to read about it today in the *Daily Mail* and elsewhere. There is chaos happening in, and emanating from, the Department of justice. This is nowhere better seen than in what is happening in the courts at the moment. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister to re-engage with the people who deliver the criminal legal aid system? They have currently withdrawn their labour and the consequences of that will be dire. Nobody seems to have a clue what is going on, and no less so the Minister for justice.

The Taoiseach: I disagree with the Deputy. I think we have a strong Minister for justice who is making sensible decisions. Some people will perhaps not like it because they liked the old system. We should not be having multiplicities of hearings. That is not tenable or sustainable. There is going to be no reduction in the cost to the State of providing criminal legal aid because of the reform. The Minister is proposing a flat fee. He has engaged with the Law Society and the Bar Council in respect of this. Expenditure on criminal legal aid in the District Court has nearly doubled from €19 million in 2015 to €37 million in 2024. Come on, Deputy. We cannot all go around the place saying-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: Can we see the analysis?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: Whose analysis?

An Ceann Comhairle: For God's sake.

The Taoiseach: Apologies, a Cheann Comhairle, I should not have asked.

An Ceann Comhairle: Bold.

The Taoiseach: It is important though because-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I renew a request I previously made to the Taoiseach relating to the campaign by Ms Lisa Phillips, who is a courageous survivor of sex abuse by Jeffrey Epstein. She and other survivors are engaged in a quest for truth and justice. Since the initial batch of files relating to Epstein's depraved international paedophile network was released, we have seen a further drip feed of allegations about his connections, which have implicated many people in public life, including former European Commissioners. Troublingly, the files also suggest that Epstein visited Ireland on quite a number of occasions, which opens the question as to whether he may have committed crimes here. I wrote to the Taoiseach again earlier this week, at Lisa Phillips's request, to forward him a request she has made for a meeting with him to outline her concerns about the nature of visits Epstein made to Ireland and about whether any criminal behaviour may have been engaged in by him here. I again ask that the Taoiseach

and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, consider meeting with Lisa Phillips on her next visit to Ireland.

The Taoiseach: I certainly will consider meeting with Lisa Phillips.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Any information she has in respect of those visits, if they involved criminal activity, should be referred to the Garda. I do not know whether that has occurred. I have no issue meeting with Lisa Phillips. I got a very late request to do so in Washington but it was not possible to schedule a meeting.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is an absolute scandal that we have tens of thousands of vacant properties in this country while people face homelessness and the effects of the housing crisis. I ask the Taoiseach to look into something I became aware of this week. I have written to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council about it. I received a tip-off from a very credible source that there are 22 apartments in an apartment complex off the Stillorgan Road that were handed over for Part V social housing three years ago but have been sitting empty ever since. Those 22 apartments are empty while families are being sent from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown into homeless hostels in the city and thousands of people have been on the housing waiting list for years. If this report is true, and it needs to be checked, there are 22 apartments earmarked for social housing sitting empty in an apartment complex off the Stillorgan Road. Will the Taoiseach look into this as a matter of urgency? I have written to the CEO of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. This kind of thing just cannot go on.

The Taoiseach: First, I agree with the Deputy that if this is true, it would be scandalous and unacceptable. However, I do not have the details behind it and I do not know who gave him the tip-off. If he gives me the details, I certainly will pursue the matter because there can be no justification for that.

Deputy Michael Collins: Adult and community education across Ireland is facing a crisis. Classes are being cut, jobs are being lost and earnings are being slashed in multiple education and training boards. A total of €20 million has been removed from the programmes serving some of the most marginalised learners in our communities. There are over 500 further education and training campuses across Ireland, six of which are in my constituency of Cork South-West. More than 40% of those attending them are senior citizens. These classes are a lifeline for many who live alone and would otherwise be at risk of social isolation. Will the Taoiseach find out for my constituents and me, and for the country, what criteria are being used for cutting courses and making tutors redundant? Is he aware that these cuts will mainly target and affect the most marginalised learners in our communities? Adult education gives people a second chance to learn, grow and build a better future for themselves. Why are important opportunities being denied to some of our most vulnerable people through cuts in the budget for adult education? I ask that the decision be overturned.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his question but I think he is conflating separate matters. This is not a cut in adult education. A total of 16 ETBs provide free English language classes for speakers of other languages. Demand rose sharply after the war in Ukraine broke out, going from approximately 9,000 learners in 2019 to more than 30,000 last year, 61% of whom were international protection applicants or displaced Ukrainians. In response to that increased demand and the need to ensure effective integration, temporary funding of up to €25 million annually was provided between 2023 and 2025. In line with budget 2026, that temporary funding has now been reduced but the core provision has not been reduced. ETBs retain flexibility within their overall budgets to prioritise English language classes locally. The change will have impacts. The additional funding was there for quite a number of years and it was a temporary intervention. The ETBs will work with SOLAS and others to try to maximise provision and deal with a newer phase.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I raise the school summer programme, which was formerly called the July provision. I have been contacted by numerous parents, school staff and principals who are really frustrated and very stressed. People at St. Michael's school and Scoil Mhuire in Trim, St. Anne's school in Navan and many more schools across Meath West have told me they have not been allocated enough resources and staff by the Department to run the programme this year. The summer programme has been really responsive to me and I know its staff are working with schools. However, I am really concerned that the wording in the relevant circular will trump common sense. The summer programme is not a summer camp or a luxury. It is a really valuable educational programme and an essential support for parents. We must make sure the letter of the law in terms of this circular is not enforced and that the school summer programme team works closely with schools to get them what they need. These schools and parents know the ratio of teachers and SNAs to children that is needed.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Department is saying it has received more applications for the school-based scheme this year than the number that ran it in 2025, with increases across primary, post-primary and special schools. In addition, the number of home-based applications has significantly increased since last year. Officials in the Department are engaging with schools on an individual basis in relation to the running of the summer programme. The staffing allocation for special class groups in the primary school scheme is typically the same as the special class resource allocation that exists during the school year.

1 o'clock

After this year's scheme, there should be a review of this. We need to target our resources at those most in need. The scheme has been expanding significantly.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I raise the ongoing dispute between the Department of Social Protection and the Branch Managers' Association, which represents the social welfare branch offices that continue to provide vital social services in communities across the country. In April 2018, former Labour Court chairman Kevin Duffy issued recommendations which were accepted as a full and final settlement of the issues between both parties. Those recommendations specifically provided for the ongoing consultation, regular engagement and a forum for discussion between the Department and the Branch Managers' Association.

Unfortunately, relations have deteriorated in recent times and significant concerns remain unsolved. At a time when these local offices continue to provide an invaluable service, particularly in rural Ireland, it is important that constructive engagement takes place. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister and the Department to re-engage directly with the Branch Managers' Association to facilitate meaningful dialogue to resolve the current difficulties? Surely the best way forward is through discussion, mutual respect and a willingness of all sides to find a workable solution that protects services for the public and provides certainty for branch managers.

The Taoiseach: The Minister, Deputy Calleary, has already met branch managers. The Department of Social Protection has offered all branch managers a 10% increase in their remuneration with effect from 1 June 2026. This has been sanctioned and my understanding is that a number of branch managers have accepted the increase, but the Branch Managers' Association has refused the increase. I am told the Department is not in a position to agree to this request for arbitration either collectively or individually. Across the board, the Government has public service norms, pay norms, and various frameworks to govern issues that arise in respect of remuneration.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This week, I met the wonderful students of the National Learning Network in Parslickstown in Mulhuddart. It is a place that has shown a way for people with different abilities to learn the social and work schools to enable them to build their own personal skill sets and possibly enter the workforce. Unfortunately and sadly, we have the lowest number of people with disabilities in work and this must be challenged. Due to funding cuts, they have a waiting list, and each person on that waiting list is losing time and opportunities. It is directly linked to City of Dublin ETB and it does not seem to be an issue with the other ETBs in Dublin. Will the Taoiseach please engage with the Minister to work with City of Dublin ETB to reverse the cuts to the numbers and end the waiting list the National Learning Network currently has?

The Taoiseach: That might be a similar issue to the one that Deputy Collins raised. I will talk to the Minister in respect of it. The scheme for English language classes was quite expansive because of the arrival under the international protection order-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This is people with disabilities.

The Taoiseach: I will follow it up with the Minister.

Deputy James Geoghegan: One of the commitments in the programme for Government is to make the criminal justice system more victim-centred. Yesterday, I met Sharon Lynn, the sister of Martin Lynn, who died following a one-punch attack in 2023. The senseless death of her brother Martin and her interaction as a victim in the court process during the trial of Martin's assailant is a story that Sharon has had to tell on countless occasions, and I witnessed that anguish in my office yesterday. She stood on a platform with the Minister for justice and he indicated that he would meet her. I ask that that meeting take place. As someone who did not practise in criminal law but practised at the civil end of crime, I definitely think we can do

better for victims. What steps is the Government taking to make the criminal justice system more victim-centred?

The Taoiseach: With the O'Malley report and so on, right across the board, there have been significant reforms in respect of support for victims through the criminal justice system. We will continue to have victims as a core focus of our policy. I will speak to the Minister in respect of-----

Deputy James Geoghegan: Sharon Lynn, about her brother, Martin Lynn.

The Taoiseach: I will speak to the Minister about Sharon's request for a meeting. I appreciate it is a traumatic situation. The Minister has met many victims over the last while. As the Deputy knows, Jennie's Law is coming in because of his engagement with TDs, families, Deputy Paul McAuliffe and others, so the Minister is responsive to situations. I will alert him that the Deputy raised this.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is very serious overcrowding in Tullamore hospital at the moment. It is the largest hospital in the midlands region. A memo was sent around to staff stating that there was a black escalation, as I have been told by staff within the hospital. They were told that 35 inpatients are being accommodated in surge beds across the hospital, with a further 14 off-site in private medical beds. This is not the flu season or the depths of winter. It is happening in the middle of summer. I am told that it has been caused by increases in population and a parallel failure to increase facilities to cope with the extra numbers. Will the Taoiseach tell the Dáil today what he will put in place to deal with the crisis immediately? What long-term plan has the Government to make sure that this does not arise in the future?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I compliment the management of Tullamore hospital, who have managed demand better than most hospitals in the country and consistently achieve very few people on trolleys. We do that through a number of different ways, including purchasing private beds where necessary. That is part of what every hospital and region does. We need to standardise the cost in relation to that but we do use off-site capacity. I do not know what the Deputy is referring to with regard to black escalation. If it is that we are trying to manage the budget overall because the HSE has hired essentially an additional 2,500 people at the beginning of this year, without a corresponding reduction in agency staff, it may be that. The Dublin and midlands areas are particularly egregious in their agency use instead of hiring for permanent positions. There is no question that the entire Dáil wants to see a reduction in agency use. If that is what the Deputy is referring to, I do not know why it is being referred to in those terms, but it is certainly necessary, and it was told to me in the health committee, that we make sure we reduce agency staff and recruit permanent staff instead. I do not know what else the Deputy referred to.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I can get the details to the Minister today if she likes.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Healthcare assistants in Northside Home Care Services do incredibly important work looking after the elderly and the community. They are paid just

above the minimum wage, well below the HSE going rate. They took strike action in January and they have taken industrial action since, with work stoppages. They should not have to do this. They should be paid a fair wage that respects the work that they do. Does the Taoiseach agree that they should be paid the HSE's going rate? Will the Government introduce a sectoral wage agreement so that healthcare assistants are paid the going HSE rate, a fair wage?

The Taoiseach: As we know, there are agreements about public service pay. There have been agreements with the section 39 workers. I understand from the Minister that about €35 per hour is the rate for tendering for services. I believe every effort should be made to try to resolve this. Regarding this company, it seems that how this is all being structured is an anomaly. I might be wrong but that is my sense of it. We need to get to the bottom of it and make sure there is a sustainable basis for workers and for the service.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise serious concerns again about the dental system and the total collapse of dental services for medical card patients and the lack of timely assessments for schoolgoing children. I and others have noted that this has really regressed. In the 1980s, as schoolchildren, we all had those timely assessments but we seem to be going backwards. It is getting no better. Even PRSI patients have had a number of benefits that they would have got in the past eliminated. There are a number of issues regarding dental care. I know the Irish Dental Association has been calling for some time for the contract to be renewed and for complete reform of the system. It is very frustrated with the HSE and the Department of Health. Will the Minister please intervene with the HSE and Department of Health to ensure that they can get a renewed contract in place as soon as possible?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I have already intervened with the HSE on two fronts. We will be producing a dental-specific plan. It is important to reference what the Deputy said about long waits, particularly for children. A specific intervention programme will last about two years. The Irish Dental Association has been involved with that. Let us not give the speaking points of private representative bodies either. I was at its conference and raised the increase in fees.

The fee paid to dentists for medical card patients has been increased by 40% and yet people still do not want to do it. I do have to acknowledge that as part of their conference dentists had two days, one on dentistry and one on aesthetics. I challenged the Irish Dental Association on that and it robustly defended the ability of dentists to do Botox and other things as part of their choice of how they practise. I have to highlight all these different things. Yes, we need to have a new contract anyway. Yes, we need to continue to make sure that we have a structured programme particularly for children. However, it is also true that there is not just dentistry happening and that is reducing capacity particularly in the public system.

Deputy Grace Boland: The summer provision has worked well for many years now. It has supported families and in particular children with disabilities but this year has not gone to plan. Schools have no certainty about summer provision, July provision, in particular in relation to the home-based school provision. Parents are supposed to source teachers and SNAs to provide this. We are seven days out from schools closing and parents have no certainty as to whether their children have been accepted. Can the Taoiseach confirm urgently that parents will receive

confirmation today in relation to home-based provision? For next year can we really encourage that this be provided within schools rather than outsourced to parents?

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, and this is just a general view, I think we need to review this. The scheme has expanded beyond any original parameters, which is a good thing. Funding has increased from about €12 million in 2016 to about €62 million now, supporting 70,800 students across 2,000 schools. Funding has increased by €42 million in the last five years alone. The programme is open to all schools, with a particular focus on increasing participation in special schools. Eligibility remains largely unchanged from 2025. My understanding is that it was originally for special schools and special needs children. That was the original objective of the schools summer programme. There always has to be a razor-sharp focus on targeting those who most need it. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, and let her know the Deputy has raised the issue of home-based provision. More schools have participated this year than last year. That is probably creating challenges as well.

Deputy Charles Ward: Concerns have been raised by a local charity, Lifeline, about being able to access family law under the legal aid scheme in Donegal. I understand there are significant delays in processing legal aid applications at the moment. During this period, organisations supporting vulnerable individuals and families often need to identify solicitors who may be able to assist in urgent family law matters. However, it appears that information on solicitors participating in the Legal Aid Board's law panel is not readily available to organisations such as Lifeline Inishowen and other organisations. This creates difficulties in attempting to assist individuals who are experiencing family breakdown, domestic abuse, child access issues and guardianship access issues. Access to timely legal advice is critical in family law and I am concerned that the current arrangements may be creating unnecessary barriers for vulnerable people and assistants. Why can information not be provided to organisations such as Lifeline Inishowen and other organisations on this issue?

The Taoiseach: The fact is that supports have been provided. On the specifics of the organisation the Deputy referenced, I do not have the details here. I will alert the Minister for justice that the Deputy has raised that specific case and ask him to revert to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: On behalf of the cathaoirleach of Carlow County Council, Councillor Tommy Kinsella, I ask the Taoiseach about the funding that was promised to repair the rural roads around Carlow that were damaged by Storm Chandra. In south and east Carlow, many rural roads around Borris, Myshall, Clonmore and other areas were left in desperate conditions after the storm. Due to the delay in the receipt of the €4 million that was promised and is required to repair the damage done, Carlow County Council now has to reallocate the budget it had for its standard maintenance programme in order to repair these roads. That will have a substantial knock-on effect on the entire road network in Carlow and not just for 2026. When can Carlow County Council and its cathaoirleach, Councillor Kinsella, expect to receive that funding?

The Taoiseach: Every allocation to local authorities also had contingency provision for events. That said, the Ministers concerned are still engaging on that issue. I will revert to the Deputy. I will alert the Ministers that she has specifically raised Carlow, but I think it is a more

nationwide issue as well. Capital expenditure has increased fairly significantly year on year. I accept that the storms created specific challenges in the areas that were most affected by Storm Chandra in particular. There are implications for the need for urgent road repairs in Carlow, Wicklow and other areas.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I raise the ongoing issue of the future long-term funding for the network of live-monitored CCTV cameras in Limerick. I understand this was raised at the mayoral forum recently. In light of the total Garda budget of €2.74 billion, the funding shortfall here is €880,000. I know that the Department of justice cannot fund this directly. Would the Taoiseach support the Garda to fund the local authority to ensure that this service continues in the context of the overall Garda budget and the NDP investment? If this service is not funded, the live monitoring will have to cease and it will be akin to losing 30 gardaí on the beat. The Government is investing €58 million directly for the Ryder Cup and €115 million in infrastructure. This is €880,000 and it is vital for the safety and security of the people in the region both during the Ryder Cup and beyond.

The Taoiseach: Let us not conflate the two issues. I think the Ryder Cup is a good event for Limerick.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is.

The Taoiseach: I am sure the Deputy acknowledges that. I am a great supporter of CCTV. I think it does help security and helps with the detection of crime in many instances. It can be a deterrent to committing crime. There probably should be a tripartite contribution or at least the council and the Department of justice should make a contribution to schemes. I do not have the specifics on the Limerick CCTV scheme. I will talk to the Minister for justice in respect of the shortfall.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: In March we all warmly welcomed the purchase of the site in Raheen in Limerick for the much-needed expansion of acute hospital capacity in the mid-west region. In March there was a commitment to establishing a new board and that there would be an initial report by this September. What is the delay in the formation of that board? Is that September date now off the table? Is there a timeline for the formation of the board and that initial report? Is resourcing an issue?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: No, resourcing is not an issue. First, I want to go and see Clare myself to understand that better, and ask for a plan for the region for the development of services in Clare and Tipperary - Ennis and Nenagh - and not just Limerick. Overwhelmingly the focus in the mid-west has been on Limerick, which I understand. However, proper community care and proper integrated care requires a focus on Nenagh and Ennis as well. I have agreed a chair, who I believe will be excellent. I will meet the patient council this week. I really want its perspectives before I finalise the board. Thereafter we will appoint a board to do that work. That will begin over the summer but it will begin structurally in a very detailed way thereafter. I have a little bit more work to do on that.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: A Cheann Comhairle, you might join me in welcoming Abraham Phelan and Rikke Sorensen from the Silk Road Café, who are here in the Gallery. This past weekend, the Silk Road Café, a private operator in the Chester Beatty Library on the Dublin Castle campus, was forced to close as a result of upcoming EU Presidency events there. Over the last number of weeks, several of us in this Chamber have raised the issue and written to various Ministers but no one has given us an adequate response. The lack of engagement with a business that has provided excellent services to the public in one of our national institutions for 25 years gives me great concern about how other small businesses in similar positions are to be treated by the State. Given that this is the last question the Taoiseach is taking today and I think this week, and given that Abraham is here now, will the Taoiseach now meet Abraham and intervene to ensure his business is properly supported and compensated given this Government-imposed closure?

The Taoiseach: I did not realise people were coming into the Public Gallery. I am not in a position to meet today. I have checked this out and I have to be careful in what I say. I understand it is not down to the European Union Presidency and there may be other issues - I do not know. I do not know if it is up for tender. Sorry, when I say I do not know, there have been indications that there are wider issues but I would not want the Presidency to be a factor in closing down the café.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It definitely was in the next month. He has a lease until-----

The Taoiseach: I was told the reason for the six-month closure was the Presidency. I do not think that is a fair argument either. I would not want any facility to have to close for six months because of the EU Presidency. It does not merit that from a security point of view. The main activities at Dublin Castle are to the latter part of the Presidency. There will be ongoing events but there has to be balance and perspective. I have checked this out and I do not think it is closing for six months because of the Presidency. I think the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin Castle is involved. I have asked my officials to check and they have-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and that is the feedback. It is better that these issues are not discussed publicly.

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

The Taoiseach: You need the details of this to discuss it publicly and that is problematic too.

Health (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health Act 1970 and to provide for related matters.

I will share my time. The Bill amends the Health Act 1970 to ensure the effectiveness of the provision without charge of drugs, medicines or medical or surgical appliances to persons suffering from the precise disease or disability of a permanent or long-term nature through a review every three years. The long-term illness, LTI, scheme has been a success since its establishment and has assisted many people across this State. However, it has not been updated for a long time and as a result, we now know about many disabilities, ailments and illness that would not have been known about when the Bill was first introduced. They are long-term and lifelong but in some instances they are not covered by the scheme. In order to know if this scheme is fit for purpose and is delivering for those who need it, it is important that it is monitored and reviewed and that this is done on a consistent basis.

Conditions such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome, PCOS, should be covered by the scheme. However, women find themselves having to find the money for treatment in some instances and shop around, as it were, and go to multiple appointments to be prescribed drugs. This can have a very severe impact on their pocket. Obviously, there is the drugs payment scheme but, again, that does not always work and sometimes acts as a barrier for these women.

In order for any Government scheme to be effective and for us to know it is working and delivering in the way intended, it should be reviewed on a regular basis. It is important that the review is then placed before the Dáil so that we have a chance to have that debate but also so that the findings of any such review are incorporated into ensuring any scheme is fit for purpose, delivering, modern, effective and capable of taking into account any illnesses that might arise. It is important that there is a periodic, mandated review, which will give us a chance in this House to have a discussion but will also give the Minister for Health of the day the opportunity to engage with the review and update the scheme as appropriate. We believe the scheme is a good scheme but not reviewing it for decades does not make it effective. It is becoming less effective with time.

Deputy David Cullinane: The long-term illness scheme was established under section 59 of the Health Act in 1971. The last time a condition was added to the scheme was in 1975. In the meantime, 51 years of advancement in medical knowledge has been ignored and those suffering from chronic or long-term conditions who cannot get a medical card have been left without support. This, of course, would not have been an issue if the Government had advanced universal health care, but the medical card thresholds have not been touched in over 20 years.

We all agree that the long-term illness scheme should not be needed because anyone who needs care should receive it on the basis of need and not the ability to pay. This is a principle we all signed up to but, unfortunately, there has been little change in medical card entitlements since 2005, and there is no commitment in the programme for Government to address this. This is why we are introducing this legislation. We have no faith that the Government will take any meaningful action to deliver universal healthcare that is free at the point of use. People with long-term and chronic conditions cannot be left on the long finger for another decade while they wait for change.

This Bill is straightforward. It requires the Minister for Health to undertake periodic reviews of the conditions, medications and equipment on the long-term illness scheme to make sure it is fit for purpose. It would require the first review to start within a year and subsequent reviews

to take place every three years. There are so many conditions that are not on the long-term illness scheme but should be. One major example of this is endometriosis. Endometriosis is a serious chronic disease and can cause severe pain, heavy and painful periods, infertility, internal scarring and damage to organs including the bowel, bladder and kidneys. It affects at least one in ten women in Ireland and yet it can take years to receive a diagnosis. Steps have been taken to address this under the endometriosis framework. We are all working across this House to improve access to care in Ireland for women but supports for medication and equipment for non-medical cardholders is a major omission from the work under way in the HSE.

Endometriosis is not short term and it is not cheap to manage. It is a long-term condition with a profound impact on quality of life, work, relationships, fertility and mental health. This is exactly the kind of condition the long-term illness scheme should be capable of recognising. I hope that when we move this Bill on Second Stage, the Government will be in a position to support it and add other illnesses to the scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to provide for the regulation of direct lines; and to provide for related matters.

Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom míle buíochas a ghabháil le gach duine a bhí ag cabhrú liom. I wish to briefly acknowledge the people who helped me get elected to the Dáil and also helped me bring this Bill to where it is today. I thank the team at the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, who met me multiple times, and the Bill's Office for its guidance. I thank my colleagues in the Independent Technical Group and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and Department officials for engaging constructively with me. I thank my team at the office, who have listened to me tirelessly, and my professors in DCU, who were patient as I developed in my developing years in engineering.

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Section 37 of the Electricity Regulation Act has been on the books for 27 years and

allows for direct connections, but in practice it has delivered practically none. The conditions are so restrictive that in a quarter of a century, this provision has been rendered entirely meaningless. With development in our grid and of energy infrastructure across the globe, we need to act. My Bill repeals section 37 and replaces it with something I believe actually works.

The scale of the problem we face at the moment is significant. We are curtailing clean energy on a massive scale. We are switching off wind farms, solar installations and renewable sources because the grid cannot absorb what it is generating. At the same time, Irish families and businesses are paying some of the highest electricity bills in Europe. These two facts should not co-exist. The reason they do relates to energy policy failure, and my Bill is trying to fix that. I welcome the constructive work the Government and the Minister have done on this Bill. As the Ceann Comhairle knows, our grid is under enormous pressure but demand is rising and will continue to do so if we look to projected figures across the globe. Connection queues are growing, and the ESB and Eir Grid networks do great work and have great standards but need more resources. The solution to that is with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, and that is what my Bill hopes to provide. These networks need tools and resources to manage and my Bill gives them that. I have raised this issue repeatedly in the House and probably sound like a broken record at this stage, talking about private wires. I have raised it at Leaders' Questions, in committees and directly with the CRU three weeks ago, when it confirmed to me, on the record of the committee, that private wires or direct lines will facilitate more renewables which otherwise could not happen.

