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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 18 Meitheamh 2026

Thursday, 18 June 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Social Welfare Appeals

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the plans to address the high rates of domiciliary care allowance, DCA, appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46280/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This is a fairly straightforward question and one I have asked before, because it is an issue I like to keep track of. It has to do with the high rate of people who are unsuccessful the first time but successful the second time, often in circumstances where there has been no change. I know that the Minister will say this is not the case, but I can tell him that my constituents do believe that there is a policy. Some of the people who contact my office believe that there is a policy of refuse first and see if people come back. That is not a good thing, I am sure the Minister will agree, but it is certainly the impression that people have.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank Deputies O'Reilly and Wall for their ongoing work on this issue. The DCA is a monthly payment to a parent or a guardian in respect of a child aged under 16 who has a severe disability and requires care and attention substantially over and above that needed by a child of the same age. The payment is not means tested. There is no restriction on the number of children for whom a person may claim the payment.

The current rate of appeal for DCA is not disproportionately higher than that of similar medical-based schemes administered by the Department. In 2026, to the end of May, the appeal rate was 20%, with 6,742 decisions made and 1,366 appeals submitted. It is important to note that where decisions are allowed in the receipt of an appeal, this may not mean that the initial decision was incorrect. A decision is more often revised because the person making an appeal provides additional information that was not available when the decision was first made. In

other jurisdictions, appellants are not allowed to submit additional information, but instead are required to submit a new application. By referring the appeal papers back to the Department's decision team for review, our process is more flexible. As a result, 692, or 62%, of the 1,111 DCA appeals granted in the period from January to May 2026 were decided by way of a revised decision by the scheme's deciding officers. This shows the Department's efforts to ensure that as few cases as possible have to go through the full appeals process. To reduce the level of appeals, we encourage those to provide all relevant information in the initial application. In a further effort to assist customers applying for DCA, claims can now be made online and improvements are being introduced to make that process easier for families.

The number of DCA appeals on hand has reduced significantly. At the end of 2024, there were 1,709 appeals on hand. This reduced to 664 by the end of 2025. There are 610 appeals on hand this year to date. This is in the context of a significant increase in applications for DCA in recent years. The number of applications increased by 17.5% in 2025, with a similar rate of increase evident so far this year.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I know that the Minister is very aware that in order to apply for DCA, a parent has to fill out a very long form, be it online or done with a biro. It is a very long form and they must describe their child on their worst day. They must talk about all of the things about their child that are negative for their family. It is soul destroying and exhausting. I can say this because I conducted a survey last year where I talked to people about it.

The experience of having an appeal rejected is somewhat traumatising for parents. I have had people in my office and I am trying to encourage them to appeal where there are no changes in the circumstances and they get it on appeal. It is welcome that people can apply online, as this removes some of the burden but, in truth, these forms are onerous. Filling them out is really hard for parents only to have an application rejected while knowing they have an entitlement and to have to go back and appeal. My understanding is that the percentage being overturned on appeal has risen. That is not a good thing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have placed considerable emphasis on this since being appointed. At the end of 2024, there were 1,700 appeals on hand. At the end of 2025, there were 664 appeals on hand, and we had a 17.5% increase in applications in 2025. As I said at the end of my previous contribution, we have a similar increase this year. We have allocated additional resources to manage it. By moving it online, we have taken some of that paperwork burden out of it.

I am very much open to feedback. We are doing a review of all the forms and processes at the moment. It is important for us to get a balance between getting the information we need to make a decision and to allow people to make an informed decision. I do not want a situation where we are adding to the challenges of a parent's life and, most importantly, a child's life. I need to strike a balance and I am very much open to feedback from offices about the design of any of our forms, but particularly the DCA form. I do not want people to have to go through any more challenges than they already do in their daily lives.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Some of this stuff is very easy to understand. If someone has a child who has a condition or a disability and that child is doubly incontinent, there you go and

that should be enough without a parent having to go into a narrative about what that means. We know what that means. That means restrictions on where people can go. That means they have to be with their child constantly. All of these things we know. Sometimes, the Department requires a lot of information from people about the impact that having a child with a disability has on the household. That is really hard for parents to do.

We conducted a survey. A really high proportion came back to us and advised that they experienced poverty in the period between making the application and actually receiving the DCA, regardless of whether that required an appeal. That is not acceptable. A lot can be done to streamline the forms but that narrative part of the form is really tough for parents to engage with.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have the online option. The average time to award a payment in 2026 to date has been seven weeks. The target is nine. We have also put a fast-track system in place between our medical assessors and my officials to ensure that all medical issues are expedited. I am trying to take all the blockages out of the application system. In response to the work of Deputies O'Reilly and Wall, who have consistently raised this, often outside the Chamber as well, we are keeping a very sharp focus on delays in the appeals. We have to strike a balance between getting the full information to make an informed decision efficiently and effectively. I have asked my officials to remember at all times the day-to-day experiences of the parents and guardians applying for it and of the children in particular.

Social Welfare Eligibility

2. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will immediately abolish the income limit for carer's allowance in view of the 2024 general election promises and the recent report regarding the difficulties experienced by carers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46523/26]

Deputy Seamus Healy: I come back to a very important issue that I have raised previously, namely, the abolition of the means test for the carer's allowance. I am asking the Minister to do that on 1 July, in view of the promises made in the general election in 2024 by all political parties and particularly in view of the recent report by Family Carers Ireland that showed very significant issues in care provision.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, the carer's allowance is the main scheme by which my Department provides income support for carers. Currently, just over 108,000 