We are trying to run a modern, renewable system on tools that belong to another era. Countries like Germany are reducing bills by allowing plug-in solar and easier battery roll-out by allowing renewables, and they have safe standards for it. Meanwhile, on another point, we are still making providers install 100,000 analogue remote terminal unit, RTU, boxes which rely on electronic dispatch logging, EDL, and manual dispatch systems. An engineer knows that is absolutely ridiculous. In comparison, operators across Europe and the UK have already moved to secure digital application programming interface, API, systems. We have not. People are struggling with energy costs and we need to act faster to tackle them. While we have been waiting, other countries across the EU have legislated and allowed homes and businesses to reduce their bills. They have increased their FDI and guaranteed investment into their country.

A small manufacturer in a rural town in Ireland is paying crippling energy prices while there is a solar farm built two fields away. Under the current system, there is no legal mechanism to run a direct connection between them. My Bill enables it to be done safely. A school with solar panels on its roof, which during the summer months does not have as much of an energy demand, could directly link them to a nearby nursing home or community hub that would benefit from lower electricity costs. Private wires and direct lines can change this situation and the significant issue we have with data centres can be tackled by allowing them to easily connect to renewable energy.

The CRU should be the single sheriff in town, but to do so, there will be a monetary cost and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, will have to get more staff and more powers, which is covered in this hefty Bill. One independent regulator in the CRU, one clear process and a mandatory timeline would increase FDI, increase job security and benefit the Irish people and SMEs. Communities in Austria share energy, reducing energy bills with multiple distribution system operators, DSOs, while we are limited here. The valid concern

that I have raised about the community benefit fund, which we see with wind energy, would be addressed directly.

I know that more can be done on this Bill and I look forward to working constructively with members of the Opposition, as I am a solution-focused TD with a firm intention to address matters constructively on Committee Stage. I will not let my ego get in the way of benefiting the Irish people. The Bill is 18 months in development, it has an Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, stamp and it answers all of the 47 pre-legislative scrutiny recommendations from the climate and energy committee. It is compliant and it is ready.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No. I congratulate the Deputy because I know he has put a significant amount of work into getting the Bill ready for First Stage.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Do not worry. He has a good teacher right beside him.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.32 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.32 p.m. and resumed at 2.31 p.m.

**Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters)
Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)**

An Ceann Comhairle: I must deal with a deferred division relating to the Second Reading on the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026, taken on Tuesday, 16 June 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and the division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 52; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Aird, William.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Brady, John.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Boland, Grace.	Carthy, Matt.	

Brabazon, Tom.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Brennan, Brian.	Collins, Michael.	
Brennan, Shay.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Browne, James.	Crowe, Seán.	
Burke, Colm.	Cullinane, David.	
Butler, Mary.	Cummins, Jen.	
Butterly, Paula.	Daly, Pa.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Devine, Máire.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Cahill, Michael.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Calleary, Dara.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Canney, Seán.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Gannon, Gary.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Chambers, Jack.	Graves, Ann.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Clendennen, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Collins, Niall.	Healy, Seamus.	
Connolly, John.	Kenny, Martin.	
Cooney, Joe.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Lawless, Paul.	
Currie, Emer.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Daly, Martin.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Murphy, Paul.	
Dillon, Alan.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Nolan, Carol.	
Fleming, Sean.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Geoghegan, James.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Grealish, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Harkin, Marian.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Kyne, Seán.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Lahart, John.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Lawlor, George.	Stanley, Brian.	
Maxwell, David.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ward, Mark.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
McConalogue, Charlie.		

McCormack, Tony.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, John.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Nash, Ged.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Matt Carthy and Mark Ward.

Question declared carried.

**Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters)
Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages**

Sections 1 to 7, inclusive, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 10, between lines 33 and 34, to insert the following:

"8. The Minister, having consulted with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, may by regulation direct that the Director suspend cooperation, in part or in full, with a state in breach of—

(a) the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, or

(b) Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union,

or whereby cooperation would place Ireland in breach of Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union."

I want to put on the record that I consider the way in which justice legislation is being dealt with on an ongoing basis to be inappropriate and unacceptable.

We are literally just two minutes after voting on Second Stage of this legislation, yet here we are dealing with Committee Stage. Amendments for this Stage had to be submitted before the Second Stage debate had taken place. That is no way to do business. It would be potentially excusable if this were a scenario where we were dealing with something that came out of the blue, but the Minister has been well aware of this legislation coming down the track for some time.

I take the opportunity to congratulate the new Minister of State. I should have done that at the outset. I wish her well and look forward to working with her.

Amendment No. 1 seeks to insert the following into section 8:

The Minister, having consulted with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, may by regulation direct that the Director suspend cooperation, in part or in full, with a state in breach of—

(a) the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, or

(b) Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union,

or whereby cooperation would place Ireland in breach of Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union."

The reason for this amendment is fairly straightforward. It is about protecting Irish interests and also the principles of the rule of law, democracy and our own sovereignty, when required. Essentially, the regulations we are dealing with here allow police services in any other European state to request, in the first instance, information in relation to criminal investigations from companies based here. They then establish a governing body that can intervene in cases where there is a dispute or a company fails to comply.

There is a particular responsibility from Ireland's perspective because we have such a large IT sector. This means there will potentially be a huge number of such applications. The Department's own guidance note states that over 600 service providers based in Ireland are expected to be designated as an addressee in Ireland. It is anticipated that the number of production orders issued to service providers based in Ireland will well exceed 300,000 annually. That is a complete outlier. In contrast, Irish authorities are expected to send 2,000 requests to others. Of all other EU states, therefore, we are likely to request that about 2,000 production orders be fulfilled in any given year whereas 300,000 are expected to be requested

from Ireland. They will come from all over. In practice, then, the expectation of how this will work in practice is that police services will request information from IT companies and it will be given over. Where it is not, though, the new body will be given the responsibility.

In principle, all of that is very important and welcome. We absolutely accept the principle, when we consider that many criminal investigations - I think virtually all - have an electronic component and where either text messages, server data or emails are required. We want that to be a seamless process in 95% of cases. It is also important to acknowledge, however, what these requests will be based on. When the justice committee received a briefing from the Department, a briefing that I think the committee unanimously agreed was unsatisfactory in respect of quite a number of questions going unanswered, the officials acknowledged that, "In theory, the regulation is based on the idea of full faith in credit in the member states' legal systems." This means that the entire premise of us adopting this legislation is accepting at face value that the legal system in every other EU state is and forever will be operating in accordance with the rule of law and the treaties of the European Union. As Deputy Mark Ward indicated during the Second Stage debate, however, "theory" is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence. We have seen how easy it is for democratic backsliding to happen. We saw this in Hungary in particular, but also in other states where rule-of-law issues have become a major concern. There is always a fear that if a government system does not have the judicial and policing independence we would take for granted here in Ireland, we could have a potential attempt to use this legislation to do all sorts of things.

The difficulty is that once this legislation is adopted as part of an EU framework, then we are locked into it. That is the ratchet mechanism in how EU policy works. Once you are in, you cannot get out. We know the challenges that the EU-Israel Association Agreement has created. We signed up to it - and I think, very clearly, we should not have - and now we cannot get out of it, despite the fact that Israel is committing genocide. It is not tenable, and I do not think it should be accepted as just part of the process, that if another member state, for whatever reason, has a government that tries to abuse these regulations, we have no option but to deal with it. If we have a situation where the courts in another state have been manipulated or become less independent than we would accept as a given, and we do not have some form of control here, then we would just have to accede to every request that comes through. That is, ultimately, what is in place. These are not the politics of efficiency or harmonisation. These are actually the politics of potentially damaging our own justice system to facilitate the lowest common denominator across Europe.

The difficulty here, and the reason I think this amendment is so important, is that this is potentially the last chance the Oireachtas will have to put some form of protection in place. To be very clear on what the protection is, it is not looking for anything other than for the Minister to have the authority, in conjunction with the Minister for foreign affairs, to realise that there is a particular area of concern and then direct that there be a suspension of co-operation to protect Ireland's legal framework and position, thereby potentially protecting Irish citizens and other European Union citizens. The amendment further states that this would be important in the event that by co-operating and facilitating one member state in breach of Article 6 of the EU treaties, we would breach the treaties ourselves by facilitating it.

We discussed this at the justice committee, and we received nowhere near the required level of assurance that we would not end up in a situation where we were sharing very sensitive

information with a police authority that might have some form of negative agenda. This has now been put clearly on the record of the House. I do not want to see a situation in ten years or any future point where we have Ministers shrugging their shoulders and saying they have no option but to facilitate such and such a government in what is clearly a nefarious request because we are bound to do so by a law we adopted in these Houses. Members will have an opportunity to put in place this protection, and I am encouraging and urging the Minister of State to adopt and accept this amendment, or at least give an indication that she will put forward a similar amendment that will, ultimately, do the same thing.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the Deputy very much for his amendment. I understand his concerns in relation to fundamental rights and countries not adhering to the rule of law as we might in Ireland.

3 o'clock

However, I regret that we cannot accept his proposed amendment. The e-evidence package provides for co-operation between member states of the EU. It does not allow any member state to unilaterally suspend its operation, and the proposed amendment would be in clear breach of our legal obligations under EU law.

On a point of principle, giving a member of the Executive the power to interfere with the exercise of judicial functions by a judicial authority within the EU would be a breach of the democratic principles of the separation of powers under the rule of law. The director is being made independent specifically to prevent any suggestion that a director might be subject to influence or direction from a member of the Executive as regards the implementation of judicial orders. That would not be right. The EU regulation already contains certain safeguards, including the provision in paragraph 3 of Article 1, which states that the regulation shall not have the effect of modifying the obligation to respect the fundamental rights and legal principles as enshrined in the charter and in Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union.

The regulation also has specific safeguards. Under Article 8, the Irish enforcing authority must be notified of incoming European production orders unless they relate to an offence in the issuing state committed by a person who resides in that state, and execution can be refused. Article 12 sets out the grounds for refusal. Article 10 provides a channel through which the service provider may alert the Irish enforcing authority when it considers the order would interfere with freedom of expression.

The Deputy might ask what happens after the director has been notified of a production order under Article 8 of the e-evidence measure. What are the practical steps? Where a director, as an enforcing authority, is notified by the issuing authority of a European production order, the director must assess the order and, where appropriate, raise one of several grounds for refusal. Following an assessment, the director can raise the following grounds for refusal. The director can state that the data requested are protected by immunities or privileges under Irish law; that the data requested are covered by rules on the determination or limitation of criminal liability that relate to freedom of the press, freedom of expression and other media; that execution of the order would entail a manifest breach of relevant fundamental rights, as set out in Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union and in the charter, which speaks to the points the Deputy is raising on fundamental rights; that the execution of the order would be

contrary to the principle of *ne bis in idem*, the double jeopardy concept; and that the conduct for which the order has been issued does not constitute an offence under Irish law, unless it concerns an offence listed within the categories of offences set out in Annex IV, all of which are offences under Irish law, if it is punishable in the issuing state by a custodial sentence or detention order for a maximum period of at least three years.

Before raising any of the above refusal grounds, the director, as enforcing authority, has to contact the issuing authority to discuss the matter. The issuing authority may decide to withdraw, adapt or maintain the order. If there is no solution, the director may raise one of the grounds for refusal. If the director, as enforcing authority, raises one of the refusal grounds, they must inform the addressee and the issuing authority. The addressee then must stop the execution of the European production order and not transfer the data, and the issuing authority has to withdraw the order. I hope that helps the Deputy regarding his amendment and gives him some comfort.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It does not because, with due respect, the Minister of State is missing the point. The amendment is in respect of specific states and the ability to suspend co-operation, in part or in full, based on the list of scenarios I have set out. Arguably and hopefully, the provision would never need to be utilised, but it would be negligent not to put a safeguard in place. People might ask when or how what I describe could happen. Consider where the Hungarian Government got very close to in terms of control of the courts and the breakdown of independence in the Judiciary and the police. It is not beyond our wildest imagination that we could end up in a similar situation. What the Minister has outlined is a very convoluted process whereby each individual application that might come from a state would have to be dealt with through the process as outlined.

I understand what the Minister is saying about potential Executive powers. Again, however, the motion as it is set out states it would involve the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in consultation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Essentially, that implies it will be a Government decision. There would be very real concerns and very valid reasons a Cabinet would come to the point that it would invoke the measure, and it would only be on the basis that it was actually protecting the rule of law, the conditionality regulation, protecting our own Constitution and protecting the EU treaty frameworks in respect of democracy and the rule of law. I hope such a provision will never be needed, but I can tell the Minister of State that if the protection is needed and we do not have it in place, these Houses will be judged very harshly.

My next point is critical because this is a debate that probably is not happening to the same extent in all EU member states. Considering the prevalence of the companies in respect of which orders and requests will be made in this State, we are going to play a disproportionate role in the decisions made. With 300,000 requests annually, I fear this will become routine for any member state seeking information.

For most criminal investigations, we want a seamless process. We want Irish authorities to be able to contact other authorities to seek electronic data and to get the information very quickly. We have to be confident, however, that all such requests are made on the basis of a genuine need to address a criminal issue rather than for some of the more concerning reasons for which requests have been in other states around the world. In this regard, the type of power

in question has been used to curtail people's freedom, not only freedom of expression but also freedom of movement and other fundamental human rights.

Again, I ask for support for the amendment. I am urging that we put in place a protection. This is what it is. Ultimately, we are talking about a protection that we hope and expect will never need to be used but without which I fear we will be adopting legislation that is going to be very good only in theory, as the officials themselves said to the committee, and that ultimately will not provide the confidence in our legislation that we should be demanding as that legislation would be underpinned by EU regulations we would have no power to amend in the future.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I wish the Minister of State well in her new role. I am sure she will find it to be very fast-moving and to have many different parts. We are finding that sometimes the hurry does not result in things operating at their most effective. Anyone who walked down to the District Court, the Central Criminal Court or the High Court today would have seen evidence of that.

This Bill is very important. That we do not have rule of law or an amendment built in at national level is very important to note. There is a huge responsibility on Ireland specifically. What we are doing here is creating a criminal justice international co-operation office in Ireland that is going to be different from what is in most other European states because of the prevalence here of the tech companies, including the Googles, Metas, LinkedIns and TikToks, which have headquarters here. To that very important office, we are allocating a budget of €2.8 million and 30 staff, who will be sent from another part of the Department of justice. The consequences of the decisions those staff will have to make with their very small budget are enormous. Do we think it is unimaginable that at some point they will have to make a determination on surveillance abuses or the use of spyware against journalists or Opposition politicians? Do we think they will not have to deal with requests that come under the heading of “democratic backsliding from some states”? They will.

If we do not have an application of our own values within those decision-making processes, we become complicit in them. That is why I will be supporting this amendment. That is why I will vote against a Bill which I mostly believe in. The rushed nature, lack of structure and inability to budget for the unforeseen makes this impossible for me to vote for.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: As we all know, we are members of the European Union and the Members opposite know well that we cannot include this provision. It is in breach of the treaties and our obligations as a member of the European Union. We all know that we have legal obligations in relation to this regulation and we simply cannot ignore that. If we were to enact the amendment, service providers would still remain obligated to execute orders. That would be without oversight from directors. For the reasons I have stated, I simply cannot accept the Deputies' amendment. We cannot rewrite the regulation. There is no legal basis for Ireland to include such a provision. The Irish Executive cannot unilaterally decide to suspend legal co-operation entirely with another EU member state that is party to this instrument. To do so would place us in breach of our legal obligations under EU law. There are safeguards in the regulation to address instances with the execution of a specific order that might be in breach of fundamental rights. I set out in detail in my initial contribution these safeguards.

This regulation shall not have the effect of modifying the obligation to respect the fundamental rights and legal principles enshrined in the Charter and in Article 6 of the Treaty of the European Union. The regulation also has specific safeguards whereby under Article 8, the Irish enforcing authority must be notified of incoming European production orders unless they relate to an offence in the issuing state committed by a person who resides in that state. Execution can be refused. Article 12 sets out the grounds on which they may be refused and Article 10 provides a channel through which the service provider may alert the Irish enforcing authority when it considers the order would interfere with the freedom of expression. At this stage, I have nothing more to add.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 65; Níl, 79; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cairns, Holly.	Browne, James.	
Carthy, Matt.	Burke, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Butler, Mary.	
Collins, Michael.	Butterly, Paula.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cronin, Réada.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cullinane, David.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cummins, Jen.	Calleary, Dara.	
Daly, Pa.	Canney, Seán.	
Devine, Máire.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Chambers, Jack.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Clendennen, John.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gould, Thomas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Graves, Ann.	Cummins, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Currie, Emer.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Daly, Martin.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Healy, Seamus.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	

Lawless, Paul.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawlor, George.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Harkin, Marian.	
Nash, Ged.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Heydon, Martin.	
Nolan, Carol.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Kyne, Seán.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Lahart, John.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Murphy, Michael.	
Smith, Duncan.	Neville, Joe.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Connor, James.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Matt Carthy and Mark Ward; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Sections 8 to 16, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 17

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 2 and 3 are related and may be discussed together, by agreement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 15, between lines 14 and 15, to insert the following:

“(g) ensure minimal administrative burden is placed on small to medium sized service providers.”.

There is real concern about the administrative burden this legislation could place on small and medium enterprises, SMEs, particularly in the IT sector. The Government conducted an SME test and I will talk more about that later but it found that the legislative impact on the SME sector will be significantly greater than it will be on larger companies and that there will be administrative and compliance costs.

This amendment is simple but it will be incredibly useful. It is to put in a provision on page 15 of the Bill after line 14 to "ensure minimal administrative burden is placed on small to medium sized service providers”.

The amendment is aspirational in many respects but it also sets out a template. It is important to say the vast majority of requests that will come through due to this legislation will come to the largest companies in the world, in effect, which happen to be headquartered here. The SME test carried out by the Department is a very useful document. It estimated that the five largest service providers will receive about 95% of all current cross-border requests in Europe and that even if there are substantial changes, about 90% will go to those companies. I do not think anybody will feel much sympathy if those companies experience an additional administration or cost burden to fulfil their obligations. The irony is companies of that size are probably going to end up making savings as a result of the EU directive. Because they operate on such a global scale, having a unified framework across the EU will be of benefit to them. There are the big five, and you could even say big ten to include the vast majority, but 600 service providers are likely to be impacted as addressees in Ireland. A significant proportion of those are going to be small, Irish-based SMEs. When we are talking about, as I mentioned earlier, 300,000 requests annually, even a small proportion coming to those SMEs could be an important point.

The potential effect on SMEs has been identified by the Department in its analysis. It stated:

For SMEs in particular, the requirement under the e-Evidence Package for authorities to nominate an addressee as a single point of contact for law enforcement authorities seeking to access electronic evidence will make it easier and more affordable for service providers to authenticate production orders. [However] ... the most significant burden on SMEs identified by the Commission’s assessment is the obligation to designate (and empower) a legal representative ... For SMEs [and again, this is all taken directly from the Department’s regulatory analysis] not already engaged in voluntary direct cooperation activities, the e-Evidence Package presents a new regulatory burden that comes with potential legal, administrative and technical costs. SMEs that do not designate an addressee, for example,

or fail to comply with the e-Evidence Directive or Regulation will be exposed to administrative penalties.

Nobody is suggesting that should be a byball and that SMEs should be therefore exempt from having to comply with the directive, but when we talk about SMEs some people have the idea that we mean Enterprise Ireland companies, whereas in some cases we could be talking about companies with two or three employees, even though they may be operating in this area.

The e-evidence regulation requires the development of a centralised IT system. No one should know the potential costs of that better than this Government because every time it tries to do one, it has ended up spending clean fortunes. It is clear that "While many large service providers will create their own infrastructure to connect with the decentralised IT system, a requirement for SMEs to do the same would have a disproportionate impact." Again, those are not my words but those from the Department's report. That report says "consideration is being given to the development of a web-based interface which will allow service providers to communicate securely with authorities without having to establish their own infrastructure." I would welcome an update on whether that has happened.

The really interesting thing about the SME test the Department conducted is that it asks very clear questions and gives yes-no answers, which is somewhat unique. One of the questions is "Is the new policy, primary or secondary legislation, or regulatory compliance requirement relevant for SMEs?" The answer given was "Yes". The test then asks, "Are SME impacts likely to be more substantial than on other companies, for example, in terms of adverse effects?" The answer was unequivocally "Yes". There is a whole section about the consultations that took place and it says "Department officials engaged bilaterally with relevant industry stakeholders and with the SME representative bodies to incorporate their views where appropriate." That is important, but nothing in the legislation puts an onus on the director of the new body to take into consideration all of that. This is going to impact large companies and medium companies but it is also going to impact micro companies, which have between one and nine employees. As I mentioned, some of these could be very small indeed. Again, the question the Department asked of itself was "Has an estimate been carried out of the numbers of micro, small and medium companies affected directly or indirectly by the measure?" The answer to that question was "No".

I would have thought that if the Department had gone to the effort of carrying out an analysis of whether this would have a disproportionate impact on smaller enterprises and it came to the conclusion that it would, the next thing it would do is ask precisely how many companies it was going to have an impact on and ask what the Department and the Government could do, within legislation, to provide supports. Another question is "Will the proposed changes result in any of the following impacts for SMEs?" With respect to additional administrative costs, the answer was "Yes", as it was with respect to additional compliance costs. Across the board there is recognition.

The Department's paper sets out a number of mitigation measures that will be put in place, including:

- A 'one-stop-shop' for e-Evidence international cooperation
- Development of a web portal ... [which I have asked for an update on]

- Consideration of the impact of penalties based on size and financial situation
- No requirement for service providers to collect, compile and report data to Member States or the Commission

However, none of that is an assurance efforts will be made to ensure a minimal administrative burden is placed on small to medium-sized service providers. That is why this is a very simple amendment, but it is crucial because these enterprises are Irish based in large part. They are not going to up and leave as a result of changes to tax policy or international regulatory frameworks. These are the people who could potentially become the next generation of IT powerhouses, and more important, they could be based in Ireland. We need to be supporting these companies to navigate their way to a point where perhaps some of them will be able to compete, I hope in a better-regulated world, with some of the other large multinational operations. I hope they will be based in Ireland and will be part of the Irish framework as opposed to the international framework, which can be a bit like the wild west.

I ask the Minister of State to support this amendment.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Deputy for his amendment. He sought information on the e-portal. Connection to the decentralised IT system for SMEs will be via a web portal and access will be provided to their nominated addressee. If the data being returned is less than 25 Mb it will be sent via the system, but if it is greater it will be sent via another secure means and the cost associated with this will be minimal.

Unfortunately, I cannot accept amendments Nos. 2 and 3.

The language of amendment No. 2 is quite vague and it would be effectively meaningless in practice. The legal obligations on service providers are determined by EU regulation and directive. It is not open to the director to alter them. If there is a case for non-compliance, there will be an administrative burden on service providers who are subject to investigation but that cannot be avoided if a proper, fair and impartial investigation is to be carried out.

Amendment No. 3 seeks to introduce a double criminality provision. However, the question of double criminality is determined by the EU regulation. It is addressed in Article 12(1)(d) of the regulation, which provides one of the grounds for refusal of a European production order by an enforcing authority such as a director. It states:

the conduct for which the order has been issued does not constitute an offence under the law of the enforcing State, unless it concerns an offence listed within the categories of offences set out in Annex IV, as indicated by the issuing authority in the EPOC, if it is punishable in the issuing State by a custodial sentence or a detention order for a maximum period of at least three years.

Annex IV contains a list of 32 categories of serious offences, all of which constitute offences under Irish law. It is not open to us to vary this EU provision, which is legally binding on the director. In the case of Irish law, the regulation is not in conflict with the intention behind the amendment, so the amendment is redundant.

Deputy Matt Carthy: My apologies. I meant to speak to amendment No. 3. It is actually sometimes useful to get the Minister's response before speaking to an amendment.

I would encourage the Minister of State to look back at the Oireachtas justice committee. There was quite substantive discussion with officials on dual criminality, particularly how the civil law system that operates in most of Europe relates to Ireland's common law tradition. If the Minister of State were to review the transcript of that engagement, she would see clearly that the current wording of the legislation failed to fully reassure members this was adequately addressed. The justice committee has the benefit of having members who are much more legally astute than I am. They are able to probe these questions in great detail. The legal practitioners on the committee raised the most serious concerns in respect of this provision. While acknowledging provisions within the e-evidence package, we believe there needs to be strong, robust provisions in any legislation to ensure information will only be provided where any alleged offence constitutes an offence under Irish criminal law. That requires an explicit provision in domestic law.

The Minister of State described amendment No. 2 as very broad and virtually meaningless but it would insert a guidance to the new agency. That is something that has been included in other legislation, where there are guidances to ensure one of the agency's roles is not to overburden a particular sector. The Minister of State says this is EU regulations and directives and there is no ability to amend it but Ministers always seem to forget or ignore when talking about EU regulations and directives in this House that the Government signed up to them at an EU level. Any gaps and failings are failings and gaps on the part of the Government. That needs to be recognised.

Amendment No. 3 is important. I will press it but will not call a vote. I will call a vote on amendment No. 2 because it is really important there be provision in the legislation, not to allow companies escape the provisions of the directive, whose importance we acknowledge, but to recognise this will place an administrative and cost burden on some companies that will not be an issue for the larger companies. We need as legislators to say clearly we want to minimise that administrative and cost burden.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: The Department is not unsympathetic to small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the backbone of our economy. That is very much acknowledged. The web portal that will be used will have a minimal cost. The vast majority of orders in these cases will be directed to a small number of large service providers. However, where a small to medium-sized service provider is subject to an e-evidence order and holds electronic evidence related to the investigation of serious crime, it will have obligations under this regulation. That will be the cost of doing business in this industry. To relieve service providers of these obligations would likely create a gap criminals would exploit by moving to services offered by SMEs and would seriously undermine the effectiveness of the evidence package.

That said, the provisions in sections 38 and 40 are specifically designed to allow the director to remedy breaches by service providers without the need to proceed to investigation or the imposition of fines. In particular, the director can seek a compliance report to clarify the issues and may enter into an agreement with the service provider setting out the steps to be taken to remedy any issues identified. Furthermore, there is a legal obligation on the legal officers under section 50(2)(f) to give special consideration to small and medium-sized enterprises when considering the imposition of fines.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 64; Níl, 78; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cairns, Holly.	Burke, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Butler, Mary.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Butterly, Paula.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Cahill, Michael.	
Crowe, Seán.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cullinane, David.	Calleary, Dara.	
Cummins, Jen.	Canney, Seán.	
Daly, Pa.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Devine, Máire.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Chambers, Jack.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Clendennen, John.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Collins, Niall.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Connolly, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gannon, Gary.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cummins, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Currie, Emer.	
Graves, Ann.	Daly, Martin.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Dillon, Alan.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dolan, Albert.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawlor, George.	Foley, Norma.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Harkin, Marian.	
Nash, Ged.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Kyne, Seán.	

O'Reilly, Louise.	Lahart, John.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McGuinness, John.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Neville, Joe.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Connor, James.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

4 o'clock

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 15, between lines 14 and 15, to insert the following:

“(g) ensure the conduct for which orders have been received constitute an offence under Irish law.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 4 and 5 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 15, between lines 25 and 26, to insert the following:

"(g) the Data Protection Commission."

Like the previous amendments, these are simple proposals. Amendment No. 4 seeks to facilitate the office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation in making representations to or assisting the Data Protection Commission, DPC, in regard to the e-evidence package in the same way the legislation provides for such co-operation in the case of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, Coimisiún na Meán, the Corporate Enforcement Authority, Fiosrú, An Garda Síochána and the Revenue Commissioners. Amendment No. 5 does something very similar in facilitating the office of the director to enter into an information-sharing agreement with the Data Protection Commission in the same way it can do so with those other offices.

There are significant implications for data protection in Ireland arising from this Bill. To some extent, we will, in effect, be ceding sovereignty to courts in other jurisdictions. That is why the facilitation I am proposing should be included. At the committee hearing, the departmental officials stated that the Data Protection Commission did not consider it appropriate that it be the enforcement authority, and the Department accepted that. I, too, am willing to accept it. However, if the Department engaged with the commission at one point, as acknowledged by the officials, that suggests it believed at that point that the commission might be the appropriate body to deal with these matters. That surely is an acknowledgement that there is an overlap of functions or at least a relevance. Given everything we have already spoken about, it would be a welcome assurance for the legislation at least to formally facilitate engagement between the two bodies even if it did not mandate what that might look like at this time.

These are mainly technical amendments but they are important ones. I urge the Government to accept them.

Deputy Mark Ward: This is my first engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh. I wish her well in her role and look forward to more engagements with her, particularly in respect of youth justice, which is an area in which I have a lot of interest. I look forward to working with her from the Opposition benches in a tangible and constructive way.

As my colleague said, the Bill provides for engagement and information sharing between the office of the director and An Garda Síochána, Coimisiún na Meán and other bodies. We are seeking provision for the same engagement with the DPC. Some concerns were expressed at the committee regarding the way the Bill has been rolled out. I will not rehash all the arguments that have been made already, including by me on Second Stage. The manner in which the Bill has been brought through the Houses of the Oireachtas has seen Second Stage taken yesterday, with us going straight to Committee Stage today without the proper pre-legislative scrutiny that was needed. It may be that there is no need for the DPC to have a role in this but we do not know that because we did not have the time to tease out that question. We

did not have proper scrutiny of the Bill. In that context, I support my colleague's amendments to provide for an ongoing engagement with the DPC.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank Deputy Carthy for his amendments Nos. 4 and 5. I thank Deputy Ward for his comments on my appointment. Regretfully, I cannot accept the amendments. The definition of "public authority" in section 17(4) is intended to cover those Irish public authorities that have a law enforcement role and that may need to seek a European production order in the context of a criminal investigation into serious crime. The director in the role of central authority responsible for administration and transmission of such orders to other jurisdictions, and the receipt of data under Article 4.6 of the EU regulation, may have a role in assisting those bodies in the transmission of such orders and to pass on data received from service providers. That is provided for in section 17(1)(f).

Given that there could be a flow of data between the office of the director and those public authorities, provision is made in section 19 for information-sharing agreements to ensure the proper safeguarding of such data. The Data Protection Commission will not have a role in the issuing of European production orders and, therefore, it would not be appropriate to include a reference to the commission in sections 17 or 19. The Data Protection Commission does have a role in ensuring data is processed and the rights of data subjects are respected, and extensive powers to investigate any potential wrongdoing lie therein. The office of the director is subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018. The Data Protection Commission was consulted about this legislation and did not seek to have any special information-sharing agreements with the office.

I hope that answers the Deputies' concerns.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It would be useful if the Minister of State could outline in greater detail exactly what was involved in the consultation with the Data Protection Commission. It has been referenced both at the committee and here in the Dáil that there was such engagement with the commission. We have been told that it did not see itself as the appropriate enforcement authority and, as we have heard from the Minister of State just now, that it did not seek additional provision in the legislation. Was the question asked of the Data Protection Commission as to whether such a provision would be helpful or potentially useful in the outworking of this legislation? Without knowing the context of the engagement, it is too simplistic to say the departmental officials spoke to people in the commission about the legislation and they never mentioned this issue. Were there formal sit-down engagements and, if so, was the Minister or a Minister of State present for any of those engagements, or was it all done through written correspondence?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: On the Deputy's specific question about the format of the liaison with the Data Protection Commission, there was a lot of interaction with it about the scheme of the Bill. I advise Deputies that my Department, in accordance with Article 36.4 of the GDPR and section 84(12) of the Data Protection Act 2018, the Data Protection Commission was consulted about the specifics of the drafting of the Bill throughout. This was done in writing, not orally. The Data Protection Commission has carefully examined all data protection-related measures in the Bill and the related European measures at a very high level, and it did not

identify a need for any such amendments or explicit provisions allowing for information-sharing agreements between the office and the Data Protection Commission.

I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It does not really. I understand that the Minister of State is only new in the role and I do not expect her to know the details of that. I think she is confirming that there was no actual physical engagement and this was all done via emails or written submission. The question I asked was whether the question was put to the Data Protection Commission. Is it the case that all agencies received an email with the draft Bill, telling them to highlight any concerns they may have with it, and if one did not come back, it was assumed that the Minister could get up and say that agency did not identify any need for additional powers? For example, did each of the State bodies referenced in the legislation, off its own bat, request to be included in the legislation or were those bodies in the initial drafts? Had this paragraph (g) about the Data Protection Commission been included in the first draft, is there reason to believe that the Data Protection Commission would have objected to it? If so, perhaps we could get a sense of the thinking about why the Data Protection Commission would not want to be included in the legislation in this manner.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: As I said, this legislation applies to criminal law enforcement bodies. We know that the Data Protection Commission is not one such body. We consulted the DPC about the general scheme and it commented on the benefit of information sharing with listed public authorities. An expert team from the DPC would have been in touch with my Department for detailed engagement on a written basis, which is not unusual.

At this stage, I have nothing further to add about the matter.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 17 agreed to.

Section 18 agreed to.

SECTION 19

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 16, between lines 12 and 13, to insert the following:

“(g) the Data Protection Commission.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 19 agreed to.

SECTION 20

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 16, between lines 23 and 24, to insert the following:

“(4) Such an annual report shall contain statistical data in relation to—

- (a) the number of orders which were notified to the Director,
- (b) the number of orders that were refused,
- (c) the number of agreements entered into with service providers under *subsection 40(1)* and the status thereof by category,
- (d) the number of instances whereby a court confirmed, set aside, replaced, or remitted either the decision or financial penalty of an adjudicating officer,
- (e) the number of instances whereby the Director failed to sanction or refuse an order within the required timeframe, and
- (f) the whole-time equivalent allocation, by cost, by role,

including the data category requested, the addressees, the situation (emergency case or not), grounds for refusal by category, number of court appearances, by country of origin.”.

Going back to our infamous committee meeting, which I know was before the Minister of State was appointed, we expected the meeting to be a short, technical briefing, but it raised serious concerns among members about legislation that we thought would be fairly straightforward. One question that was asked that could not be answered related to the potential scale of what this body could cost the Irish taxpayer annually. Somebody mentioned that we were kicking off with a €2.8 million budget this year, which would provide for 29 staff and associated costs. We also know that there are suggestions that we could end up with 150 staff in this body. We are told that the State is expected to receive in excess of 300,000 orders each year. We also know that the Department seemed to think, or at least provided evidence, that the impact on the courts would be minimal and the Courts Service itself has said that limited data is available about the number of cases that may arise after commencement. That is probably a diplomatic way of saying that we have not a clue. It goes on to suggest that the Department's projections may prove optimistic.

I am quite concerned that after the summer, when this comes into effect, combined with the as yet unknown outworkings of the reform to barristers' pay and so on, and when we have the EU Presidency putting pressure on the ability of gardaí to attend courts, we may be facing a substantial backlog in the courts, even worse than is already the case. Apart from all of these things, we know that many questions have not been answered but we do not know much else.

This amendment is intended to ensure that, at a minimum, the Oireachtas can be assured that there will be an annual report that will lay out how the office is functioning so that we can be kept abreast on an ongoing basis. Paragraph (c) is necessary so that we have a view of the number of instances where the office is engaging in what might be called corrective behaviour rather than levelling fines against service providers in breach of their obligations. Paragraph (d) would help to inform how the office is functioning, if its decisions are actually standing up to scrutiny and, crucially, the impact, if any, it is having on the Courts Service. Paragraph (e) would likewise provide a view about whether the office was meeting its obligations. Paragraph (f) is included to provide insight into the efficiencies and effectiveness of the office, how a large organisation like this can develop and the bill that the Irish taxpayer will be expected to foot for this facet of European co-operation. I can almost pre-empt that the Minister of State will say that this is not necessary and it is open to Members to submit parliamentary questions,

but given the concerns about the potential annual costs of this new body, I believe it is important that, from day 1, we set out that the organisation will have to report on these matters in an annual report so that there can be transparency and scrutiny.

We know that there is an issue with the Minister of State's Department. Maybe the Minister of State can put it on her to-do list. It is what I would call the refusal and evasiveness of her Department when dealing with any parliamentary questions.

For virtually every body under the Department's authority at this point, we get responses back to parliamentary questions saying that the Minister will not be held accountable and will not provide any information. It is not the same in every other Department. Many other Departments will provide information or, at a minimum, seek out information for the benefit of Deputies. However, the Department of justice has got to a point where it is just refusing point blank. I would say it probably makes as many refusals to parliamentary questions as it gives answers. I assume this body will be the same and the Department will again refuse to answer any parliamentary questions, so we will be dependent on the annual report to actually provide information not only to Members of the Oireachtas, but also to members of the public. Therefore, we need to ensure that the annual report is actually detailed and provides the type of information that would be useful for us in analysing the effectiveness of this body.

Deputy Mark Ward: Having an annual report on something that is new - a new Bill, a new operation or a new entity - is an absolute no-brainer just to see how things are working. We have no idea of the scale of cost of this and where it will end up. Based on the bit of information we got at the pre-legislative scrutiny stage, it is starting with 29 staff. It could be dealing with up to 300,000 orders each year and there are some suggestions that the staff number could rise to 150. Will 150 be the maximum number of staff in this new body? Do we expect 300,000 orders a year or could that rise?

There is the potential for this to be a runaway train. We do not know where it is going to end up. That is why I am saying that having an annual report to report on how many staff are coming in and the cost of it is a no-brainer and it will give us the evidence to see if we need to put more resources into it. The office may have more resources than it needs and we might be able to deploy those resources somewhere else where they are really needed.

I also have concerns about the impact on our court system, which is already bursting at the seams. Nothing I have heard so far, yesterday on Second Stage or at the pre-legislative scrutiny, has given me any confidence that this operation will not put any additional pressure on our court system. Does the Minister of State have any evidence that the court system will not be unduly impacted by all of these orders coming in? In relation to the annual report we are asking for, and in addition to the costs, the staffing levels and the other matters that were outlined by Deputy Carthy and me, the annual report could provide the evidence of how this is impacting on our court system.

Having an annual report on something that is new is a no-brainer. It is best practice for anybody bringing in something new at the very start. Whether a small or medium-sized enterprise, a multinational or a government, when bringing in something new, there should be an annual report to see how things are working. The Minister of State should consider it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The audacity of such an amendment from Deputy Carthy. Imagine wanting an annual report on a brand new structure, a brand new office, that we are told will probably have 300,000 requests and will try to hold to account some of the largest corporations in the world that may be liable to fines of 2% of their annual turnover. This democratic Chamber, which is supposedly one of accountability where we hold account, is simply asking for an annual report and somehow I assume that will not be the case.

I do not blame to Minister of State at all for this, but there is an arrogance that emanates from the Department of justice. It shows itself in the number of parliamentary questions that are declined and how it deals with Bills of considerable substance. Last week, the annulment of historical convictions for homosexual men was lumped in with the same Bill dealing with whether rape counselling notes should be allowed in trials. Today, we had to submit amendments for the Third Stage of a Bill before Second Stage had even concluded.

In the current environment in which this Chamber operates, this is an audacious amendment that simply asks for the means to allow us to scrutinise whether a new institution is actually working. I imagine that the amendment will be declined, which is a shame and shows how things have developed in this Chamber.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I know that time is sometimes very precious in this House. Section 20 of the legislation requires the publication of an annual report. That is set out very clearly in the legislation.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Will it impact on the Courts Service?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: The annual report shall provide information as the director considers appropriate or as the director may direct. The section deliberately did not prescribe in detail exactly what statistical data should be included, as we are setting up a new entity. Until we have some experience of how it operates, it would be premature to determine what statistical information is most relevant and available. My Department believes that we should maintain a flexible approach at this stage but I will put on the record that I see no reason for the information referred to in the amendment not to be included in future in an annual report. I also remind Deputies that the Freedom of Information Act will apply, so there will be no question of hiding information.

In any case, most of the statistical information will be provided by the director to the Minister under section 21. Also under section 21, the director must submit to the Minister information on the number of notifications made under Article 8 and the number of production orders refused. This must be done by type of data requested, address and grounds for refusal.

Deputies were looking for further information on the impact on our court system. I assure Deputies that this impact will be minimal. For the purposes of this Bill, our courts will principally be involved in confirming compliance decisions, the imposition of fines and appeals. Our courts will otherwise not have a significant role in incoming orders issued by courts based in other member states.

In relation to the costs, the potential number of cases that will be going through the office and the number of requests made to the office, current estimates suggest that approximately

300,000 orders will be sent to service providers based in the State each year. This is based on the number of law enforcement requests currently received by the largest service providers based here. However, as only certain types of data request require a notification to be sent to the enforcing authority, the office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation will receive only a subset of those orders for review. Current estimates suggest that the office could receive around 24,000 notifications each year and as the e-evidence package represents a new legal framework for obtaining electronic evidence across the EU, the exact number of orders that will be issued and, consequently, the number of notifications sent to the office will only be known once the regulation comes into effect.

Deputies were also interested in the proposed cost of the office. An allocation of €2.8 million was secured in budget 2026 to establish the new office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation. The figure of €2.8 million reflects both pay and non-pay costs associated with setting up the office in 2026. This is a part-year cost. The approach to establishing the office as agreed by the Government has always been that it will do so on a phased basis. The Department has been focused on the progression of the legislation and the recruitment of the director, which is nearing completion. The process of recruitment of staff of the office is under way and my officials are engaging with the Public Appointments Service on that matter. It is expected that 20 staff will be recruited to the office by the end of the year and the recruitment process will continue as and when required on a phased basis.

I hope that answers the Deputies' questions.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome that the Minister of State has put on the record that she believes the information set out in this amendment should be provided in the annual report. That is important. However, I think there is a tacit acknowledgement in what the Minister of State has said that there will be no obligation whatsoever on the new entity to actually provide that because it has been given direction by the legislation to produce an annual report with no direction as to what should be in it. It is like asking 20 children in a class to write a report on their trip to the zoo, which could result in 20 very different versions of what was actually important apart from, hopefully, all of them agreeing that it was enjoyed by all.

A couple of things need to be said in respect of accountability.

First, there is a requirement for the Minister to receive information from the new body. Is the Minister obliged or committed to publishing that or sharing it with the rest of the Oireachtas and to being answerable in respect of it?

Second, the Minister said the body will be subject to freedom of information, FOI, requests. That is not an appropriate mechanism for transparency. Most of the reasons FOIs have to be submitted in the first place are because there is a lack of transparency around a particular matter, obviously personal issues excepted. I do not know why we would put a stipulation on a statutory body to produce an annual report without any detail as to what should be in it. I recall legislation I dealt with directly regarding the Agri Food Regulator and another body I was dealing with. The provisions around the annual reports were very detailed precisely because the Houses of the Oireachtas wanted to set out very clearly the information they expect in a report. If we do not actually set out what it is we are looking for in an annual report, invariably what ends up happening is that people compare one annual report with another to see what is missing. That is not the way we should be commencing this process at all.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister of State for giving us some sort of clarity that there will be an annual report. I refer to the process yesterday and today. We were here yesterday for Second Stage and the senior Minister got up and gave his opening statement. We all stood up and asked him some questions we were hoping would be referred to in his concluding remarks. Those questions were not answered, however, because another Minister for State came in and did not address the specific questions we had asked. No offence to the Minister of State, but we have another Minister of State here today. There is no consistency with this whatsoever.

The Minister of State expects 24,000 orders per year will be processed by this body and she hopes to have 20 staff in place by the end of the year. I do not know how long these orders are going to take to process but, if each of those staff members will be processing orders and will not be there for other administration purposes, that is 1,200 orders each member of staff will process per year. How long does the Minister of State reckon it will take to process one of these orders? There seems to be a really big burden on the staff the Minister of State is hoping to recruit. I ask for clarity on that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I have a brief question. In terms of the annual report which is catered for in section 20, what should this House expect from the first annual report? In 12 months' time, when the first annual report is delivered, what information should we expect? Presumably we understand that the office may evolve. There was reference to 30 staff when we were at the committee and it seems to be 20 now, along with a budget of €2.8 million. If this moves into the type of behemoth we imagine it would be, what should we expect from that first report?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: In relation to the annual report, Deputy Carthy was curious as to whether it would be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Section 20(4) provides that it would be presented to the Houses of the Oireachtas. As to what the contents of the report would be and what would form part of the report, that would be at the discretion of the Minister. Under section 20(3), the annual report "shall be in such form, and include such information in respect of the performance by the Director of his or her functions, as the Director considers appropriate or as the Minister may direct." As I outlined, under section 21, the director must submit to the Minister information on the number of notifications under article 8, the number of production orders refused and the type of data requested, the addressees and the grounds for refusal, etc.

In relation to Deputy Gannon's point on why not be prescriptive at this stage or why state we are not being prescriptive, this is a new body and office and it was the considered thought of the Minister that the section would deliberately not be prescriptive so that we can take into account the experience and how the body is operating. It was the Minister's view that it would be premature to determine what statistical information is most relevant at this point, and he came to that decision having considered the matter with his officials and having put a lot of thought into it. I hope that answers some of the Deputies' questions.

Deputy Mark Ward: If the Minister of State has the information, in relation to the 20 members of staff and the 24,000 orders per year they are going to be processing, how long will

each of these take to process? Does the Minister of State think that is going to be a burden on the staff?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Orders must be processed in ten days or 96 hours.

Deputy Mark Ward: I will have to get my calculator and work out how long it is going to take. Maybe that could be in the annual report also.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 20 agreed to.

Section 21 agreed to.

SECTION 22

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Amendments Nos. 7 and 12 are related. Amendment No. 12 is consequential on amendment No. 7. Amendments Nos. 7 and 12 may be discussed together.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 17, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

“(2) Notwithstanding this section, the Minister shall, no later than 31 July, publish guidance notes for small to medium sized service providers to promote compliance with their obligations under this Act.”

This is, again, a simple insertion. It goes back to the earlier point on the need to actually support small and medium enterprises which will receive a minority of the requests but for which this will have the biggest impact and implication, as acknowledged by the Department itself. We know all service providers are going to have to comply with the directive and regulation by August. There will be very little time between the enactment of the legislation and the obligation being placed on service providers, and that is entirely a result of the approach of the Minister and Department to this, bringing it forward late in the day and not being able to answer questions. This is again rushed legislation from the Department of justice. I appreciate there is a Department webpage in relation to registering as a service provider but there is a significant body of work necessary to ensure that SMEs that will be affected will be adequately supported.

I hope the Minister of State will accept this amendment but, on the off-chance she is not going to accept one of my amendments, I ask that she give a definitive answer on the number of service providers in Ireland at this stage that are going to be caught up in this legislation. Is there an online portal, web app or similar available to each of them? Will the Minister put into the hands of each service provider a comprehensive but accessible and straightforward guide as to their obligations and how they can be best complied with?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Does Deputy Carthy want to address amendment No. 12 now? If not, I can let other Members in.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Not at this time.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Do any other Members wish to speak?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: In relation to the Deputy's question on the number of service providers that will be affected, 420 have been identified but the Department believes it may affect up to 600 service providers. I hope that provides clarification.

I propose to address amendments Nos. 7 and 12 together. Regretfully, I cannot accept either of these amendments. The purpose of establishing an independent office is to ensure that the Minister, as a member of the Executive, does not have any direct role in the enforcement of the obligations by service providers under this Bill. It would be neither desirable nor practical for the Minister to publish guidance notes when he or she has no role in determining compliance with the provisions. That is why section 22 provides that the director may issue guidance notes. I will not agree to an amendment that would undermine the role of the director in this regard, and neither can I agree to give service providers a free pass to breach their obligations under the e-evidence package pending the issue of guidance notes. I point out that the provisions of sections 38 and 40 are specifically designed to allow the director to remedy breaches by service providers without the need to proceed to investigations and the imposition of fines.

In particular, the director can seek a compliance report to clarify what the issues are and may enter into an agreement with the service provider setting out the steps to be taken to remedy any issues. Furthermore, there is a legal obligation on adjudication officers under section 50(2)(f) to give special consideration to small and medium-sized enterprises when considering the imposition of fines. The purpose is to ensure compliance with the legislation and the imposition of fines is very much a last resort.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 22 agreed to.

Sections 23 to 31, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 32

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 21, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

“(4) (a) Where an authorised officer or an adjudication officer compels the disclosure of a record or takes possession of a record in accordance with *subsection (3)*—

(i) the officer concerned shall not, pending the final determination of an application under *subsection (4)* or *(6)*, as the case may be, use, copy, communicate or otherwise act upon the record or its contents for any purpose other than its secure retention in accordance with any directions given by the High Court under *subsection (7)*,

(ii) the record shall be retained in a sealed and secure form, and shall not be accessed by any person, save for the purpose of complying with a direction of the High Court under *subsection (7)*, and

(iii) any person having custody of the record shall be bound by the restriction in *subsection (3)* and shall, if required by the High Court, give an undertaking to that effect.

(b) Where no application is made under *subsection (4)* or *(6)* within the period of 30 days referred to in *subsection (4)*, or within such extended period as the High Court may allow, the record shall be returned forthwith to the person from whom it was taken or compelled, and the officer concerned shall certify in writing that the record has not been used, copied or communicated during the period of its retention.”.

I take the opportunity to wish the Minister of State well in her new role. We served together in the Seanad and it great to see her promotion. I am sure we will have many engagements in the coming months. Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 deal with privileged material. In recent times, the Government has sometimes been slow to recognise the impact that some of this legislation could have on the protection of legal or journalistic privilege. Under section 32(3) and (4), the Bill allows for the compelled disclosure of potentially privileged material. This is subject to a subsequent High Court determination with a 30-day window to apply. The key word here is "subsequent". As currently drafted, the provision puts the cart before the horse. The 30-day window runs from the date of disclosure of taking of possession. An authorised officer has up to 30 days to apply to the High Court for a retroactive determination of privilege after he or she has already taken possession of that piece of digital evidence but there is nothing here that amounts to any sort of explicit ban or interim restraint on the use of that privileged material while the court application is pending. We believe that this is essential and have tabled these two amendments to make clear on the face of the Bill that where an authorised officer or adjudication officer compels disclosure or takes possession of a record, the record may be subject to legal privilege and they cannot use, copy, communicate or act upon that record before the High Court's determination. I hope the Government will look closely at these amendments and that common sense will prevail. We want to prevent any potential loopholes with this legislation and I hope the Minister of State can agree to our amendments.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Regretfully, I must oppose both amendments. Section 32 is intended to deal with a situation where an investigation is under way by an authorised officer into a possible contravention by a service provider of a relevant obligation under the directive - notification of designated establishment or legal representative or failure to provide same with the necessary powers and resources. It could also apply where an adjudication is being made as to whether to impose a fine for a breach of certain provisions of the e-evidence regulation by a service provider. In the course of such an investigation or adjudication, the service provider may have to provide certain material. Section 32, which is a standard provision on the Statute Book that functions well, addresses the situation where a question of privilege arises. The intention is that in such cases, the material shall be handed over subject to its being held in safe-keeping by the authorised officer or adjudication officer, who must make an application to the High Court within 30 days. The High Court then decides what to do with it.

If I understand the Deputy correctly, his concern is about what happens to the material between the handing over the material and the application to the High Court. I agree with the Deputy that the material should be kept securely but I do not believe that his amendment is required. Subsection (3) of section 32 already provides that an officer can only compel the disclosure of the record or take possession of the record provided that the privilege asserted can be maintained. This provision is already quite sufficient to achieve the end sought by the Deputy's amendment - the preservation of privilege asserted over the record until such time as the court has ruled on the matter. An authorised officer or adjudication officer may only access material for the purpose of an investigation or adjudication and clearly cannot use material if privilege is claimed until and unless the High Court judge issues a direction or rules on the matter. Furthermore, under section 33(1), an authorised officer may not disclose any confidential information. To do so is a criminal offence under section 33(3). There are similar provisions for adjudication officers in section 33(2).

In summary, I agree with the sentiment underlying these amendments but I believe they are unnecessary and may be too restrictive as to means of preserving privilege. I am confident that the existing provisions and the High Court will ensure that there is no such abuse.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 21, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“(c) the prohibition on use, copying, communication or other action in respect of the record pending the final determination of the application, including such prohibition as against any person to whom the record may have been disclosed prior to the assertion of privilege.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Mark Ward: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 21, between lines 34 and 35, to insert the following:

“(9) Counselling records in relation to sexual offence trials shall not be processed under this Act.”.

We have had extensive engagement with the Minister in recent weeks in the Dáil regarding the disclosure of counselling notes in trials. I appreciate that the Minister has moved somewhat on the issue but I will take the opportunity to ask him to move further and meet the needs as outlined by survivors with whom we have engaged. This gets to the core of the concerns regarding this Bill. It involves what happens with a court case in another jurisdiction regarding an alleged offence when it is known that a counsellor has electronic records of counselling notes. An order is received by a service provider in Ireland that provides online storage facilities. Is the Minister of State willing to stand over legal protection for survivors of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence that is less than what we provide for people in Ireland? The Minister of State might say that the legal systems here are different and have different safeguards and that would be true but is she willing to stand over whichever legal system in the EU may provide the least amount of protection to survivors-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): We must conclude.

Deputy Mark Ward: Time is up. That is not the first time we have had discussions and time has run out.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): As the time has expired, I am now required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 16 June 2026: "That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Title is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the Health (Amendment) Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

Guardianship of Infants and Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2026: Report and Final Stages

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 4, lines 18 to 32, to delete all words from and including "(1) Where—" in line 18 down to and including line 32 and substitute the following:

"(1) Where a person (in this section referred to as the 'convicted guardian') who is a guardian of a child is convicted in the State of the murder or manslaughter of a person who was, at the time of the commission of the offence concerned, another guardian of the child concerned the Child and Family Agency shall, as soon as practicable but not later than 3 months after the conviction or any extension of that period under subsection (2), apply to the court in that behalf for an order under subsection (3).".

I welcome Mr. David French to the Visitors Gallery. When he attended the Oireachtas committee on justice yesterday, I said only half in jest that he has a better attendance rate in this place than some Members do. Everybody in the House, including the Minister, will acknowledge the reason this Bill is before us at all is largely down to the efforts of David and his family. Their efforts in memory of Valerie are commendable.

The amendment seeks to strengthen section 12C by requiring Tusla to apply to the court in every case following a conviction and by requiring that to be done within three months. As it stands, there is a discretionary test I am concerned about that could limit applications where reasonable cause is not established and that contradicts the stated intention that the application would be made in all cases. A conviction for the murder or manslaughter of a co-guardian is in itself sufficient evidence of a fundamental breach of the duty to the child and no further

threshold need apply, so removing the discretion ensures consistency, protects the child and avoids the risk the legislation becomes ineffective in practice. I raised this with the Minister on Committee Stage. My appeal was that he would either accept this amendment or provide another formula of words that would be acceptable to him because there is a concern in terms of the veracity of Tusla in these matters. We had Tusla representatives before the committee yesterday. Essentially, it appears that in practice this will operate with a single social worker making a determination. That is concerning. There could be a situation where Tusla decides, via one person or very small number of people, that this law should not be applicable in a situation whereby somebody who has killed another parent and is still considered under law a legal guardian of a child who has been deprived of a parent by that individual and that that might remain legally the position at the behest of a single institution. Therefore, we believe there is a need for absolute clarity in terms of the law and to ensure there is no ambiguity.

As the Minister knows, we have a further amendment that clarifies one of the areas he has raised and it is a valid point whereby somebody could have been convicted but on the basis of all the discernible evidence it could be proven that they had been a victim of domestic abuse. In that regard, we recognise there needs to be a level of discretion but it is our view that discretion should be in the hands of the courts, not in the hands of the agency. There should be a very clear level playing field in terms of where these decisions are made. As in all cases, once Tusla brings an application, it will be for the courts to adjudicate but there is a real concern by campaigners and by the people who have brought us to this point that you could have a scenario whereby one parent is responsible for the murder or manslaughter of another parent and Tusla, in whatever wisdom or logic, decides it does not believe there is a case to be brought to remove guardianship rights from that parent. There is no mechanism for appeal in that regard. That is unfair and it goes against the spirit of everything the Minister has quite rightly said in terms of the importance of this legislation.

Deputy Máire Devine: The Guardianship of Infants and Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2026 will always be known as Valerie's law. Thanks to Valerie's brother, David French, this is a very proud moment for all of us and especially for him and his family. His tenacity is to be admired given the arduous journey over the years to get to this point, with many occasions appearing to be confusing. I would say that trying to find a way has been exhausting for him but sibling love and loyalty spurred him on.

As a Sinn Féin spokesperson on gender and domestic violence, with the support of the agencies that support women, we are always calling on men - our brothers, husbands, sons, fathers and uncles - to stand with us; to stand with women. Often men say, "We are not like that; you have our support". Where is your voice, your presence in marching with us demanding protections, in addressing your mates' behaviour and in calling out cringeworthy attitudes and actions? Take a leaf from Mr. French's book whose dignified determination shows how our men and boys can be, how they respect their loves, their mothers, wives and daughters, who make up over half the population. He stood firm and this will inform his nephews - Valerie's sons - how to carry their heartache while living their best lives as equality advocates in their community. Maith thú, Daithí, we owe you much.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is an important moment to acknowledge the courage and commitment of Mr. David French who has travelled here for every committee hearing and

briefing out of love for his sister Valerie and to ensure the passage of the Bill we are discussing today. It is an important moment to take stock to reflect on that courage. Too often, we see people who have to place the trauma of their loss or absence alongside the courage needed to get up and go out and make things better for those who come after them. It is an important point to mention. I will be supporting Deputy Carthy's amendment. We should acknowledge that Tusla is a reluctant litigant in this regard and there should be space for families to ensure they can seek accountability when perhaps Tusla does not see the purpose of that should the case arise.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Like my colleagues, I too welcome Mr. David French to the Gallery. I commend him on his perseverance and the encouragement he has provided, not only to me in terms of trying to ensure the legislation could be introduced to the Houses of the Oireachtas but also in terms of the encouragement and support to other Members of the House.

5 o'clock

It is unusual to have legislation that is universally supported. I am very conscious Members are perfectly entitled to put down amendments but it is unusual to have legislation that is so universally supported. This is in no small part due to the presence and campaigning of David French.

I thank Deputy Carthy for his amendment, which seeks to do two things. It seeks to amend section 12C, which at present, under the draft that was approved on Committee Stage, requires the Child and Family Agency to bring an application as soon as practicable but not later than six months after the conviction of the person for manslaughter or murder. Deputy Carthy's amendment wishes to amend this so that it states "3 months". I cannot accept the amendment because I believe the statutory provision that is there at present is fairly clear to the Child and Family Agency. It requires it to bring an application as soon as practicable. This requires it to move with considerable expediency and the timeline limit on which the application can be made is six months.

My concern is that by changing the statutory limitation from six months to three months I will find myself in a situation where the Child and Family Agency will recognise that it cannot get all of the material before the courts within the three months and we will encourage applications for extensions of time. As Deputy Carthy is aware, under the legislation such applications for an extension of time are permitted and sometimes they may be necessary. My concern is that if we limit it so tightly to three months, there will necessarily be constant immediate applications for extensions.

It is also important to point out that when it comes to making this application it will, presumably, be an application that is made on affidavit by Tusla, in which it will have to set out the basis for the application. It will have to provide evidential proof of the conviction by way of the order from the Central Criminal Court. It will take a bit of time to do this. It will also need to put before the court evidence that it states is necessary to show that the second requirement for the implication of the application has been met, which is that the convicted parent has failed in his or her obligation to the child.

This brings me to the second part of Deputy Carthy's amendment, which is that he seeks to remove from the consideration the test that Tusla must be satisfied the convicted guardian has failed in his or her duty towards the child concerned. The reason this is included, and I emphasised this on Committee Stage, is based on the constitutional threshold for State intervention in the family. It is important, as I have stated repeatedly, that this provision is not perceived as being a penalty imposed on a guardian who is convicted of manslaughter or murder. That is not the purpose of it. If it were the purpose, challenges would be brought to it on grounds of equality. The purpose is to trigger an application in circumstances where there is a conviction of a guardian of the murder or manslaughter of another guardian and there is a belief that the convicted guardian has failed in his or her duty towards the child concerned. I agree with virtually everyone here that in the vast majority of circumstances where an individual guardian has been convicted of murder or manslaughter of another guardian and there are children, this is in itself a child protection issue and the person who is convicted has failed in his or her duty towards the child concerned.

To use the example that Deputy Carthy gave a few moments ago, which is present in one of his forthcoming amendments, say there was a situation where a female guardian who had repeatedly been subjected to domestic violence was prosecuted for murder or manslaughter and was convicted. There could be situations where Tusla, as the party bringing the application, could look to see who else was a potential guardian of the children. It could determine in this situation and in this context that it would not be appropriate to bring an application because the mother of the children should remain as the guardian. In such circumstances it would be inappropriate for such an application to be made. For this reason I cannot accept the amendment, notwithstanding that we all agree with the sentiment that we want applications such as this to be brought as soon as is reasonably practicable. I cannot remove the second limb of the triggering test, which is the requirement for Tusla to be satisfied that the convicted guardian has failed in his or her duty towards the children.

Tusla is the Child and Family Agency and it is the appropriate entity to bring such an application. I know in due course this afternoon we will be discussing amendments from Deputy Carthy on other family members being permitted to bring an application. This would create a very contentious and difficult scenario for the family and the children in certain circumstances. This is a public law issue. Because of this, the public statutory body responsible for the protection of children is the appropriate entity to bring the application. For this reason I respectfully say I cannot agree to Deputy Carthy's first amendment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will make a couple of points. In respect of the three-month provision included in my amendment, I want to restate clearly, as I did to the Minister on Committee Stage, that if this was the big stumbling block I would have quite happily accepted his suggestion to increase the time. To me this is a red herring because it is clearly on the record of the House that there is a willingness to accept it. I do not accept his other arguments in respect of the broader issue here, which is the ability of a single agency. Tusla has told the Oireachtas justice committee this will mean that ultimately it will be down to the call of a single social worker, somebody who in 90% of cases, if not 99.9% of cases, will have the best interests of the child at heart, or at least what they consider to be the best interests of the child at heart. They will make a judgment call. We could have a situation where somebody who is convicted of murdering a parent remains the guardian of the children, where an individual or a small

group of individuals in Tusla think this is okay but any other reasonable person outside of that organisation might consider it not to be okay. There is no mechanism in this law for anybody else to make this application. It is not possible for a garda, other family members or interested parties in terms of the well-being of the child. This to me is a lacuna in the law and more than is the case with any of the other amendments, should we get to a point where we could agree to this alone, we would have much stronger legislation that would have a much clearer impetus and support of all concerned.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We had a good discussion about this on Committee Stage. I note what Deputy Carthy is trying to do but I have to stick with what I have in terms of the six months and the statutory requirement. The last thing any of us in the House want is for an application to be challenged in the courts by a person who is convicted and who says it is an extra penalty being imposed on them, that they are a person who has been convicted of murder or manslaughter and is being treated differently from others who have been convicted of murder or manslaughter because an extra penalty is being imposed upon them, namely, the removal of their guardianship rights. I have to take this into account. The reason the Minister for children is sitting beside me and is so supportive of the legislation is that it is about protecting children. That is the primary focus of it. It arises in the context of the criminal justice system reaching a certain determination but the provision in the legislation is about protecting children. If I deviate from that and start focusing on matters other than children, we are going to get ourselves into legal difficulties.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 82; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cronin, Réada.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Crowe, Seán.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cullinane, David.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cummins, Jen.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Daly, Pa.	Calleary, Dara.	
Devine, Máire.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Chambers, Jack.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Clendennen, John.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Collins, Niall.	

Farrelly, Aidan.	Connolly, John.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gannon, Gary.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cummins, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Currie, Emer.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Daly, Martin.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dillon, Alan.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kenny, Martin.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawless, Paul.	Foley, Norma.	
Lawlor, George.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Grealish, Noel.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Harkin, Marian.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Murphy, Paul.	Heydon, Martin.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Higgins, Emer.	
Nash, Ged.	Keogh, Keira.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Lahart, John.	
Nolan, Carol.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McEntee, Helen.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murphy, Michael.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Neville, Joe.	
Rice, Pádraig.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Connor, James.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Shea, John Paul.	

Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Members to remain in the Chamber while Deputy Carthy moves amendment No. 2:

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 6, between lines 8 and 9, to insert the following:

"(8)(a) Notwithstanding subsections (1) to (7), this section shall not apply, or shall apply with such modifications as the court considers appropriate, in a case where the convicted guardian was convicted of manslaughter and the court is satisfied that—

(i) the act giving rise to the conviction was committed in self-defence, or

(ii) at the time of the commission of the offence, the convicted guardian had been subjected to domestic violence (within the meaning of the Domestic Violence Act 2018) by the deceased guardian, and the offence occurred in circumstances materially connected to that history of domestic violence.

(b) In determining whether paragraph (a) applies, the court shall have regard to—

(i) any findings of fact made in the criminal proceedings,

(ii) any evidence of domestic violence, including patterns of coercive control, and

(iii) the best interests of the child concerned.

(c) Where paragraph (a) applies, the Child and Family Agency shall not be required to make an application under subsection (1), unless the Agency is satisfied that, notwithstanding those circumstances, there is a risk to the safety or welfare of the child concerned.

(d) Nothing in this subsection shall prevent the court from making an order under subsection (3) where it is satisfied that such an order is necessary and proportionate to protect the safety or welfare of the child concerned."

In moving amendment No. 2, I am conscious that the vote on amendment No. 1 is probably going to be the only one on this legislation, which has cross-party support and will be known as Valerie's law because of the campaigning efforts of David French, who has brought us all to this point. It is appropriate, seeing that we are all in this House, to acknowledge David and his family.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 11, lines 29 to 32, to delete all words from and including "(1) An" in line 29 down to and including line 32 and substitute the following:

"(1) An application to the court for an order under this Part shall not be made in relation to the child concerned other than on notice to—

(a) each guardian of that child (including a victim guardian within the meaning of section 12D), and

(b) the next of kin of a deceased guardian of that child, where that deceased guardian died as a result of an offence referred to in section 12C(1); provided that a person shall not be regarded as next of kin for the purposes of this paragraph if that person has been convicted of that offence,".

This amendment ensures that all relevant parties, including the next of kin of a deceased guardian, would be notified of court applications affecting a child. It is important that the family of a guardian who has been killed be made a notice party in proceedings. Such a family have a clear and legitimate interest in the child's welfare, and that role should be recognised, respected and reflected in the process. We discussed this at length on Committee Stage and the Minister did not accept our amendment of the basis that "next of kin" was not defined in the legislation, but the meaning of "next of kin" is quite clear, as is how that would be applied in real terms before a court. It is for this reason that we tabled the amendment again on Report Stage. I ask the Minister to accept it. If he feels there is a better formula of wording, we have been very clear that we are open to that. This is about ensuring families are notified. We should remember that we are talking about families who have lost a loved one in the most cruel circumstances by murder or manslaughter. They have a vested interest in the well-being of the child in relation to whom a court order is applied for. I do not believe notifying them is too much to ask for.

We asked Tusla when its representatives appeared before the committee about their approach to these matters and they were not forthcoming in giving the committee a sense of how the agency currently approaches the issue. It is crucially and critically important that we do not have a situation where there is a court hearing in respect of a case involving a child where the family of the deceased person is not a notice party or perhaps is not even aware that the case is before the court. I appeal to the Minister to either agree to this wording or agree to find a formula of words that will meet the same purpose.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his amendment. I do have a better type of wording and it is set out in section 12I of the legislation. The section is entitled "Notice parties to proceedings under this Part". Section 12I(i) states, "An application to the court for an order under this Part shall not be made in relation to the child concerned other than on notice to each guardian of that child". Whether it is an application in circumstances where the victim guardian is still alive, and that can happen, an application must be made to that victim guardian or, indeed, to any other guardian who is available. It will obviously have to be served on notice to the convicted guardian as well.

The legislation before us also provides in section 12I(ii), "A relative of the child concerned may seek leave to be joined as a notice party to proceedings under this Part." If a relative becomes aware that Tusla is bringing such an application, that application will obviously be on notice to the guardians of the child who are living and a relative can nonetheless still apply to the court to be made a notice party to the proceedings.

I am concerned that the Deputy's amendment could give rise to a lot of contentious and difficult circumstances during the hearing of the application. What the Deputy wants to introduce is a requirement that Tusla would have to notify the next of kin of a deceased guardian of that child. It is important to set out that there is no definition of who is the next of kin within the Deputy's amendment. When it comes to the relative, defined in section 12I, I have specified who a relative is for the purpose of making such an application. Section 12 I(3) states, "In subsection (2) 'relative', in relation to the child concerned, means a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt, whether of the whole blood, half blood or by affinity, and includes the spouse of any such person and any person cohabiting with any such person." Under the provision I have, a relative can apply to be put on notice and can seek the leave of the court to be joined. Under the Deputy's proposal, there is a statutory requirement to be imposed on Tusla to put on notice the undefined next of kin. It is not possible for me to accept such a vague and ill-defined amendment.

Even if it were the case that I was to accept the Deputy's amendment, if it were precise, we must think of the difficulties that could arise in circumstances where all the next of kin of a deceased guardian of a child would be put on notice. Let us use an example where the mother of the child or children is the victim and, regrettably, that is predominantly the case. In such circumstances, is it the case that Tusla will have to put on notice every sibling of that deceased person? What about her parents and grandparents? It is not defined as to who should be put on notice. The reality is that in a particular family, it may be the case that the next of kin of the deceased has no relationship with the deceased or their child. Alternatively, a next of kin may have a very close relationship with the convicted guardian. It may in some circumstances be difficult to identify or locate such people as the next of kin. There is a requirement to put them on notice.

Like me, Deputy Carthy wants to ensure that these applications are heard as soon as practicable. If it is the case that Tusla is required to put every next of kin on notice, what happens in circumstances where a next of kin, say a sibling of the deceased guardian, lives in Australia or elsewhere outside the jurisdiction? That will, in effect, mean that the District Court hearing the application will say there is a statutory obligation and the Oireachtas has determined that the next of kin must be put on notice. If one of the people who are the next of kin is living in Australia, the application could not proceed until such time as that person has

been put on notice of the application. It would impose a barrier, and I know the Deputy does not want to put in place barriers. It would impose a barrier to bringing an application in a speedy manner and would not provide any additional benefit for the child concerned.

As I say, I believe the provisions that are set out in section 12I, which deals with notice parties to proceedings under this Part, are sufficient. The guardians must be put on notice. A relative can seek the leave of the court to be put on notice. It does not mean that the court is going to, on each occasion, say that person will be granted leave to be heard in the case. The court may say it does not need to turn this into a family row among the remaining relatives of the deceased guardian, with a number of them in court saying that they want the children to remain within the guardianship of the convicted guardian while another part of the family is saying they want to guardianship rights of the convicted guardian taken away. We must recognise that there will not always be harmony within a family in terms of what should happen at the outcome and the provision that I have included at section 12I is, to use Deputy Carthy's words, better wording, and that is what we should stick to.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister again, purposely or otherwise, has missed the point. This amendment was brought forward not because it was something that I wanted to bring forward. I brought it forward because the affected families pointed out to us that this is an anomaly. They have not been made notice parties or have not been informed at all, or have had to fight and battle with Tusla to have any say whatsoever about the care of a child that they love. They feel strongly that the legislation, as currently worded, does not cater for that. It is for that reason that this amendment was put forward. I take it that the Minister has issues with the wording we put forward but I hope he will accept our bona fides in saying that there are legitimate concerns that the Government's legislation does not fully address this issue. The answer, therefore, is not to leave things as they are but to find a solution. As with all of these amendments, if there is a middle road to be found, I am quite happy to travel there. It appears that the Minister does not want to accept the amendment. He starts from that position and then finds whatever reason he can to build up to what might appear to be a logical argument against it. The real logic of the fact is that we have had situations where court cases involving the well-being of children have not been notified to people who, probably more than anybody, have the care of those children at heart. That needs to be rectified, whether in this legislation or another piece of legislation. I am arguing that now is the time to do that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am not dismissing Deputy Carthy's proposed amendment because it is coming from him. I listen carefully to what he says and what other colleagues contribute. We want to get this right. I must be honest with the Deputy in the House about what I think the consequence of his amendment would be. It is true that there is no definition for who is the next of kin. The first thing a court will do when it is mandated by the legislation to put on notice the next of kin is to ask who the next of kin is. Is it all the siblings of the deceased guardian or does it extend only to certain among them? We need to be precise and will be criticised by the courts if we do not define this accurately.

The Deputy raises the valid point that families want to be involved in this. We know that the genesis of this legislation is the love of a brother for his deceased sister.

That is why I included, in section 12I, a provision that allows family members to bring an application to the District Court requesting to be put on notice of this application because, for

example, they represent the interests of their deceased sister and would like the court to hear those during the hearing of the application. That provision is there already. As well as that, Tusla is not an island. People contact it, write to it and make submissions to it. There is an express statutory provision in place. It is not Tusla that will decide whether a family member is to be a notice party. The court will decide and I think that resolves the issue of concern to Deputy Carthy. No disrespect meant to his amendment but the provision in the Bill is far better and the amendment put forward by Deputy Carthy would create confusion.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 12, between lines 16 and 17, to insert the following:

“(1A) Where a guardian *ad litem* of the child, another guardian of the child, or a relative of the child (being a person who would be entitled to notice of proceedings under this Act) is of the opinion that an application under subsection (1) ought to be made in the best interests of the child, he or she may request the Child and Family Agency to make such an application.

(1B) The Child and Family Agency shall consider any request under subsection (1A) and, where it decides not to make an application under subsection (1), shall, on request, provide reasons for that decision to the person who made the request.”.

This is another amendment we discussed at length on Committee Stage and I was hopeful the Minister would bring forward his own amendment to deal with this issue. As discussed, this deals with historical cases. As it stands, the section gives Tusla discretion in dealing with convictions that occurred before the Act commenced. The Minister made quite a lot of reference on Committee Stage to the fact that this is peculiar - I am not sure it is entirely unique - in that it has a retrospective element. That is important and I commend the Minister and Department on including it.

However, without strengthening the provision to include other parties, as this amendment seeks to do, there is a risk that there will be cases where applications will not be brought where they should be. This amendment recognises that guardians *ad litem*, other guardians and relatives should have a role in prompting action where it is in the child's best interests. This is particularly important considering Tusla has raised concerns about resourcing and identifying historical cases. It is, therefore, essential that those closest to the child can bring matters forward and ensure appropriate applications are made to the court.

The Minister previously indicated that people can contact Tusla anyway and that a provision in legislation is not needed. That is not necessarily an argument for not doing something. There is a strong case to put on a legislative basis that people can engage with Tusla to ensure there is, in the first instance, consideration of any such request. Equally important, in terms of the amendment we have put forward, is the provision that, if a decision is made not to pursue it, at least the rationale for that decision would be notified because that would resolve a question mark or concern on the part of those affected. I encourage the Minister to accept the amendment.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Carthy for his amendment. In paragraph (1A), in effect what Deputy Carthy is seeking to achieve is already the law under the provision. Deputy Carthy's amendment states "where a guardian *ad litem* of the child, another guardian of the child, or a relative of the child ... is of the opinion that an application ... ought to be made in the best interests of the child", he can request Tusla to do so. The situation at present is that if Tusla believes it is in the best interests of the child - that is the second limb of the test we discussed under amendment No. 1 - it must bring the application, where there has been a conviction of murder or manslaughter. That is a requirement. The purpose of Deputy Carthy's first paragraph is to achieve something that will happen in any event. As Deputy Carthy fairly acknowledged I said on Committee Stage, there is nothing to stop relatives, guardians *ad litem* or other guardians of the child contacting Tusla to say they believe an application should be brought. If it is the case that an application is in the best interests of the child, Tusla must bring it.

My real concern about the proposed amendment, however, is the requirement in paragraph (1B) for Tusla to provide reasons to the person who made the request if an application is not made. Although Deputy Carthy does not define "relative", we will assume it has the same definition as it has in section 12I. Deputies will see that I included a very broad definition of "relative". Under this provision, there would be a requirement on Tusla to set out to a broad range of family members reasons an application is not being made. There may be reasons that are sensitive or personal which Tusla might not want to give out because of the central importance of the child being protected. They could be matters confidential to the child, such as the child's views.

I appreciate what Deputy Carthy is trying to do in all the amendments but I have to try to ensure that, at the end of this, we get a Bill that is coherent and will work and I am concerned that doing this would undermine the effectiveness of the legislation. On balance, I do not think it would improve the legislation. I say that with the greatest of respect for Deputy Carthy.

I am fearful the obligation on Tusla to provide reasons would become quite a legal process. It would recognise that any reasons it gives out would have to be thorough and that might have an impact on the decisions it makes. It is always the case that if Tusla is not fulfilling its public law duty as required, there are remedies available to family members, guardians *ad litem* or the other guardians by way of judicial review. That is not the outcome anyone wants but there is a certain architecture to this legislation that will permit families to engage with Tusla. It permits family members or relatives to be put on notice of the application before the courts. If family members are put on notice of the application, they will be given a right to be heard by the District Court so their views will be well aired before the court. In balancing the rights of relatives, or the next of kin as Deputy Carthy referred to, it is important they have a process in which their views can be accommodated and listened to. I have included that in section 12I and the process whereby the application is made and people can contact Tusla is sufficient. I just do not want to put Tusla on a defensive, litigious footing when it comes to communications from family members where Tusla has a statutory obligation to provide reasons to those people that it is not bringing the application. I do not want that to become the dominant part.

We want this to be as simple as possible. There is a conviction for murder or manslaughter. It is in the best interests of the child for an application to be made under this section. Tusla goes promptly to the District Court. The District Court considers the application. Family

members will apply to the District Court to be heard and put on notice. I am sure in many instances the court will permit that while not turning it into a situation where every family member has a separate entitlement to be heard.

We can then have a prompt decision which, as always, is guided by what is in the best interests of the very unfortunate children who are left behind.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is not much to say because we have argued this out in relation to all the amendments. The Minister is particularly wrong in this case. Consider a scenario in which a parent of a child has murdered or killed another parent of a child. They are in law currently considered to be guardians. There is now a provision where Tusla can apply to the courts to have that guardianship removed. For cases that predate the passage of this legislation, there is a level of discretion involved as to whether Tusla will bring such cases. This amendment simply seeks to allow family members of the deceased parent to make an application or a request of Tusla to bring it forward. If Tusla decides that in that situation, where the person who killed the other parent should remain the guardian and will not even bring the matter before a court for decision, the family of the deceased person should be told why. It is not too much to ask and that is why I am pressing the amendment.

Deputy Gary Gannon: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, may I come in? I support the amendment and will be very brief. The Minister has said a couple of times that there is nothing to stop the family having the right to make a request-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to interrupt you, Deputy Gannon. The time permitted for the debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with the order of the Dáil of 16 June: "That Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad.

Finance Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

Question proposed: "That section 1 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Section 1 deals with the diesel rebate scheme. As I have said to the Minister of State and the Tánaiste, there are many issues with this scheme. One of the particular issues is cash flow. I have outlined previously to the House that the best way to support hauliers and transport operators was to provide the rebate at the pump. There would be no delay and operators would not have to wait for three months, meaning there would be no issue with cash flow. In addition, given the way the energy directive is formed, that would allow for the same benefit to be passed on to other consumers, like the motorists travelling the length and breadth of the State who have in the last period paid significantly increased sums for their diesel.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I acknowledge the Deputy raised this on Second Stage and I replied to advise that any issues that were there initially have been identified and rebates are being processed as efficiently as possible. The temporary enhancement to the diesel rebate scheme has been agreed by Government in light of the severe price impacts that have arisen following the outbreak of the conflict in the Middle East. It is acknowledged it is a short-term and targeted measure that helps to ease the burden on households and businesses across the State by minimising the inflationary impact of fuel costs for road haulage and bus services during this period.

The Deputy said they wanted to ensure people could get access to it in a timely way. We have taken that back and referred it. We have been assured any glitches there were have been ironed out and rebates will be processed in a timely way.

Question put and agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 6, to delete lines 1 to 22 and substitute the following:

"

1 July 2026	€381.00	€502.88	€250.00	€371.85	€371.85	€0.00	€210.45	€21.00	€167.25	€79.17	€11.48
14 October 2026	€706.14	€706.14	€615.76	€615.76	€615.76	€160.81	€210.45	€219.50	€167.25	€103.66	€11.48

".

These amendments go to the core of the legislation. This legislation is flawed because it has left people under severe financial pressure in the middle of a really hard time for so many families across the State. Amendment No. 1 probably sums that up best. It would remove excise completely from home heating oil. It is folly but we hear from Government all the time that there is no excise tax on home heating oil despite numerous replies to parliamentary question saying over and over that there is excise duty on home heating oil in the form of carbon tax, and carbon tax is excise. We should really stop that stupid debate because this is legislation that deals with excise, a version of which is mineral oil tax and part of that is carbon tax, which is an excise duty.

The core of this is the Government has refused to cut excise duty on home heating oil at all. The reason it has done that is it is called "carbon tax". Government has this idea of carbon tax as a Holy Grail, so no matter how difficult things get for families, it is not willing to deal with it just because the excise duty is called carbon tax. It is as if there is a separate pot of money into which carbon taxes go. There is no such thing in Irish tax law as a certain tax being

assigned to a certain type of spend. It does not exist. Hypothecation does not happen in Irish tax law, so this money that comes in from carbon tax as people pay to heat their homes and to drive from A to B goes into the big kitty - the State's purse - and then is divvied out.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's office cannot identify where a significant amount of that carbon tax, I think about 40% if not more, is spent despite Government saying it is spent on supports for climate change and measures of that nature. However, that is not what is happening with all of the money. We show time and again that there are other ways revenues can be raised to do not only those types of measures but also to do more and to deal genuinely with issues of climate.

6 o'clock

Our amendment would reduce excise by €183 on a 1,000-litre fill. The cost of home heating oil has increased significantly since March. In some cases, it has gone up 50%. It is still €300 more expensive to refill a tank than it would have been before the recent spikes resulting from the war in Iran.

Amendment No. 2 deletes all further carbon tax increases. We submitted this as a single amendment to the Bills Office but it split the amendment. Why is it important that we do not increase carbon taxes? Because carbon taxes are regressive. Carbon taxes are a punishment on ordinary families across the State. The idea we would increase carbon tax over and over, knowing the alternatives are out of the reach of many families, is simply punishing the families because they are not wealthy enough to buy an electric car, do not have enough sitting in their bank account to put air-to-water systems into their house or cannot afford a deep energy retrofit in their homes and do not qualify for the free one. It is not fair. It is regressive and the Government is punishing people by implementing it. It is not just me saying it is regressive; the ESRI in its report made it clear that carbon taxes are regressive.

Is there a case for taxes that can change behaviour? Of course there is. I have supported taxes in the past that can change behaviour but for that to happen we need alternatives and those alternatives have to be readily available and affordable.

Members of this House will be asked when they vote on the schedule later on to vote for an increase in the prices of petrol, diesel and home heating oil in October 2026; not only that, they will also agree to vote for similar increases in 2027, 2028, 2029 and 2030. There is no other legislation that comes before the House with such a long-term vision or that the Government is so certain of that it says it will do this, that and the other over the next four or five years. Where is the Government's legislation in relation to children with additional needs that lays down in law the targets and benefits that will be provided between now and 2030? It does not exist. Where is the legislation that lays down in law the right to housing increasing every year between now and 2030? It does not exist. For all the serious issues in this State, the Government does not provide long-term plans or legally binding legislative provisions. However, when it comes to punishing people in my constituency because they have to drive to work, drop their kids to school or go to a dental or hospital appointment, then it has no problem not only punishing them by making it more expensive to get from A to B come October, but also doing the same thing the next year, the year after, the year after and the year after. Parties in this House, including so-called Opposition parties, will back the Government to the hilt in that. It is disgraceful.

I will not be part of it. We were right to vote against the legislation last time. People called me out on it and said I was isolated. By God, I was not isolated. The people who came onto the streets took our position. They knew the Government's first miserly excuses for cuts to diesel and petrol were pathetic. That is why people rose up and took to the streets. That is why the barricades were set. That is why the country said, "No more of this here". Folks, this is wrong what you are doing in terms of increasing carbon tax every year between now and 2030. It is absolutely regressive. It punishes ordinary families the length and breadth of this State and the argument put forward about a ring fence to support these families is completely and utterly hollow. It does not stand up to scrutiny under the Finance Act or in relation to what the ESRI and Comptroller and Auditor General have said.

I will push amendment No. 1 because people deserve a reduction in excise duty and, particularly, a reduction in home heating oil. I will push amendment No. 2 because I stand against any more increases in carbon tax on solid fuels, and amendment No. 3 when it comes to natural gas. People are trying to heat their home at a time when one in four households - get this, folks; let the penny drop here - one in four households across this State cannot pay their gas bills, yet the legislation before us asks us to vote to increase those gas bills in October, the following October, the following October and the following October. We in Sinn Féin will not stand for that. We should be bringing forward legislation to support families, not more punishment, not punishing them for using gas or home heating oil to heat their home or putting petrol or diesel in the car to get from A to B.

The last thing that is absolutely obnoxious and that we will not stand for in this legislation is the Government asking us to agree a schedule for petrol and diesel prices to increase significantly come 1 August. This Dáil goes into recess in four weeks' time so when this kicks in on 1 August, the Government will not be in this Chamber. This legislation will not pass these Houses until July yet on the last day of July diesel is to increase by 32 cent and petrol by 27 cent. That is nuts. It is absolutely bonkers that the Government is asking us to support legislation - whatever about its humming and hawing as to what it might do in two weeks' time - that would see diesel go up to €2.20 on 1 August when the Dáil is not even sitting, and petrol going up to similar levels. Not in my name. I oppose the Government's schedule. I believe it did not go far enough in its excise cuts. I stand with the Irish people in opposing the increases in carbon tax the Government plans for this year and every year until 2030.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am happy to reply to Deputy Doherty but it is probably a futile and pointless exercise because he has come in with his mind made up. I will reply anyway because we know his contribution today was for Facebook later on.

Amendment No. 1 proposes from 1 July until 14 October 2026 a further reduction in mineral oil tax rates and petrol and auto diesel and to reduce the mineral oil tax rates applicable to kerosene used other than as a propellant, as well as further deviations from the mineral oil tax rates applying to other fuels. It further proposes to set mineral oil tax from 14 October 2026 at the rates applicable prior to the rate cuts introduced in March and April of this year.

Amendments Nos. 2, 3 and 4 effectively propose to end carbon tax trajectory at current rates. Mineral oil tax comprises a non-carbon and a carbon component, commonly referred to as the carbon tax. That is the difference. When we talk of no excise on kerosene, there is a carbon element and that is called carbon tax. We commonly refer to one element as excise duty and

another as carbon tax. There is carbon associated with kerosene. The increase that was to come in at the beginning of May has been deferred until later in the year to recognise the cost pressures at the time it was to come in. Kerosene rose to €1.77 per litre in April; over the past month, the average prices have been down to €1.26 per litre. It is welcome to see it back on a downward trajectory. We need to see it go further but that is its current status.

The Deputy calls out his party's opposition to carbon tax. To be fair, that has been a consistent approach but there is a different approach on this side of the House. It is not today or as part of this Bill that we are realising that approach to carbon tax; this is a well-enshrined approach by this Government.

The programme for Government committed to continue with carbon tax increases, aligning with the recommendations from the Climate Change Advisory Council and scientific experts, and to using the revenues raised to support climate action measures and ensure the most vulnerable are protected from unintended impacts of the tax increases. This includes funding for retrofitting - tens of thousands of homes have benefited from this, particularly people in receipt of fuel allowance, who get a deep retrofitting free of charge - and agri-environmental schemes, along with targeted social welfare payments and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and ensure a just transition. These measures are, contrary to what the Deputy says, designed to be progressive.

To give effect to the programme for Government commitment to protect the vulnerable, a targeted package of social protection interventions was developed, which is informed by ESRI research that was commissioned to address this issue specifically.

As of budget 2026, the Government has allocated over €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue for these purposes since 2020. ESRI analysis consistently shows those on lower incomes are better off as a result of the social protection measures funded by the increased carbon tax.

In budget 2026, over €1.1 billion was allocated to climate action measures and to ensure the most vulnerable are protected from the unintended impacts of the increase. This was an increase on the 2025 allocation, and included funding of €566 million for retrofitting programmes and just transition, €350 million for targeted social welfare interventions such as the fuel allowance and €173 million for green and sustainable farming measures. Pausing the carbon tax trajectory current rates would decrease the funding available for these just transition and climate measures, which are demonstrably progressive.

Our need to decouple from fossil fuel dependence and achieve energy security is even more apparent now, given the levels of volatility in international fuel markets. Ireland's long-term commitment to tackling climate change remains strong. Furthermore, as the Deputy will be aware, energy taxation is covered by the energy taxation directive, which sets out excise duty rules covering all energy products in the EU used for heating and transport, as well as electricity. The directive sets out minimum levels of taxation applicable to these energy products for specific uses. For diesel used as a propellant, the minimum rate is €330 per 1,000 litres, exclusive of VAT. The total rate of mineral oil tax on auto diesel is currently approximately 37 cent per litre, having taken account of the 30 cent reduction that was introduced. When taken together with the diesel rebate scheme maximum repayment rate, which was temporarily increased to 12 cent per litre, qualifying haulage and passenger transport operators pay an effective rate of mineral oil tax of approximately 25 cent per litre.

This means that Ireland is currently below the minimum rates allowable under the energy taxation directive by approximately 8 cent in respect of qualifying road haulage and passenger transport operators. In light of this fact, we have engaged with the EU Commission and requested a temporary derogation under Article 19 of the energy taxation directive due to the exceptional circumstances that the conflict in the Middle East has caused.

Finally, the proposed amendments from Deputy Doherty would come at great cost to the Exchequer and jeopardise potentially other areas of investment. That is why Government have introduced a targeted set of temporary supports. The package of measures the Government has introduced totalling over €750 million is helping to reduce the cost burden at the petrol pump, supporting those most at risk of energy poverty and assisting key sectors such as agriculture and haulage that are critical to keeping our economy moving. These measures are deliberately time-bound and targeted, because our support must be both responsive and responsible. The Government is continuing to act in a way that protects the most vulnerable and sustains our economic stability. As the Taoiseach said on Leaders' Questions earlier today, just as we have in the past, we will keep an eye on the costs. We will keep them monitored and if further interventions are required, there is the capacity to do so.

For the reasons I outlined, I am not proposing to accept these amendments.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State obviously came down here with his mind made up as well. That is fair enough, but maybe he would help me along the way. Will he convince me of why I should vote to increase the pressure on a neighbour of mine who heats their home with home-heating oil, who does not get fuel allowance, and whose incomes, because they have two incomes coming in, mean they cannot avail of the free retrofit? Why should I stand here and vote to make their life harder every year for the next four years when I know they do not have the money to do a deep retrofit, do not have the money to convert to air to water and do not have the money to buy a new electric vehicle? Why should I do that?

When the Minister of State is on his feet trying to convince me of why I should do that, why I should make life harder for my constituents, maybe he would answer me this as well. Why should I vote for this knowing that the Minister of State is asking me here in this Schedule that, on 1 August 2026, when the Dáil is on holidays, diesel will go up at the pumps by 32 cent and that petrol would go up by 27 cent? Why should I vote tonight to put that in law? How do I turn, go back to Donegal and say to folks that they should not worry, I was their messenger this week, I spoke for them and I made sure that, come 1 August, when the Dáil is on holidays, diesel will go up 32 cent and petrol will go up 27 cent, and I did that because the Minister of State asked me to do it? Will the Minister of State convince me why that is in the interests of my constituents?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I all the Minister of State said, there was a complete absence of acknowledgment of the very real pain that people on low-to-middle incomes are under in terms of the price increases. If you look at home-heating oil, for example, and people who do not avail of the fuel allowance increase because they are above those thresholds and cannot afford those increases in home-heating oil, the Government does not seem to be acknowledging that. We have put forward proposals. A targeted energy credit of €400 would be a start to helping households in that situation. We have put forward proposals for investment now, which would mean a long-term and permanent reduction in the cost of living for households that are

struggling, by much-improved grants for solar. That would be a once-off investment by Government but it would be a permanent reduction. It would be good for sustainability and good for households that are really struggling.

What is really enraging - the ESRI research backs this up - is that when you look at the huge investment that has gone into grants, it is the households with the most resources, those which needed support least, that have overwhelmingly been able to avail of those different grants. The households really struggling to keep food on the table and to heat their homes are the ones that cannot avail of those grants. They simply do not have the resources to do so and they are the ones that are getting squeezed more and more. What is needed is a change in approach so that the greatest supports go to those households that are really struggling with their bills, that is, the low-to-middle income households. The Minister of State should design the grants for those households in a way that they can access them. In fact, why should households on the highest of incomes be able to avail of those grants? They do not need that support or help at all. Why not prioritise the households that really need it?

The Government keep on talking about targeting but yet, when it comes down to it, that is not what the Government does. The Government needs to be serious about just transition, which we all need to be serious about, and serious about getting support and buy-in for that. The Government approach, however, has ignored that people across the country want to support that but they have to be able to afford to support it. We have put forward two very practical measures the Minister of State could take - targeted energy credits now to help those who need the help most but also measures such as proper grants that can be accessible to low-and-middle income households to install solar so they get a permanent reduction in their bills, and that would be good for the country in terms of helping to break some of our dependence on fossil fuels. I cannot for the life of me understand why the Minister of State would not adopt our proposals.

Deputy Robert Troy: I will speak to Deputy O'Callaghan's amendment when we get to it but the one point I would agree with him on is that we should always look at introducing targeted measures to help those who need the greatest level of support the most. The Deputy made the fair point that there is a cohort of people who are above the eligibility thresholds to qualify for the working family payment but need additional supports.

I agree with the Deputy on that and I certainly will fight hard to ensure they get those supports in the upcoming budget.

There were targeted measures introduced in the budget last year. The eligibility criteria for the fuel allowance were extended to include the 40,000 recipients of the working family payment. That was a very targeted measure for working people on low incomes who benefit from social welfare support. They got access to the fuel allowance for the first time. In addition, in recognition of high energy costs as a result of the war in the Middle East, a commitment was given to extend the fuel allowance payment period by four weeks, which gives people an extra €152 per annum. Again, this is a measure that is very much targeted.

The Deputy talked about measures to facilitate retrofitting and energy upgrades to people's homes. Earlier this year, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, increased the financial support and grant assistance available to people to upgrade their homes. We are all operators within our own constituencies. From assisting those who come through my constituency office, I know

there are now many more people availing of those supports than there were in the past. The credit unions have introduced a greenify loan to support people who want to do upgrades by allowing repayments to be spread over a period at reduced rates. They are enabling people to reap the rewards in a way, as I am sure the Deputy will agree, that is beneficial both for the homeowner and for the environment by helping us to meet our targets. We can agree somewhat on that area.

The measures that were introduced by the Government are some of the most generous in *per capita* terms across Europe. That is independently verifiable. We probably could keep debating this point until the Dáil rises tonight at 10.30 p.m. or 11 p.m. No matter what measures the Government introduces, it is the job of the Opposition to call for more supports and to say we are not doing enough. We have committed €750 million in funding to additional measures. Those measures are targeted at the people on the lowest incomes. They are also targeted at sectors of the economy, including transport and agriculture, that are high energy users. We want to assist them in recognition that if energy costs become hugely unbearable to the transport sector, for example, they will be passed on to households. As well as being targeted, the measures are time-specific. As we said from the beginning, we will be keeping them under review.

For the reasons I have outlined, I do not propose to accept the amendments.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I challenged the Minister of State to convince me as to why I should make my constituents' lives harder by agreeing to an increase in the price of petrol, diesel, gas and home heating oil every year for the next four years. He did not even try to convince me. These measures are based on a Government ideology or policy. It is the wrong one and, for that reason, I will be pressing amendment No. 1.

Deputy Robert Troy: I spoke about some of the additional supports we have been able to implement as a result of the introduction of the carbon tax. I am not sure whether the Deputy was in the Chamber at the time or if he was taking a telephone call outside it. I made the point that carbon tax has a role to play in terms of changing behaviour and helping people who can change to do so. As a representative of a rural constituency, I accept there are not the same alternatives in rural Ireland as there are in large urban areas. It is to protect the people who have been most adversely affected by the carbon tax, namely, those in lower income households, that we introduced deep retrofits for householders who are availing of the fuel allowance and expanded eligibility for the allowance. It is why we have increased the rates of SEAI grants for which people can qualify. For the first time, householders can qualify for grants of up to €4,000 for windows, grants for new front and back doors and increased levels of support for insulation, including house wrapping.

All of those measures, which were introduced in recent months, are being funded by the carbon tax. The money is being put back in to support people to make the change. In recognition of the huge increase in current fuel costs, which it is not always recognised in this House is something that is outside our control, a decision was made to defer the carbon tax in May this year.

I also said that in the context of the upcoming budget, I will be very forceful as a member of the Government on the need to ensure additional measures are introduced to support working

families who may be falling short of eligibility for the benefits of some of the schemes I have mentioned and who need additional support. I acknowledged that need and will work towards addressing it.

What the Deputy is proposing today would cost in the region of at least an additional €500 million right here and now. For that reason, I cannot and will not accept the amendments.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 6, to delete lines 56 to 67, and in page 7, to delete lines 1 to 5.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 45; Níl, 102; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Buckley, Pat.	Aird, William.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boland, Grace.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Brian.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brennan, Shay.	
Crowe, Seán.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cullinane, David.	Browne, James.	
Daly, Pa.	Burke, Colm.	
Devine, Máire.	Burke, Peter.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Butler, Mary.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Butterly, Paula.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cahill, Michael.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cairns, Holly.	
Graves, Ann.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Canney, Seán.	
Healy, Seamus.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Kenny, Martin.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Chambers, Jack.	
Lawless, Paul.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Clendennen, John.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Collins, Niall.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Connolly, John.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Cooney, Joe.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Murphy, Paul.	Cummins, Jen.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Cummins, John.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Currie, Emer.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Daly, Martin.	
Nolan, Carol.	Dempsey, Aisling.	

O'Hara, Louis.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Dillon, Alan.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Dolan, Albert.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Fleming, Sean.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Foley, Norma.	
Stanley, Brian.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Gannon, Gary.	
Ward, Mark.	Geoghegan, James.	
	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
	Grealish, Noel.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Hearne, Rory.	
	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	

	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Question, "That section 2 stand part of the Bill", put and declared carried.

SECTION 3

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 7, to delete lines 20 to 24.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 45; Níl, 104; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Buckley, Pat.	Aird, William.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boland, Grace.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Brian.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brennan, Shay.	
Crowe, Seán.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cullinane, David.	Browne, James.	
Daly, Pa.	Burke, Colm.	
Devine, Máire.	Burke, Peter.	

Doherty, Pearse.	Butler, Mary.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Butterly, Paula.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cahill, Michael.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cairns, Holly.	
Graves, Ann.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Calleary, Dara.	
Healy, Seamus.	Canney, Seán.	
Kenny, Martin.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Lawless, Paul.	Chambers, Jack.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Clendennen, John.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Collins, Niall.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Connolly, John.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Cooney, Joe.	
Murphy, Paul.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Cummins, Jen.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Cummins, John.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Currie, Emer.	
Nolan, Carol.	Daly, Martin.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Dillon, Alan.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Fleming, Sean.	
Stanley, Brian.	Foley, Norma.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Ward, Mark.	Gannon, Gary.	
	Geoghegan, James.	
	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
	Grealish, Noel.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Hearne, Rory.	
	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	

	Lawlor, George.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Question, “That section 3 stand part of the Bill”, put and declared carried.

SECTION 4

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 8, to delete lines 1 to 6.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 45; Níl, 103; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Buckley, Pat.	Aird, William.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boland, Grace.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Brian.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brennan, Shay.	
Crowe, Seán.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cullinane, David.	Browne, James.	
Daly, Pa.	Burke, Colm.	
Devine, Máire.	Burke, Peter.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Butler, Mary.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Butterly, Paula.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cahill, Michael.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cairns, Holly.	
Graves, Ann.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Calleary, Dara.	
Healy, Seamus.	Canney, Seán.	
Kenny, Martin.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Lawless, Paul.	Chambers, Jack.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Clendennen, John.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Collins, Niall.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Connolly, John.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Cooney, Joe.	
Murphy, Paul.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Cummins, Jen.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Cummins, John.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Currie, Emer.	
Nolan, Carol.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Dillon, Alan.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Dolan, Albert.	

Ó Broin, Eoin.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Fleming, Sean.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Foley, Norma.	
Stanley, Brian.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Gannon, Gary.	
Ward, Mark.	Geoghegan, James.	
	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
	Grealish, Noel.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Hearne, Rory.	
	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawlor, George.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	

	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Question, “That section 4 stand part of the Bill”, put and declared carried.

7 o'clock

NEW SECTIONS

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 5 has been ruled out of order.

Amendment No. 5 not moved.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 8, between lines 7 and 8, to insert the following:

“Report on impact of an energy credit

5. Within 3 months of the implementation of the new Mineral Oil Tax rates, the Minister shall produce a report on the impact of an energy credit of €400 for each household with an income up to €70,000 per annum.”.

This amendment is about the need for targeted energy credits. As I have said before, the Government is making a key mistake in not having targeted energy credits aimed at low-to-middle-income households that are really feeling pain from this cost-of-living crisis and not just from the increases that have happened since the attacks on Iran, given that we were already experiencing a cost-of-living crisis before that. In his earlier comments, the Minister of State

failed to acknowledge that disabled people were up to €1,400 worse off as a result of the budget. This was before any recent increases in home heating oil or any other fuel costs.

The Minister of State said that he agreed that there needed to be more support for those who were the ineligible for the working family payment. He acknowledged that there was a gap for people above that threshold on low and middle incomes, yet the Government will presumably vote down this amendment. Indeed, the Government has failed to introduce a measure like this.

I have to make it very clear that a targeted measure like this is just part of what is needed. A targeted energy credit of €400 for those who need it most is a start but what is fundamentally missing from the Government's approach and much of this discussion is investment in long-term measures that would permanently bring down the cost of living, such as the proposals that we put forward on solar energy. A targeted energy credit of €400 should be part and parcel of a wider approach involving measures that mean households will have money off their energy bills for good so that they are better able to meet future energy shocks and cope with this existing cost-of-living crisis, and we as a country are less exposed to energy shocks and fuel price increases. We are one of the most exposed countries in Europe when it comes to this so we have to get out of short-term measures, which are necessary, and take measures that will stand with us over the coming weeks, months and years. A big problem with the approach taken by the Government over the years is the use of short-term measures and we end up with nothing to show for it in the long term. We need that combination of emergency measures, as are proposed in this amendment, and measures that will get us out of the hole and help households over the long term.

Deputy Ged Nash: I speak in support of this amendment. We in Labour have been long-standing supporters of the proposition that we would use the taxation system to assist people who are finding it very difficult to meet their energy bills. The evidence before us about people's problems meeting electricity bills and utility bills more generally is very clear and apparent to all of us in our everyday work as TDs in our constituencies and our engagement with people on a day-to-day basis. This is a real problem for working people who I remind the Minister of State did not have the benefit of the indexation of their PAYE tax bands, rates and credits last year. They are falling further behind and are finding the going increasingly difficult.

This is about using the taxation system to target support where it is evidently needed the most. We use the social welfare system successfully. I think there is a universal welcome across the House for the expansion of supports for people who depend on the State for their income. The extension of the fuel allowance by a number of weeks is welcome while the inclusion of other cohorts of society in the scheme has been welcomed by everybody. It has been universally acclaimed and welcomed. It is necessary. However, the people who are caught in the middle are the problem. We know for people on higher salaries that the cost-of-living crisis and the increases in energy bills are, dare I say it, inconveniences - things they would prefer not to see but things that, by and large, people on good incomes can absorb. It is the people on incomes of €70,000 to €80,000 or below and who are not captured by the fuel allowance scheme who require support. We have used our very sophisticated taxation and revenue collection system before. The Revenue Commissioners is an extraordinary organisation and one of the best organisations in the public service in terms of how it responds to the requirements of the Government and the State. It demonstrated that during the pandemic,

introducing the employment wage subsidy scheme and, subsequently, the temporary wage subsidy scheme based on the information and expertise it had. It is very easy to identify the people who would benefit from a targeted energy credit like this.

The simple fact of the matter is that the political will to do it is not there. This is something that will need the Minister of State's attention and the attention of his Government colleagues ahead of October's budget. This is necessary until such time as we have the renewables and retrofitting revolution that is far too slow to happen in this country.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome this amendment. I assume it refers to disposable income with regard to households. I believe €70,000 is a low figure, given the scale of the energy crisis and, in particular, how far it has reached with nearly 320,000 households unable to pay their electricity bills and one in four unable to pay their gas bills. Two earners on quite low wages of €35,000 each would not be eligible for that support. I know plenty of people on what would be a low income of €35,000 each and who would really struggle, so that number is low. However, that does not take away from the actual substance of the report being called for because we can always argue about what threshold we should introduce. It is about the principle of ensuring first and foremost that there are energy credits for individuals because of the scale of the challenge facing so many households and, second, that they should be targeted.

This is something that we in our party sat down and discussed with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, many years ago. We do not call for targeted measures immediately because they cannot be done. We need to be realistic as to what can be done next week. The CRU has made it clear to us that they cannot be delivered in a week or two weeks, but they can be delivered. In fairness, the Government has had years to deliver a system, between the CRU and the Department of Social Protection, that would allow for the targeting of energy credits in the way Sinn Féin has proposed, which is a €400 credit. What we need right now in relation to supports is to have money flowing into the coffers now, not in October, not in November. That is why we continue to argue that the energy credits need to be delivered right now. Obviously, the mistake is that the Government has not designed a system. If a system had been designed the Government, would have been able to target energy credits and we could have had a genuine debate about whether €70,000, €80,000 or whatever number is the point the energy credits were targeted at.

I agree with the amendment on two points. First, energy credits should be available. Second, they should be targeted. I have a question for the Minister of State. This is part of the toolkit, unfortunately, because of the high energy costs that the State is paying. A report came out just last week showing that while we know we have the highest electricity costs in Europe, we are told that we have the second highest electricity costs in the world. This stuff is mental in a country that used to have some of the cheapest electricity prices. We still have companies making huge profits on the backs of ordinary people. The Government simply has not done the homework to design a system between the regulator and the Departments of Social Protection and Finance to look at how we can ensure that energy credits can flow to people in a very simple, straightforward way, one where people do not have to apply and the credits just come off their bills, and where the credits can be targeted. That is a case of joining up systems and doing the homework. I urge the Government to do that work. These types of amendment that call for a report are the instigation of that.

I support the amendment. I have small reservations about the household income for the reasons I outlined. Many households that would be struggling would still not get the benefit of this. More importantly, there is no point calling for something unless the system is created and that is the intention behind the amendment, namely, to force the Government into doing something it should have done four years ago.

The Government will probably turn around in October and introduce energy credits. See if it does. Credits should be delivered now, but for God's sake, do the work so that, in a couple of months' time, the Government will have the ability to target them. Energy credits should not be going to holiday homes. We have called this out so many times. There are people, in this House and elsewhere, who got energy credits and have multiple properties. It is absolutely nuts and it went on for years. At the start of a massive challenge when things happen, the Government sometimes has to respond fluidly and do things, and maybe people get supports they should not have got. We saw this during the pandemic and so forth. That is all right in the first couple of weeks or even the first months of a crisis, but it is not acceptable four years on. It is not acceptable that it does not exist in our toolbox that we can deliver energy credits to families and that there is no ability between the Department and the CRU to target them at whatever level we agree. That it simply does not exist is appalling and an indictment of the Government and its lazy attitude to dealing with these issues. That type of measure should exist as part of its toolbox so that it can support households at a time of need.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for raising this issue. To be fair to him, the amendment calls for a report to be published within "3 months of the implementation of the new Mineral Oil Tax rates ... on the impact of an energy credit of €400 for each household with an income up to €70,000 per annum." While I accept he is trying to generate a debate here today and that it will not put a cost on the Exchequer here and now, but I presume what he is trying to do is to ensure that this can feed into the budgetary process for the budget that is a number of months away. I do agree, and as I said at the outset, the way we should be helping people is through targeted supports. We have demonstrated our commitment to helping those who are in the most need of support through the fuel allowance and extending the eligibility criteria for the working family payment, which ensured that an extra 40,000 people on the working family payment got a fuel allowance for the very first time, but we do need to go further. There is an acknowledgement, certainly from my party in government, that there are a cohort of people who are falling short of some of the supports that were introduced. That is why there is a determination by us in government to ensure that we look to that cohort in the upcoming budget.

The budgetary process is well under way for budget 2027. In the past number of days, we had the national economic dialogue, which brought together civil society, the Government, union representatives, and representatives of business, academia and research. My Department will look at all available data from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and other State agencies and representative bodies in order to put together a budget that will be fair, impactful and progressive. That is what we want to achieve. In the next number of weeks, we will see the summer economic statement, which will outline the spending parameters open to us for budget 2027. I assure all Deputies that all data will be looked at to ensure that we bring forward a budget that is fair. They will have the opportunity, when budget day comes, to present an alternative budget, as is the case every single year. At

that stage, the Deputies will have to come forward with proposals that are costed and we will have an opportunity to compare our respective positions.

A point that has been made on a number of occasions is about cuts that were implemented to particular sections of society when temporary measures concluded. The difficulty is when you introduce temporary measures, and when they are reintroduced for a time, people tend to have them embedded into their daily living and their expectations. In particular, Deputy O'Callaghan referenced people in receipt of disability payments who, when their temporary measures expired, were at a loss. That was the case, but they were temporary measures that were introduced at a particular time. There is a commitment, and work is well advanced, to introduce permanent measures to ensure that we put in place the right supports, not on a temporary basis, but on a permanent one into the future. In budget 2027, we will see the Government living up to our commitment in that regard.

It is important that we invest in our infrastructure and that is why the Government approved the landmark €3.5 billion investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure across 2026 to 2030 as part of the national development plan. This represents the largest single investment in the country's electricity network in its history. A sum of €1.5 billion was allocated to ESB Networks and €2 billion to EirGrid, which will enable both companies to significantly increase capital investment to expand their onshore and offshore electricity transmission and distribution network infrastructure, which is critical as we move away from fossil fuels. The Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 2025 enacted last November provided the legal mechanism for the State to make a €1.5 billion equity investment in ESB Networks and increase its statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €17 billion.

The €1.5 billion was transferred from the Central Fund to the ESB in mid-December, ensuring ESB Networks can begin delivering on this ambitious onshore grid investment programme next year. Work is happening on putting in place the necessary investment in infrastructure for this transmission. We are all at one that we would like to see it accelerated and done in a more efficient manner.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I find it extraordinary that the reaction to the withdrawal of temporary supports on which people had relied seemed to come as a surprise to the Government and Ministers. People on a low income got a temporary support. To withdraw this support and not put a permanent support in its place was unforgivable. Disabled people on low incomes were absolutely reliant on those temporary measures. They were taken away with a promise that the Government was working on the permanent measures and people were told to wait until they were put in place. This winter people were in very tough circumstances when those temporary supports were taken with a promise of a permanent measure in future. This is no good. People cannot heat their homes on the promise of permanent measures.

The Minister of State has said he will look at all of the available data. I ask him to look immediately at the figures from the Central Statistics Office which show the rate of those aged over 65 who are in consistent poverty increased by 70% in just one year. This was as a direct result of choices the Government has made. Tá rudaí go dona ach go háirithe mar gheall go ndearna an Rialtas na roghanna míchearta, ach ní bhíonn sé roghnach riamh an rud ceart a dhéanamh. The Government can always do the right thing. It can do the right thing now by introducing targeted energy credits as an emergency measure. As has been pointed out, the

Government has had ample time and warning to put in place its systems for this, and if its intention is to do something in the budget it has plenty of time to get its act in order on it.

Deputy Robert Troy: Temporary measures are temporary measures; that is the nature of a temporary measure. What did happen in the previous budget was the largest increase in investment in the disability sector on record, with an almost 20% increase on the previous year. My colleague tells me it was €620 million. That is how much additional funding was put into disability services, daycare and respite. These are all areas that people with a disability have been looking for. There is a commitment this year, and the Minister, Deputy Calleary, has already begun work on a permanent cost-of-living measure for people with a disability. I want to put that on the record of the House this evening.

Deputy O'Callaghan mentioned people aged over 65. This is why in the previous budget there was an increase in the rate of fuel allowance paid weekly. There was a change in the eligibility criteria, an increase in the weekly rate and an increase in how much people can have in terms of the means test. There was also an increase in the number of the weeks paid out. Measures have been put in place to help address people who are affected the most adversely by high energy costs.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I do not want to take away from the investment in disability services, which was absolutely necessary and we have a distance to go there. It is good that progress is being made and it is long overdue. Disabled people make the point very strongly that they are not just people who use services. In fact, a lot of disabled people do not necessarily use services. They need to be able to live, survive and thrive independently. It is a fact we have the highest unemployment rate of disabled people in Europe. That is an area that absolutely has to be addressed because it should not just be an issue of income support. It should be an issue, as in other European countries, of disabled people being able to participate fully. Of course, having a basic income to be able to participate fully, including in the employment market, is key, which is why it is important. I know measures are temporary but to introduce temporary measures, take them out, acknowledge that permanent measures are needed and say the work has not been done on them leaves people in a very difficult situation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State does not sit at the Cabinet table but the 15 Ministers who sat around the Cabinet table last October and made a decision to withdraw energy credits made a decision to leave people with disabilities €1,400 worse off. At a time when they knew that prices were going to continue to go up, and at a time when they knew that so many families were under pressure, what did they think was going to happen? What was going to happen is what we have seen materialise in front of our eyes, which is that more and more people have fallen into financial pressure. Each month more and more families cannot pay their electricity bills or gas bills. I see it when I speak to people. Sometimes we get numb to the numbers. Sometimes numbers such as half a million just roll off our tongues but 320,000 families are not able to pay their electricity bills and 180,000 families are not able to pay their gas bills. This is massive. Many of these families have two, three or four people in their household. Just think about what this looks like. Think about how many times Croke Park would be filled over and over again with the people who cannot pay for their basics in the Ireland of 2026, and who cannot pay for their electricity or their gas. We could fill Croke Park

ten times over and there would still be queues of people outside, young and old, who say they also cannot pay their electricity or gas bills. The decision of the Government was to withdraw the only support they relied on. Knowing that the pressure was getting worse and that inflation was continuing to rise, it withdrew the supports.

What it did to people with disability, leaving them €1,400 worse off, was disgraceful. I called it out on budget night. The cost of disability is real. We thought the Government finally understood this when it paid a lump sum that was higher than in the past to people with disability but instead what it did was took away those supports that people depended on. This is why so many people are angry, frustrated and under serious pressure.

There are policies the Government can deliver that would provide benefits to people right here and right now. Earlier when speaking on this legislation I said the only guarantee the Irish people have is that carbon tax is going up to make petrol and diesel dearer, to make home heating oil dearer, to make the cost of gas dearer and to make the cost of a bag of coal dearer. The only guarantee people have is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will put it up every single year for the next four years. There is no guarantee in terms of what people on social welfare or people with disabilities depend on and how much more they can expect in the next couple of years. There is no legislation to say what it will look like for them. What the Government is doing is wrong. Tá an rud atá an Rialtas ag déanamh go huile agus go hiomlán contráilte. Táimid in Sinn Féin ag cur moltaí chun tosaigh arís agus arís eile ag rá go soiléir - is sampla iad na ceithre leasuithe atá curtha síos agam anocht - go bhfuil tuilleadh tacaíochta de dhíth ar ghnáthdhaoine na tíre seo, agus go bhfuil an t-airgead sa tír seo leis an tacaíocht sin a chur ar fáil. Is é an rud atá in easnamh anseo ná Rialtas a thuigeann an brú atá ar ghnáthdhaoine na tíre seo. Níl an Rialtas réidh agus sásta beart a dhéanamh le cuidiú leo. Tá an cuidiú sin de dhíth ar dhaoine fud fad na tíre seo. Tá sé contráilte go bhfuil an Rialtas ag tabhairt isteach reachtaíochta agus ag rá le daoine sa tír seo go bhfuil sé ag cur suas an praghas ar dhíosail faoi 32 cent ar an 1 Lúnasa agus an praghas ar pheitreal faoi 27 cent ar an lá céanna, agus ag ardú an praghas ar pheitreal agus ar dhíosail arís i mí Dheireadh Fómhair mar aon le hola le haghaidh téamh tí. Sin an fáth go seasann Sinn Féin in éadan na reachtaíochta seo.

Sin an fáth fosta go dtabharfaimid tacaíocht don leasú atá os ár gcomhair le cinnte a dhéanamh de go bhfuil tacaíocht ansin do dhaoine sa tír seo ó thaobh costais fuinnimh de. Tá 320,000 duine fud fad na tíre seo nach bhfuil ábalta a gcuid billí leictreachais a dhíol agus duine as achan ceathrar nach bhfuil ábalta a gcuid billí gáis a dhíol. Is é an fáth go bhfuil sé sin ag tarlú ná go bhfuil Rialtas againn nach dtuigeann an brú atá ar dhaoine. Tá an t-airgead sa tír ach níl an toil pholaitiúil ansin. Tugaim tacaíocht don leasú seo ach seasaim in éadan na reachtaíochta atá an Rialtas ag cur chun tosaigh fá choinne na fáthanna atá curtha chun tosaigh agam anseo.

Deputy Robert Troy: One basic point people fail to acknowledge and recognise is that the huge increase in energy prices is not as a consequence of decisions taken by the Government but as a consequence of an issue happening in the Middle East. That is not of the Government's making. I think we can all agree on that. This is what has been the biggest driver in the increase in the cost of energy since the crisis began. As a consequence of and in reply to that, the Government did take corrective actions, not once but twice. This was to the tune of a total of €750 million. We are never going to agree because no matter how much we did on this side of the House, those on the other side of the House will say we should have done more and gone

further. They do not even recognise that we made interventions, and that this action was one of the largest across the EU.

On Leaders; Questions today, the Taoiseach gave a firm commitment that the situation would be kept under continuous review. We have to acknowledge, thankfully, that the price of a barrel of crude oil is much lower now than it was at its peak. Thankfully, the signs seem positive in relation to a peace deal in the Middle East and, hopefully, that will open up the Strait of Hormuz. This will see a huge increase in the supply, which will, hopefully, bring down the cost of oil even further. We, therefore, have to be agile and responsive to what is happening on the international stage because this is what is affecting the cost of energy in Ireland today.

The differences regarding the benefits of the carbon tax have been exposed among the people on the Opposition benches. The most recent votes identified this. A sizeable majority in this Dáil supports it and supports what is being done to ensure that the revenue generated by the carbon tax is reinvested to protect those who need the greater support through the fuel allowance, social welfare payments, investment in environmental and agricultural schemes in the agriculture sector, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants to help people retrofit their homes and a deep retrofit for those who need it the most, namely those people at risk of energy poverty and receiving social welfare fuel allowance. The tens of thousands of households that have benefited from that welcome it.

I assist people in this regard, and I acknowledge everybody does in this Chamber. We assist people daily and weekly in our clinics and in our constituencies. If we talk to anybody, in the context of the fuel allowance, who has had the benefit of a deep retrofit and the benefit they have derived, they will speak about the improved quality of life in their homes and the huge reduction in what they are spending weekly, monthly or bimonthly on energy to heat their homes. That is a permanent support for people at risk of energy poverty. It is a permanent benefit that we have been able to provide because of the carbon tax, and that is never acknowledged when Deputy Doherty gets up to speak.

I have outlined that our budgetary process has commenced. I acknowledge that more needs to be done in relation to people who are working and who are finding it difficult in terms of the cost of living. Work is ongoing to ensure that people get that extra support in budget 2027. We will see that when the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister, Deputy Harris, get up to deliver the budget in a few short months.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I need to put a few home truths on the record here because the Minister of State cannot get away with that. He cannot continue to come in here and say that carbon tax revenue is all going to fund X, Y and Z. Does he seriously think the Comptroller and Auditor General is lying, or does he just want to ignore what the Comptroller and Auditor General has said in his reports? Let us have an honest conversation about this topic. The Comptroller and Auditor General has said very clearly that hundreds of millions of euro being brought in from carbon tax cannot be identified as going to any of the intended causes: retrofits, climate change and social welfare payments. The carbon tax cannot be identified as going to those ends. This amounts to hundreds of millions of euro. This is not Sinn Féin speaking but the Comptroller and Auditor General before the Committee of Public Accounts. It is in black and white and there for everybody to see. I ask the Minister of State to stop spouting the stuff he is saying because it is not true.

We have shown the Government time and again not only how it can deliver retrofits and environmentally-friendly programmes but that it can do so in a better way that is not a transfer of taxpayers' money to people who are already wealthy, those who can already afford to buy their electric vehicle or do the deep retrofit, and still get the grants. We need to make sure that more of that money flows into the households that cannot afford to do this, and that is why we need to see a restructuring of the grants. We also need to see more money spent on these programmes and we do not need carbon tax to do this. The Government could look at other types of tax.

I have a novel idea for the Minister of State in this regard, and I ask him to think about it for a second. Stop picking the pockets of my neighbour, who cannot afford an electric vehicle, and pick the pockets of the banks, which made €3 billion in profits last year. The Government allowed them to pay 1% in tax. Why not do this? Why not let the banks fund energy retrofits? Why is the Government picking the pockets of my neighbour?

The Minister of State spoke about what this legislation is about and that the energy crisis has been created by the war in Iran. Of course, the latest version of this has been created by the war in Iran. Nobody disputes that and, hopefully, some of this will settle but it does not let the Government off the hook. This Government is instrumental in driving up the costs of gas, electricity, petrol, diesel, home heating oil, a bag of coal and a bale of briquettes. It has been doing this every year for the past six years and it plans to continue doing it for the next four years. It is in the legislation. It is what the Minister of State is asking me to vote for. I am not voting for it because it is not just Trump and his antics driving up these costs. The Government is driving up these costs. This legislation is driving up these costs. How am I supposed to turn around to people in Gweedore, Letterkenny or Killybegs on 1 August and explain to them how the hell, under God, I voted for legislation that put up the price of diesel by 32%? They will think I do not understand what they are dealing with at the minute. That is what the Minister of State is asking me to do, and I am not doing it.

I am also calling out the Minister of State because some of the stuff he is saying is simply not true. If we want to have a debate, then let us have an honest debate. I ask the Minister of State, however, to please acknowledge what the Comptroller and Auditor General has said, namely that hundreds of millions of euro of carbon tax is not ring-fenced for the intended purposes. If the Minister of State wants, I will quote exactly what he has said. Between 2020 and 2023, the Comptroller and Auditor General cannot say where more than €500 million has been spent in terms of the intended projects. The Government keeps on saying that the carbon tax revenue is ring-fenced for these measures when it is not. Does the Minister of State want to stand there and say that the Comptroller and Auditor General, and his office, is simply wrong and misleading the public and the Dáil? If the Minister of State is not willing to stand there and say that, I ask him to stop misleading the Dáil and the public, and to have an honest debate in relation to where carbon tax goes.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy has had the vote, so he can go back and claim he has taken that position. The House has had to vote on his amendment. It was comprehensively beaten, not just by the Government Members but by other Members in the Dáil who support the model that has been implemented because they can see the benefit of it in terms of the money being reinvested.

I will just give the Deputy a flavour. In budget 2026, €1.114 billion was allocated for climate measures and to ensure the most vulnerable would be protected from the unintended consequences of the tax increase. This is €163 million more than the 2025 allocation. There is €566 million for the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment for retrofitting programmes, just transition and the ODA green climate fund, representing an increase of €89 million on the amount for 2025; €350 million for the Department of Social Protection for targeted social welfare interventions, representing an increase of €44 million on the amount for 2025; €173 million for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for green and sustainable farming measures, representing an increase of €30 million on the amount for 2025; €20 million for the Department of Transport for the continuation of carbon tax-funded programmes; and €5 million for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for the continuation of carbon tax-funded programmes. That is how the money that was collected is being spent. We can agree to disagree on the policy proposal, but that is where we are.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State started talking about a couple of million here and a couple of million there. I have called him out in relation to what he is saying over and over again about the revenue being reinvested. I am asking him, and challenging him here in the Dáil, either to stand over what he is saying or call out the Comptroller and Auditor General. You cannot have it both ways. Who is telling the fibs here? The Minister of State is saying that carbon tax is completely reinvested and the Comptroller and Auditor General is saying not under his watch, not that he can find. He is saying that between 2020 and 2023, about €500 million of the €1.3 billion brought in did not go towards the intended scheme. Therefore, the Minister of State should please stop. I am challenging him here now. Does he stand over what he is saying? He should please answer this question: is the Comptroller and Auditor General wrong, or is all the revenue reinvested?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Deputy O’Callaghan’s amendment and he has said twice he is pressing it. Does he wish to press it now or shall I go back to the Minister? We have ten minutes left.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I am happy to let the Minister in again but I wish to press the amendment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am finished. I appreciate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay. I thank the Deputies. After the Minister of State’s comments, Deputy O’Callaghan may press the amendment.

Deputy Robert Troy: What I am quoting are the figures from 2025 and 2026. I have outlined how the €1.114 billion was allocated to each Department. I cannot break it down in granular form for the Deputy here today, but what I am outlining, at a high level, is how the money collected is going back to the various Departments. When carbon tax was introduced initially, my understanding was that the first €20 was not ring-fenced and that anything over and above that was for the measures I have outlined already. I will come back to the Deputy on what he

is saying about the period 2020 to 2023. The figures I have quoted this evening are from 2025 and to date in 2026.

Fundamentally, the Deputy is opposed to the policy. I recognise that. He has been consistent in his approach to it, and that is fair and is his prerogative. What we have said is that this is a policy that has been introduced to change behaviour. It has been done in a way to protect those at the lowest income levels from unintended consequences and to generate funding that can be reinvested in permanent measures that will help people through environmental schemes in agriculture, deep retrofitting and the increases in the SEAI grants, which the relevant Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced earlier this year. The figures I have spoken about are for 2025 and 2026.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 70; Níl, 84; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butterly, Paula.	
Crowe, Seán.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	
Daly, Pa.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Devine, Máire.	Calleary, Dara.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Canney, Seán.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Chambers, Jack.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Clendennen, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cummins, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Currie, Emer.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Daly, Martin.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dillon, Alan.	

Hearne, Rory.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kenny, Martin.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawless, Paul.	Foley, Norma.	
Lawlor, George.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Grealish, Noel.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Nash, Ged.	Heydon, Martin.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Kyne, Seán.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Lahart, John.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McGuinness, John.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Murphy, Michael.	
Smith, Duncan.	Neville, Joe.	
Stanley, Brian.	Nolan, Carol.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	

	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Cian O'Callaghan and Jennifer Whitmore; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am now required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 9 June: "That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, the section is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Title is hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 107; Níl, 47; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Aird, William.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Buckley, Pat.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Boland, Grace.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Brennan, Brian.	Collins, Michael.	
Brennan, Shay.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Browne, James.	Crowe, Seán.	
Burke, Colm.	Cullinane, David.	
Burke, Peter.	Daly, Pa.	
Butler, Mary.	Devine, Máire.	
Butterly, Paula.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cahill, Michael.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cairns, Holly.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Gould, Thomas.	
Calleary, Dara.	Graves, Ann.	
Canney, Seán.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Healy, Seamus.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Kenny, Martin.	
Chambers, Jack.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Lawless, Paul.	
Clendennen, John.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Collins, Niall.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Connolly, John.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Cooney, Joe.	Murphy, Paul.	

Crowe, Cathal.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Cummins, Jen.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Cummins, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Currie, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Daly, Martin.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Devlin, Cormac.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Dillon, Alan.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Dolan, Albert.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Fleming, Sean.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Foley, Norma.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Stanley, Brian.	
Gannon, Gary.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Geoghegan, James.	Ward, Mark.	
Gibney, Sinéad.		
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.		
Grealish, Noel.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Hayes, Eoin.		
Healy-Rae, Danny.		
Healy-Rae, Michael.		
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawlor, George.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McGrath, Mattie.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, John.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		

Murphy, Michael.		
Nash, Ged.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Quaide, Liam.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Whitmore, Jennifer.		

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

Question declared carried.

8 o'clock

Insurance (Disregard of Certain Medical History and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ged Nash to move amendment No. 1 which arises out of committee proceedings.

Deputy Ged Nash: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 5, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“(7) For the purposes of this section, a person is not precluded from being in complete remission by reason only of the fact that the person is receiving—

(a) anti-hormonal medications, or

(b) any form of preventative therapy or medicine intended to reduce the risk of recurrence of cancer following the end of active cancer treatment.”

I thank the Minister of State for the way in which he has engaged with me on this matter in recent days. I think he accepts that we in the Labour Party proposed this amendment in good faith. I might describe it as a belt and braces approach to the particular provision in the Bill. The intention is to strengthen and galvanise it and ensure there is no ambiguity in any respect in terms of how this provision is interpreted by the insurance industry when people are in the position that they ought to have access to disregards and where there may be issues around it, intentional or otherwise. I think the Minister of State accepts this was proposed in good faith and in the spirit that we want to see the full Bill implemented so that there will not be any ambiguity whatsoever about any definitions in it, such as about what "remission" or "five years beyond active treatment" mean because those two tests are contained in the Bill.

I am aware the Minister of State has received clear advice on his view there is no ambiguity and that the full intention and spirit of the Bill will be implemented. However, this is designed to avoid any ambiguity that might arise, especially in relation to the requirement of some cancer survivors who are in remission to receive ongoing hormonal treatment. That would apply, as the Minister of State is aware, primarily in the case of breast cancer survivors who have had a HER2-positive diagnosis and also in the case of some prostate cancers that are typically hormonally-driven and require the taking of medication on an ongoing basis.

I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would put on record his position on the amendment. It would be a worthwhile exercise in itself just to establish the advice he has. I ask him to provide some clarity on his position on this and some reassurance that the Bill and the provision as currently drafted is, for want of a better description, bulletproof.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I put on record the strong support of the Social Democrats for this Bill. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, and all who have worked on this on a cross-party basis, including the Irish Cancer Society and the volunteers from that society. It is an excellent example of how this Oireachtas can and should work very effectively. We need to see more of this approach to legislation progressing not just from Cabinet but from backbenchers across the Oireachtas.

I support Deputy Nash's amendment. It is a very good effort to try to ensure there is not ambiguity in the Bill and he raises an important point.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): To the Deputy's latter point, I am always open to good suggestions from the Opposition; I am just not sure it always come forward with them. I say that in jest.

Deputy Ged Nash: I know.

Deputy Robert Troy: In all seriousness, I acknowledge all Members of the Dáil in terms of their co-operation and their positive engagement on this legislation since it was first introduced by my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, when she was a backbench TD.

I fully appreciate the amendment is coming from a position of good faith and I am not at all questioning Deputy Nash's bona fides in relation to the reason for advancing it. The Government has considered the proposal to insert a new subsection that would provide a person shall not be regarded as precluded from being in complete remission solely by reason of receiving anti-hormonal medications or preventative therapies or medicine and understands the underlying concern this is aimed at addressing. While the intent of the amendment is acknowledged and understood, the Government does not consider it necessary to include this provision as the legislation provides "complete remission" is determined by an oncologist on request. The five-year threshold only applies to primary treatment such as surgery or chemotherapy, which is considered "active cancer treatment". Anti-hormonal medications or any form of preventative therapy or medicine intended to reduce the risk of reoccurrence of cancer following the end of active cancer treatment are excluded from consideration for the disregard. For example, industry has clarified that an applicant who had surgery for breast cancer five years ago and is certified as being in complete remission by an oncologist but still takes anti-hormonal medication would qualify for the disregard under this legislation.

The Bill as amended clearly defines "active cancer treatment" in section 3 and explicitly provides this does not include anti-hormonal medications or any form of preventative therapy or medicine intended to reduce the risk of reoccurrence following the end of active treatment. Individuals who are receiving these therapies or medications are already regarded, for the purpose of this Bill, as having completed active cancer treatment where all other criteria are met. The Bill therefore already accommodates the scenario where an applicant is no longer being treated for cancer and is in remission but may be taking medication or undergoing therapy for preventative reoccurrence.

Officials in my Department engaged with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government, representatives of the insurance industry, the Irish Society of Medical Oncology, the Society of Actuaries in Ireland and very importantly, the Irish Cancer Society, which the Deputy has engaged with, on this definition. The result of this consultation is a definition that closely follows that of the voluntary code. Additional consultation with industry has certified that, in practice, insurers do not consider medication to prevent reoccurrence as rendering applicants ineligible. Consequently, I do not propose to accept the amendment despite the Deputy's good intentions.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Bill received for final consideration and passed.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad. Congratulations to all concerned. It is one of my favourite times to be in the Chair.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 8.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 8.20 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 8.17 p.m. and resumed at 8.20 p.m.

Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024: From the Seanad

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 8: In page 5, to delete lines 24 and 25 and substitute “Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.”.

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, and Nos. 6 to 11, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 9: In page 6, to delete lines 7 and 8 and substitute “the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, may determine.”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

Section 9: In page 7, to delete line 9 and substitute “Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 4:

Section 12: In page 9, between lines 25 and 26, to insert the following:

“Insertion of sections 16A and 16B into Act of 2012

12.The Act of 2012 is amended by the insertion of the following sections after section 16:

“Staff of Microfinance Ireland

16A.(1) Microfinance Ireland may, with the approval of the Minister and the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, appoint such and so many persons to be members of the staff of Microfinance Ireland as it from time to time considers appropriate.

(2) The grades of the staff of Microfinance Ireland and the numbers of staff in each grade shall be determined by Microfinance Ireland with the consent of the Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

(3) The staff of Microfinance Ireland shall be employed on such terms and conditions as may be determined by Microfinance Ireland from time to time subject to the approval of the Minister and the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

(4) There shall be paid by Microfinance Ireland to the members of its staff such remuneration and allowances for expenses as may be determined by Microfinance

Ireland with the approval of the Minister and the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

(5) Where a member of staff of Microfinance Ireland is—

- (a) nominated as a member of Seanad Éireann,
- (b) elected as a member of either House of the Oireachtas or to be a member of the European Parliament,
- (c) regarded pursuant to Part XIII of the Second Schedule to the European Parliament Elections Act 1997 as having been elected to the European Parliament, or
- (d) elected or co-opted as a member of a local authority, he or she shall stand seconded from employment by Microfinance Ireland and shall not be paid by, or be entitled to receive from, Microfinance Ireland any remuneration or allowances for expenses in respect of the period commencing on such nomination, election or co-option, as the case may be, and ending when such person ceases to be a member of either such House, member of such Parliament or member of a local authority.

(6) A period of secondment referred to in subsection (5) shall not, for the purposes of any superannuation benefit, be reckoned as service with Microfinance Ireland.

Existing staff of Microfinance Ireland

16B. (1) Each person who was a member of staff of Microfinance Ireland immediately before the appointed day shall, on the appointed day, be deemed to be a member of staff of Microfinance Ireland for the period remaining unexpired (if any) under the contract of employment under which he or she was employed by Microfinance Ireland as if he or she had been appointed under section 16A.

(2) A person referred to in subsection (1) shall be subject to such terms and conditions of service, including terms and conditions relating to remuneration, as are not less favourable than the terms and conditions of service, including terms and conditions relating to remuneration, to which the person was subject immediately before the appointed day.

(3) In subsection (2), the reference to terms and conditions relating to remuneration does not include terms and conditions relating to superannuation.

(4) In relation to a person referred to in subsection (1), previous service with Microfinance Ireland prior to the appointed day shall be reckonable for the purposes of, but subject to any exceptions or exclusions in, the following:

- (a) the Redundancy Payments Acts 1967 to 2022;
- (b) the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001;
- (c) the Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act 2003;
- (d) the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997;
- (e) the Terms of Employment (Information) Acts 1994 to 2014;

- (f) the Minimum Notice and Terms of Employment Acts 1973 to 2005;
- (g) the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2015;
- (h) the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 to 2022;
- (i) the Parental Leave Acts 1998 to 2023;
- (j) the Adoptive Leave Acts 1995 and 2005;
- (k) the Carer's Leave Act 2001;
- (l) the Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016;
- (m) the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019.

(5) In this section, “appointed day” means the day appointed by order under section 12(3A).”.”.

Seanad amendment No. 5:

Section 13: In page 9, to delete line 35 and substitute “of section 13 of the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Act 2026, Microfinance Ireland shall, with the approval of the”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 6:

Section 13: In page 10, to delete lines 1 and 2 and substitute “Minister and the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, make a scheme or”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 7:

Section 13: In page 10, to delete lines 11 and 12 and substitute “consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, make a scheme amending or revoking a”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 8:

Section 13: In page 10, to delete lines 19 and 20 and substitute “subject to the agreement of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, make a”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 9:

Section 13: In page 10, to delete lines 25 and 26 and substitute “with the consent of the Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 10:

Section 14: In page 11, to delete line 2 and substitute “Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, make”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 11:

Title: In page 3, line 7, to delete “Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment” and substitute “Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendments reported.

An Ceann Comhairle: A message will be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it that Dáil Éireann has agreed to amendments Nos. 1 to 11, inclusive, made by Seanad Éireann to the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024.

Sitting suspended at 8.22 p.m. and resumed at 8.27 p.m.

EU Directive on Combating Firearms Trafficking: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences and amending Directive (EU) 2024/1260 of the European Parliament and of the Council,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 18th March, 2026.

I thank the House for facilitating this motion. I welcome the opportunity to address the Dáil on Ireland's opt-in to a new EU proposal for a directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences.

Ireland has an option, provided for in Article 3.1 of Protocol 21 annexed to the Treaty of Lisbon, to opt in to individual proposals in the area of freedom, security and justice. The protocol provides that Ireland has three months from the date a proposal is presented to the Council to notify the Presidency of the Council of its wish to take part in the negotiation, adoption and application of the measure. The three-month period for this proposal ends on 23 June 2026. The exercise of the opt-in is subject to the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas, so it has been necessary to bring this proposal to the Houses as swiftly as possible. Ireland can accept a proposal at any time after it has been adopted but in such cases Ireland

will not have been in a position to vote on the final content of the proposal. It must also be noted that Ireland made a declaration appended to the Treaty of Lisbon of its intention to opt in to measures in the area of freedom, security and justice to the maximum extent it deems possible.

The EU has previously adopted several instruments regulating the legal acquisition and possession of firearms. Opting in to this measure in relation to firearms trafficking provides an important opportunity for Ireland to reiterate our commitment to tackling illicit firearms, the trafficking of which poses a serious threat to both our and our European neighbours' security, and beyond.

On 26 February, the European Commission put forward this proposal with the intention to combat firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences. The aim is to introduce a EU-wide framework with common definitions of firearms offences and penalties, support stronger co-operation between member states and improve the collection and use of data. The proposal also closes the gap when it comes to the misuse of 3D printing for illicit weapons production and includes an obligation for member states to establish a national firearms focal point to better enable operational co-operation between member states.

Illicit firearms pose a serious threat to the security of all EU citizens. They enable a wide range of serious and organised crimes, including drug trafficking, extortion, robbery and gang violence.

The issue has intensified due to geopolitical events in geographical proximity to the Union. There is a high risk that the surplus of weapons from ongoing conflict, such as the one in the Ukraine, will leak into illegal markets.

Key challenges that have been identified that further the facilitation of illicit firearms trafficking are the technological shifts creating the possibility of online dissemination of 3D-printing blueprints. The large gap in data and reliable, comprehensive statistics also make it more challenging for law enforcement and policymakers to assess the scale of this threat and identify possible solutions.

Firearms trafficking has been consistently identified as a major internal security threat to the EU. The necessity for harmonisation of criminal standards has been highlighted in both the 2025 ProtectEU internal security strategy and the new counter-terrorism agenda. However, there are significant differences in how firearms-related crimes are defined and punished across the member states. This lack of harmonisation hinders cross-border co-operation, complicates investigations and prosecutions, and reduces the overall effectiveness of law enforcement against firearms trafficking and its related offences.

I will provide more detail about the specific elements of the measure that is under discussion. The directive aims to protect EU citizens from the threat of illicit firearms by reducing the number of illegal weapons and related criminal activities, harmonising firearms offences and penalties and improving data quality and availability. The proposal targets intentional acts involving illicit firearms and does not propose to change existing EU rules on the legal acquisition, possession and cross-border movement of licit firearms. The proposal will harmonise the definitions and penalties of criminal offences to include the trafficking, manufacturing or possession of illicit firearms, the falsifying or illicitly removing or altering

of mandatory firearm markings, and the illicit creation, acquisition, possession and dissemination of 3D printing of firearms.

Under this proposed directive, each member state will be obliged to establish a national firearms focal point to facilitate co-ordination and co-operation between the competent authorities. This directive will also strengthen data collection on seized firearms, which will enhance the capabilities of law enforcement officers and policymakers. It will allow for better resource allocation and it will enhance threat and policy evaluation.

Harmonised EU-level action will also support broader security goals, as firearms crimes are closely linked to terrorism, money laundering, drug trafficking and other types of organised crimes. As firearms trafficking continues to worsen, we are committed to combating this challenge through a co-ordinated and coherent approach. To do this, we must ensure our legislative measures are fit for purpose. In Ireland, we have robust legislation safeguarding the use of firearms through the Firearms Act 1925. However, this represents the first firearms trafficking measure at EU level. This legislation will remove the fragmentation that exists across the European Union to provide for harmonisation, thus enhancing cross-border co-operation, criminal investigations and prosecutions. The ultimate goal is to safeguard citizens and ensure that serious criminality is disrupted and punished.

The views of the Office of the Attorney General have been sought on this directive. The legal advice confirmed that there are no legal or constitutional obstacles to Ireland opting in to this directive.

Naturally, given the importance of this issue, officials from my Department will continue to participate actively in the negotiations at working party meetings and engage with other Departments and agencies to ensure the final text of the directive works well for Ireland and the EU as a whole. As part of Ireland's Presidency responsibilities, senior officials in my Department will be leading on the negotiation of the measure as it progresses in Brussels. By opting in to the measure, we will join our European colleagues to help fight this collective challenge.

The Government has no hesitation in commending this motion to the House.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sure the Government has no hesitation at all.

There is a serious issue in terms of how the Minister for justice is dealing with some incredibly important Bills that will have implications for years to come, and that is his inability to engage with the Houses of the Oireachtas regarding EU matters in a timely manner. I have lost count of the number of times that a Minister from the Department of justice has come in here with a proposal and said that time is of the essence and we have to adopt it within the following number of weeks. The question is: whose fault is that? It is certainly not the fault of Opposition Members who are told that there is an urgency. This is particularly the case with this proposal.

The briefing note circulated by the Department highlights the particular urgency and lists 23 June, less than a week from now, as the deadline. That is the timeframe the Houses have to consider it.

The Minister might consider me to be naive but I would have thought that the purpose of debates in this House was to scrutinise proposals, identify issues and suggest improvements or other beneficial courses of action, but the truth of the matter is that these motions have become a rubber-stamping exercise that have become the hallmark of how he approaches this. The least that the Houses of the Oireachtas deserve is an adequate timeline. I am told that for all the lack of notice we got in this House, the Seanad was give 24 hours' notice in respect of this motion.

The Minister of State referred to the deadline of 23 June. She stated this is because of the pressures of Article 3 of protocol 21 and it is important that we go back to the basis of where protocol 21 came from. It provided an opt-out for Ireland and Britain at the time in respect of matters concerning security, freedom and of that nature. There are two provisions in it. The first, Article 3, that the Minister of State cites, essentially allows the Government to opt in at an early stage of the deliberative process and within which comes a very tight deadline, but I am astounded that her contribution never mentioned Article 4 because Article 4 provides a different mechanism for Ireland to opt in, if that is the considered view of the Government and the Houses of the Oireachtas. That allows us to sign in at any stage after the enactment of the proposal.

Of course, the Government will cite that Article 3 brings us to the table, allows us to be part of the deliberations and the decision-making process but it also forces us to accept whatever decision is made, even if we oppose it and are in a minority in a qualified majority voting situation. Two questions arise from that. Do we have faith in the Ministers to defend and fight for the positions of the Oireachtas behind closed doors when they treat the Oireachtas with such contempt on an ongoing basis in relation to these motions? Do we trust the Minister at a time he is signing us up under protocol 21 to probably the greatest number of EU proposals ever? He has given up opt-outs where we have always had them and opted in and he is increasingly using Article 3 rather than Article 4, which was the primary mechanism used by previous Governments to sign up. This is all too familiar. We saw the furore in recent weeks when members of the public became aware in respect of the EU migration and asylum pact that we are locked in not only through this Government but future governments to an EU framework that takes no account of the unique circumstances and challenges that this particular island nation, divided as it is, faces.

In the Seanad earlier, the Minister misrepresented, or at least misunderstood, Sinn Féin's position because we have always acknowledged that there are areas where there is a need for EU collaboration. It is absolutely the case that combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences could be one of them but that should be done on the basis of considered discussion in this House. That should have been done as a result of debates at the Oireachtas joint committee on justice in the first instance where we have thoughtful detailed conversations as to what precisely it means for Ireland to opt in, what provisions of sovereignty precisely are being handed over and what the value for this State is in handing over that sovereignty, then a considered debate in this House and then moving forward, but instead what happens is decisions are made behind closed doors to opt in.

I have the briefing note here. That is what has been provided to the Oireachtas by way of considered deliberation by the Department by way of briefing and then we are being asked at

short notice to opt in under Article 3 and trust the Ministers to have our back as a state in EU negotiations.

It does not matter after that whether they do have our backs, because we are locked in anyway. This is not at all the way to do business.

There is a particular issue when it comes to firearms. When we are dealing with terrorism and serious firearms trafficking, I fully accept there is a need for, and merit in, operating on an EU basis. However, game clubs and hunting organisations, for example, have highlighted to us that when previous Governments signed us up under Article 4 to firearms legislation at EU level, there was no consideration for the impact on those types of local organisations and, subsequently, no real engagement on the part of the Department.

I will be voting against this motion. I do so on the basis of standing up for the rights of the Houses of the Oireachtas to have full and proper consideration of these matters, not to be subjected to a rubber-stamping exercise and not to be treated with what I consider to be absolute and utter disdain in terms of proper accountability. The Minister of State can say these are democratic decisions. Yes, this will be a democratic decision in that Members will vote on it, but nobody can argue in any way that there has been democratic consideration, accountability and discussion in respect of this motion. That absolutely has not happened.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Social Democrats will support this motion because we want Ireland to opt in to the EU directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences. We do so because firearms trafficking, by its very nature, is a cross-border criminal activity. Organised criminal networks do not respect borders. The firearms used by criminal gangs across the country do not magically appear here. They are trafficked across jurisdictions, moved through criminal supply chains and exploited by organised crime groups operating across Europe. We accept that co-operation between member states is essential, as is information sharing between law enforcement agencies to enable them to work together effectively.

However, supporting the opt-in should not mean suspending scrutiny. We have major concerns about how the Department of justice, led by the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is continuously undermining democratic and parliamentary norms in this House. We will support the measure because we believe it is an important one but we do so while highlighting the failure of the Department once again to apply the required level of scrutiny. The EU's Regulatory Scrutiny Board has itself raised concerns about the level of analysis applied to this proposal, with a report noting that it was moving through the system without the level of detailed examination such a significant criminal justice measure deserves.

That concern is very well founded. When Ireland chooses to opt in to a justice and home affairs measure, it is not a routine administrative exercise. Rather, it is a significant policy decision that means accepting that European legislation will shape part of our criminal justice framework. That should always be done carefully, deliberately and on the basis of evidence, particularly at a time when security concerns across Europe are becoming increasingly more complex. We are living through a period of significant geopolitical instability. We have seen organised crime become more sophisticated, growing security concerns across the Continent, conflict on Europe's borders and increasing pressure on law enforcement agencies in many member states.

In that environment, it is entirely reasonable that the EU would seek to strengthen co-operation against firearms trafficking. It is equally reasonable for this House to ask questions. The central question I have for the Minister of State and the Government she represents is a simple one. What specific gaps in Irish law does this directive close? When we examine our existing legislation, we find that Ireland already has some of the strongest firearm laws in Europe. We already provide for severe penalties for unlawful possession of firearms and significant penalties where firearms are possessed in suspicious circumstances. We already provide for sentences up to and including life imprisonment for the most serious firearm offences.

If we are being asked to opt in to this measure, the Government should be able to clearly identify where the deficiencies lie but I did not hear that addressed in the Minister of State's contribution. Is the benefit primarily to do with information sharing, tracing firearms, intelligence co-operation or offences relating to the illicit manufacture of 3D-printed weapons, or is there a more substantive gap that has not yet been outlined to the House? Those questions are not arguments against the directive. They are arguments for proper scrutiny and they are questions that should have been debated at committee level.

The directive contains provisions on minimum and maximum penalties and a sentencing framework. If we are introducing new sentencing approaches, they should be justified by facts, evidence and a clear understanding of what actually reduces organised crime. Too often in politics, there is a temptation to assume that longer sentences automatically produce better outcomes. The evidence internationally is far more mixed. The objective must not simply be to increase penalties for the sake of it. The objective must be to reduce firearms trafficking, reduce gun violence and improve public safety.

What bothers me most about a discussion like this in the Chamber specifically about firearms offences is that we very rarely discuss one of the major issues occurring across Irish society right now, which is the pernicious nature of gang violence and all the tentacles that surround it. The Minister of State represents Dublin South-Central, which is a constituency very similar to mine. Surely she must see the level of child grooming into criminality that is happening. My eyes almost rolled back into my head a couple of months ago when the Minister talked about the fact we have not had a death by firearms as a consequence of gangland criminality in the past year. Yet, as I walk home via O'Connell Street and Dorset Street, the level of coercion of children into criminality I see there is something many of us have not seen in our lifetime. This directive does not counter that but nor have I seen anything from the Government that does so.

Drug-related intimidation is no longer happening only in inner-city communities. It is a nationwide problem. Rural and farm-based communities are experiencing it. The drug-related intimidation and violence engagement, DRIVE, programme is funded to the tune of some €240,000 each year. The level of drug-related intimidation far exceeds what that funding could possibly do. We have a multitude of disparate but better organised gangs emerging every single week in this country. Inevitably, somebody will say we need an initiative like the inner-city task force for Ballymun, Blanchardstown or Limerick, rather than accepting this is a national problem that requires manifold interventions.

I consistently hear that the Minister at the Department of justice is doing the best work in the country. When I look at the outcomes, I just do not see it. I will vote for this motion on

the EU directive because co-operation matters. Scrutiny also matters, however, and it has not been applied in this instance. I genuinely do not believe the Department of justice is taking any degree of interest in the people who hold the firearms and the people who are coercing children and young people in this country into carrying out the type of intimidation of which we have been seeing the evidence since 2001. There have been 2,600 incidences of drug-related intimidation in the past two years and arson attacks have increased manyfold. We are not getting to grips with a problem that used to be under the radar but about which we now simply do not talk. This directive lacks proper parliamentary oversight. The problems it is trying to solve will not be addressed unless the Government actually takes the issues seriously.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): The next slot is for the Independent and Parties Technical Group but there are no Members from that group present. Therefore, we will move on to the Independent Technical Group, with Deputy Gogarty up first.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Like previous speakers, I do not like the short notice given for this debate but I otherwise broadly welcome the Government motion on Ireland opting in to the proposed EU directive on combating firearms trafficking under Protocol 21. It makes sense because it aligns us with newer EU-wide rules on tracing, information and data sharing and penalties. The directive is focused on tackling the illegal movement of firearms, which is an activity that crosses all sorts of national borders in different jurisdictions with different rules. The criminal networks exploit those differences between legal systems across Europe. By joining this measure, Ireland strengthens its ability to work with other member states. It will improve information sharing and, we hope, will strengthen penalties.

Some people have concerns about the directive. In terms of the sovereignty argument, there is always an element of trade-off. There is an aspect of swings and roundabouts.

Other people fear that it might affect people who use firearms responsibly for sport or farming. We should discuss it more because the short period is not desirable. In general, I think this is essential legislation and I will be supporting it because it strengthens An Garda Síochána's work.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We have a big problem with gun crime in this country. It is important that we work collectively with other countries to stop that. Crime is causing enormous stress for rural communities, in towns and villages right across the country. It is important that we have a serious conversation about what happens to people when they are released from prison. Over the past five years, more than 3,500 persons have been released from prison with no fixed abode. Many go straight into emergency accommodation, with no plan, no supports and no oversight. What is effectively happening in rural communities is that some local authorities are sending individuals into Mayo, in places like Knock, Balla and Crossmolina, and placing them into the hands of private landlords without any professional support structures, risk assessment or rehabilitation pathways whatsoever. In this model, the only beneficiary is the landlord itself.

I have been reliably informed that Roscommon County Council is sending persons released from prison to landlords in Mayo. Worryingly, one of these landlords has plans to expand his enterprise into Claremorris, into a location beside schools. Mayo should not be used as a

dumping ground in relation to this. I have spoken to professionals, addiction counsellors, psychologists and many other specialists, and they have all agreed that you cannot place recently released offenders into privately run, profit-led facilities without any oversight. When you take a man who may have burgled a house and place him alongside a man who may have burgled a car, that is not a rehabilitation centre. You are effectively creating a school of crime. When one person can learn from another, it is the reverse of Batman and Robin. This is happening in Knock, Balla and Crossmolina. It is causing devastating consequences for the individuals, where no rehabilitation is happening, for the community, who have to live with the effects of this, and for the gardaí, who are massively stretched and yet have to deal with such difficult circumstances as well.

There is a better way. If you look at how Galway County Council operates its model, people who are released from prison go to a professionally run service with counselling and risk assessment protocols. It is effectively operating a step-down facility and COPE charity is managing that for the council. It protects individuals, promotes rehabilitation, protects communities, and, crucially, it protects the gardaí too. Instead of funnelling public money into the hands and pockets of landlords, we should be investing properly in rehabilitation and step-down facilities. The model is there and I call on the Minister of State to end this failed experiment. It is causing devastating consequences in Mayo in particular. I want the Minister of State to put proper structures in place. No one should be released from prison with no fixed abode and effectively shoved into a large accommodation centre with other people who have recently been released from prison. It is a dynamite combination and it must be ended. I call on the Minister of State to look into this issue in Mayo, Knock, Balla and Crossmolina. I ask her to come back to me on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I raise a matter that has caused huge concern among farmers, hunters and licensed firearms owners right across rural Ireland. This is about the proposed EU restrictions on lead ammunition and, more important, the complete lack of information and engagement by this Government. This issue did not appear yesterday. Concerns about these proposals have been voiced over the past number of years. Representative organisations have been looking for meetings and meaningful engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, and officials in his Department, and they have got virtually nothing back. In many cases, they have got nothing at all. That is simply not acceptable. The people affected by this are farmers protecting livestock, people carrying out vermin control, hunters, sporting shooters, and ordinary licence-holders who obey the law and pay their taxes like everyone else. Many of them who live in rural Ireland feel they are being ignored, and I can see why. There has been no meaningful consultation, no proper stakeholder engagement, no effort to bring people around the table and no effort to explain what Ireland's position actually is. That is just shocking. The Government talks endlessly about stakeholders' engagement and consultation, but when it comes to rural stakeholder groups, too often they seem to be the last people anyone wants to listen to. That is exactly the impression being created here.

The REACH vote is due on Thursday week, yet here we are, days away from a hugely important decision, and stakeholders still do not know which way Ireland intends to vote. How is this acceptable to this Government? There are over 150,000 licensed firearms owners in this country. Many have serious concerns about the practical consequences of these proposals. There are concerns about availability, the suitability of existing firearms, safety, cost and

supply. What is Ireland's position? Will we vote against or in favour of this proposal? The Health and Safety Authority under the Department of enterprise will cast a vote. Which way do we plan to vote?

Deputy Carol Nolan: I begin by briefly addressing the motion concerning Ireland's opt-in to the proposed EU directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences. I have no difficulty with supporting proportionate, targeted measures that genuinely strengthen our capacity to tackle the illegal trafficking of weapons, particularly those entering the EU from conflict zones or through organised criminal networks. I do want to be absolutely clear, however, that this directive is about criminal law harmonisation and not about the lawful, responsible and highly regulated community of licensed firearms holders in this State. It is certainly not about ammunition standards or hunting practices. However, it is precisely because this directive is not about those issues that I must take this opportunity to highlight a real and growing concern among rural communities, sports shooters and hunting organisations, concerns that I have raised repeatedly through parliamentary questions.

Only last year, I submitted a series of parliamentary questions to the Ministers for agriculture and for the environment, seeking clarity on the European Chemicals Agency's proposals under REACH to further restrict or effectively phase out the use of lead ammunition, including for shotguns used in hunting and pest control. I specifically asked the Minister at that time to outline the Government's engagement with the National Association of Regional Game Councils, NARGC, with local gun clubs and with the tens of thousands of responsible firearm holders who will be directly affected. The replies, unfortunately, were very vague, non-committal and in some cases outright dismissive of the scale of the impact. Now we see NARGC again calling for clarity and sounding the alarm. This time, it is warning that the proposed EU restrictions could have serious, disproportionate and unnecessary consequences for rural gun owners, clay pigeon clubs, wildlife management and farmers who rely on shotguns as a practical tool. NARGC is absolutely right to highlight that many of the alternatives to lead shot are more expensive, less effective and in some cases unsafe in older firearms that were never designed for high-pressure steel loads. I have raised this repeatedly and we are not seeing any action on it or engagement with the game council.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish the Minister of State well in her new role. I am concerned about these opt-ins. We are opting in very often without any proper legal scrutiny or impact analysis. None of us can say there is not a huge problem with gun crime. The availability of and activity involving guns is outrageous. We can have all the opt-ins and European agreements we like, but we do not have the Garda Síochána on the ground to deal with it. I commend the ABGN Gun Club in four parishes in my area, and also the many gun clubs around the country that do excellent work in nurturing species that are in danger, habitats and everything else.

9 o'clock

They have huge concerns here. There was absolutely no consultation with the national organisation or those clubs. They are concerned as are the farmers who, for instance, cannot farm potatoes, which are coming up now, because of crows. They have to have a shotgun. They can have these bangers and everything else. They also need them for deer hunting and for shooting vermin. These people are not being consulted and the worry is that this is the thin

end of the wedge. If we opt in to this, we do not know what it is and where it might end up when it comes down on top of us.

I also have huge issues with the Prison Service at the moment. Our prisons have double the number of prisoners that they can hold and they are releasing prisoners on a regular basis to unscrupulous landlords, some of whom have IPAS centres. I attended a briefing in the audiovisual room this morning. The money that is being paid to some greedy developers here is shocking. They have friends in high places and involves literally billions in money overall. As Deputy Paul Lawless said, it is just shocking. They are putting in one, two and three different criminals who have been released here without any rehabilitation. It is only a cocktail for more crime, more gun crime and all kinds of heinous crimes.

We can come in here and rush through legislation to opt in to this, that and the other with the EU. We are forgetting about the ordinary people who look after our country, our land, our heritage and, of course, our habitats. Yet we do not know the impact of what we are passing will have on them and on those in the farming community who are trying to survive, eke out a living, protect their crops and above all, protect their people. This is wide open for abuse from the EU afterwards.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I, too, wish the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, the very best in her new position.

I am concerned. Every one of us would support the objective of protecting people from the threat that guns or illicit firearms pose to people's lives. To reach this general objective, it is important to reduce the number of illicit firearms and the activity of the illegal firearms market in the EU, to reduce the discrepancies between EU member states, to harmonise firearms-related offences and penalties across member states, and to enhance the overall picture of the threat posed by firearms by improving the availability and quality of data.

However, I am very concerned about the ordinary people in Ireland who hold firearms, whether rifles, shotguns or whatever, for the protection of their farms and to keep wildlife a reasonable distance away. All parts of Kerry are completely overrun by deer. If we were to hurt those who are trying to keep the numbers down - we really appreciate the great work they are doing - it would be very wrong. I believe we have not had enough debate on this motion and I am very concerned about it.

We all know the great work the gun clubs do and they are completely above board. I am also worried about the change relating to lead bullets and that this would in some way speed up getting rid of the lead cartridges we have had for years and years. I am very concerned about how little debate we are having on it this evening. As I said at the start, we are all worried about drug lords, the use of guns and the deaths especially here in the capital and also in other parts of the country. I am very concerned that we might in some way hurt the users of legally held guns in the countryside for the protection of farms and their livelihoods.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I also congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, and I wish her well in her new role.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the House for facilitating this motion today. I thank colleagues from across the House for their contributions. I would like to address some specific questions raised. Deputies Nolan, Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae and Carthy raised the issue of the legal acquisition and use of firearms particularly in rural areas. Their points were well made in relation to the use of hunting rifles and rifles used to protect property from animals. However, this proposal will not redefine the rules on legal ownership of firearms. The proposal only targets intentional acts involving illicit firearms, fully preserving legitimate activities by authorised dealers, industry and citizens. It does not change or affect in any way the existing EU rules on the legal acquisition, possession and cross-border movement of hunting rifles and those types of firearms.

Many Deputies expressed dismay over the timelines. I assure the House that this measure was laid before the Oireachtas one month after its publication. There is some urgency in relation to it given that we have so much legislation going through the Houses and I ask them to bear with us. I note all the positive support for the proposal today.

At the outset, Deputy Carthy spoke about the difference between Article 3 and Article 4 in respect of the opt-in. Under Protocol 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Ireland has two avenues in relation to opting into EU proposals. Under Article 3, Ireland can notify the EU institutions within three months of a proposal being published that it wishes to participate from the outset. This gives Ireland a seat at the negotiation table during the Council working groups and ministerial discussions, allowing it to influence the final wording and operation of the legislation.

Under Article 4, Ireland can wait until after the EU measure has been adopted and then decide whether to opt in to the final instrument. However, at that stage Ireland has no role in shaping the legislation and must effectively accept the measure as negotiated by other member states. An opt-in under Article 3 of Protocol 21 therefore ensures that Ireland is at the table and involved in the discussions and negotiations with other European partners. It is stated Government policy that Ireland participate in the justice and home affairs measures by default, opting out only where concrete and well-defined legal impediments can be identified. This issue was also mentioned by Deputy Gary Gannon.

Deputies Gannon and Carthy also asked why we are now deciding to opt in. The Government is supportive of the proposal and views it as a valuable instrument in combating serious and organised crime, particularly in terms of the increased sophistication and technological advancement in the *modus operandi* used to commit such crimes. It should be noted that it is the Government's stated policy that Ireland participate in justice and home affairs measures by default, opting out only where concrete and well-defined national interests are at stake. In policy and procedural terms, it is considered desirable that Ireland opt in to this measure pursuant to Article 3.

In light of legal advice received from the Attorney General on 27 May that this measure provides no legal or constitutional impediments to Ireland's participation, Ireland should opt in to this proposal. Opting in now will allow Ireland to stay in step with other European partners and strengthen our efforts to fight trafficking of illicit firearms. As part of Ireland's Presidency responsibilities, senior officials in my Department will lead the negotiation of the measure as it progresses through the House.

Deputy Gannon also raised the status of the negotiations. Negotiations are currently under way and have been ongoing since the first working party meeting took place in March 2026. As part of Ireland's Presidency responsibilities, senior officials in my Department will be leading on the negotiation of the measure as it progresses in Brussels. It is anticipated a general approach will be reached during the Irish Presidency. Opting in now will ensure the likelihood that Ireland can take a role in these negotiations, which will be really important so as to ensure the final measure be transposed in a manner compatible with Ireland's common law legal system.

Another huge issue that is very important to me as a representative for Dublin South-Central relates to drug-related intimidation. The Department of justice on the DRIVE oversight board is hugely supportive of this programme to tackle drug-related intimidation at community level. I have delegated responsibility for youth diversion. I look forward to working with Deputy Gannon and other Members of the House in relation to early intervention to ensure that young people do not end up in the justice system and are diverted before it becomes more serious and before they are recruited by criminal gangs.

I thank the Deputies for contributing today. The EU strategy to tackle organised crime and the renewed impact framework are alike in recognising firearms trafficking as a priority. The Government has no hesitation in commending to the House the motion that we opt in to this proposal. By doing so now under the Article 3 opt-in, it will ensure we are at the table with our European partners and can be involved in the detailed discussions. For all of these reasons, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 110; Níl, 43; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Aird, William.	Buckley, Pat.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Carthy, Matt.	
Boland, Grace.	Collins, Michael.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Cronin, Réada.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Crowe, Seán.	
Brennan, Brian.	Cullinane, David.	
Brennan, Shay.	Daly, Pa.	
Brophy, Colm.	Devine, Máire.	
Browne, James.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Burke, Colm.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Burke, Peter.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Butler, Mary.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Butterly, Paula.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Gould, Thomas.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Graves, Ann.	
Cahill, Michael.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cairns, Holly.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Kenny, Martin.	
Calleary, Dara.	Kerrane, Claire.	

Canney, Seán.	Lawless, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Chambers, Jack.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Clendennen, John.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Collins, Niall.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Connolly, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Cooney, Joe.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Nolan, Carol.	
Crowe, Cathal.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Cummins, Jen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Cummins, John.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Currie, Emer.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Daly, Martin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Dillon, Alan.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Dolan, Albert.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Stanley, Brian.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Ward, Mark.	
Fleming, Sean.		
Foley, Norma.		
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Gannon, Gary.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Gibney, Sinéad.		
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.		
Grealish, Noel.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Hayes, Eoin.		
Healy-Rae, Michael.		
Healy, Seamus.		
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawlor, George.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Martin, Micheál.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		

McConalogue, Charlie.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, John.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Murphy, Paul.		
Nash, Ged.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Quaide, Liam.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Whitmore, Jennifer.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Danny Healy-Rae.

Question declared carried.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Motion

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move the following Further Revised Estimate:

Vote 26 — Education and Youth (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €13,642,152,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Education and Youth, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants.

Vote put and agreed to.

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 Order: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022
(Designation of Meath County Council) (Parts of Administrative Area) Order 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd April, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 Order: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022
(Designation of Carlow County Council) Order 2026,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 15th May, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the Second Reading motion on the Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026. On Tuesday, 16 June 2026, on the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Brennan, Brian.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Brennan, Shay.	
Boland, Grace.	Browne, James.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Burke, Colm.	
Brophy, Colm.	Burke, Peter.	
Buckley, Pat.	Butler, Mary.	
Butterly, Paula.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Cahill, Michael.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cairns, Holly.	Calleary, Dara.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Canney, Seán.	
Carthy, Matt.	Carrigy, Mícheál.	
Chambers, Jack.	Clendennen, John.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Collins, Michael.	
Cronin, Réada.	Collins, Niall.	
Crowe, Seán.	Connolly, John.	
Cullinane, David.	Cooney, Joe.	
Cummins, Jen.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Currie, Emer.	Cummins, John.	
Daly, Pa.	Daly, Martin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Devine, Máire.	Dillon, Alan.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Dolan, Albert.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Fleming, Sean.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Foley, Norma.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Gannon, Gary.	Grealish, Noel.	
Geoghegan, James.	Harkin, Marian.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Gould, Thomas.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Graves, Ann.	Heydon, Martin.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Kyne, Seán.	
Harris, Simon.	Lahart, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Lawless, Paul.	
Healy, Seamus.	Lowry, Michael.	
Hearne, Rory.	Maxwell, David.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Higgins, Emer.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	McCormack, Tony.	
Kenny, Martin.	McGrath, Mattie.	

Keogh, Keira.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Kerrane, Claire.	McGuinness, John.	
Lawlor, George.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Martin, Micheál.	Moynihan, Michael.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Moynihan, Shane.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Murphy, Michael.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Neville, Joe.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Nolan, Carol.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Murphy, Paul.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Mythen, Johnny.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Nash, Ged.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Roche, Peter.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Smith, Brendan.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Timmins, Edward.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Toole, Gillian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Troy, Robert.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.		
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.		
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.		
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.		
Quaide, Liam.		
Quinlivan, Maurice.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Ward, Mark.		
Whitmore, Jennifer.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and David Cullinane; Níl, Deputies Peadar Tóibín and Carol Nolan.

Question declared carried.

Data Centres, Energy Use and Climate Change: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Ciaran Ahern on Wednesday, 17 June 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- climate change resulted in Irish temperatures in excess of 30°C in May, breaking a 29-year-old record by more than two degrees;
- a United Nations report has described Ireland as a cautionary tale on the environmental impact of data centres;
- the Government is implementing policies that will increase fossil fuel use, by facilitating further new data centres through the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Large Energy User (LEU) connection policy, the introduction of private wires legislation, and the construction of a floating terminal for the importation and storage of liquid natural gas, including fracked gas;
- over 22 per cent of our electricity is already used by data centres, this will rise to over 30 per cent by 2030, and to 55 per cent if growth continues as projected, using more power than every other electricity user in the country combined;
- in May, the Climate Change Advisory Council noted that all new renewable energy being developed in the State is being cannibalised by new demand created by data centres, rather than going towards decarbonising homes, transport or industry;
- research projects that the 5.8 gigawatt (GW) of additional data centre capacity under the LEU may result in a doubling of the State's peak demand for electricity generation, and lead to an increase in gas consumption by 2030 against the current projected decline, should capacity be constructed ahead of new renewables capacity; and
- no offshore wind power generation capacity will be available before 2030 despite a 5 GW target;

further notes that:

- Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the European Union, and over 500,000 households are in arrears on their energy bills;
- the increased and inflexible energy demands of data centres means that more and more often gas generation sets the wholesale price of electricity, rather than renewables, resulting in higher prices for households, while Eurostat shows that large energy users pay lower network charges;
- research by Friends of the Earth Ireland, shows that Irish households paid an estimated €715 million more in electricity bills from 2015 to 2023 due to data centres, equivalent to €360 per household, and face an additional €1.43 billion in costs up to 2034, costing each household up to €644 more; and

- the Economic and Social Research Institute has shown that recent energy price increases hit low-income households harder, and that more targeted support measures are needed;

regrets that:

- the Climate Action Plan 2026 still has not been published;
- the final, phase 2 oversight group report of the Land Use Review, was submitted over a year ago and has still not been published; and
- planned legislation to prioritise critical infrastructure will bypass statutory climate obligations;

recognises that:

- data centres are essential infrastructure for the modern digital economy and the development of artificial intelligence technology but are overly concentrated in Ireland, are using an ever-increasing amount of energy, resulting in higher costs for households and businesses, and increased development is now at odds with our climate targets;
- discussion by Government of nuclear power is a nonsense and a form of climate obstructionism which distracts and blocks real climate action; and
- the Government will further increase carbon emissions by lifting the Dublin Airport cap, promoting unsustainable housing and economic development, and by no longer prioritising public transport and active travel investment over roads construction;

condemns the decision of the Government to use the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, to disapply Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021 from designated projects; and

calls on the Government to:

- publish the Climate Action Plan 2026, and the final phase 2 oversight group report of the Land Use Review without any further delay;
- delete Section 7 of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, and publish the legal advice confirming the constitutionality of the provision to disapply Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021;
- suspend the CRU LEU connection policy, and commission an independent study of the impact of data centres on electricity prices, carbon emissions, water usage and grid stability;
- introduce a moratorium on the further construction of data centres until renewable energy from offshore wind comes online, and households and businesses can benefit from lower energy costs;
- introduce a levy on the energy usage of data centres, to recover the higher electricity costs now being imposed on Irish households and businesses;

— confirm by how much Ireland will miss our binding 2030 emission targets, what the cost of securing additional carbon credits will be, and how the next Government will pay for those; and

— immediately reintroduce targeted energy credits and more targeted Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland supports for households in advance of Budget 2027.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that in relation to Climate Action:

— last month, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched its latest Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Projections 2025-2030, which show that we are moving in the right direction and improving our performance compared with the previous year;

— for the first time, the EPA now projects that we are close to meeting our first carbon budget, following a consistent trend of improving projections for that budget over recent years;

— the EPA is projecting a decrease in emissions of between 13 per cent and 25 per cent by 2030 (from 2018 base);

— emissions are reducing across many sectors while our population is growing, and our economy is growing;

— we now have the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, and we have decoupled growth from emissions;

— Ireland is at the forefront of transitioning to an electricity system dominated by variable renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, and indeed renewable sources generated almost half of Ireland's electricity in February, March and April of this year;

— significant investment has taken place in increasing the technical flexibility of Ireland's power system to enhance its renewable integration capabilities – through storage and other technologies;

— the electricity system in Ireland can operate with up to 75 per cent wind and solar at any given moment; and

— there are now 241,000 electric and hybrid vehicles on Irish roads;

in relation to, energy affordability:

— the Government is deeply aware of the pressures placed on households and businesses by high energy costs, and has taken a number of steps to support households and business;

— the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) was established in June 2025 to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewables commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— in recent months the Government introduced a €750 million package of fuel supports, which is among the largest per capita of any European Union state, while Budget 2026 had a range of other measures;

— the Value-Added Tax (VAT) rate on electricity bills has been reduced to 9 per cent VAT until 2030;

— enhanced social protection payments have been introduced, including an increase to the fuel allowance rate and an expansion of the eligibility rules, which applies to about a quarter of Irish households; and

— the NEAT continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year;

in relation to, infrastructure delivery:

— a record allocation of €640 million in Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) retrofitting schemes;

— since 2019, we have invested over €1.8 billion in retrofitting, and we have been able to provide energy upgrades for 268,000 homes;

— in the first quarter of 2026, over 12,000 homes have been upgraded through SEAI schemes, including over 1,500 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;

— since the formation of this Government, over 70,000 homes have been upgraded, including over 9,000 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;

— Ireland currently has over 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, and onshore wind is the largest contributor to this, with over 5 GW of wind generation capacity and 2.5 GW of Solar Photovoltaics installed, with hydro, biomass, and other small sources contributing the remainder;

— Government approval was received in July 2025 for €3.5 billion investment in EirGrid and ESB to facilitate the investment programme of up to €18.9 billion out to 2030, and connection of 5 GW offshore wind; and

— the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, is a timely and important piece of legislation and will make a significant contribution to the prompt delivery of nationally important infrastructure, whilst maintaining robust regulatory, environmental and planning safeguards;

in relation to:

— data centres are a very important part of Ireland's economic and digital present and future, and a key part of our value proposition for foreign direct investment;

— the recent KPMG study on data centres, undertaken on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, reports there are 19,500 directly employed in the industry;

— Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy, this is our core energy intensive industry;

— the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Data Centre Connection policy published in 2025, clearly set out what is required for a new data centre connection, including the requirement to get 80 per cent of its energy through new renewable sources; and

— the CRU decision simply refers to market research data on 5.8 GW of prospective interest in data centre growth, rather than linked to any contractual demand in place at present; and further recognises that:

— the Government is committed to taking further action to deliver on the twin objective of decarbonisation and digitalisation in a sustainable and affordable manner;

— the Government is committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis, and work remains ongoing right across Government to implement climate mitigation measures every single day of the week;

— the priority is driving implementation, particularly on high-impact measures with multiple societal and economic benefits;

— the Climate Action Plan will be more focused on the most impactful measures and will report on the ones that make the biggest difference;

— the NEAT continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year; and

— the Government's Large Energy User Action Plan, published in January 2026 sets out a 'plan-led' approach for very large and energy intensive investments, which due to scale and energy consumption will benefit from coordinated national infrastructure planning."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Catherine Ardagh)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the ministerial amendment to the motion on data centres, energy use and climate change. Yesterday, on the question that the amendment be made, a division was claimed and the division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	

Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Geoghegan, James.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harris, Simon.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nash, Ged.	
Heydon, Martin.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nolan, Carol.	
Kyne, Seán.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	

McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Duncan Smith and Ciarán Ahern.

Amendment declared.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	

Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Higgins, Emer.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Kyne, Seán.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	

Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	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.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Eoghan Kenny and Ciarán Ahern.

Question declared carried.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.45 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 18 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.45 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 18 June 2026.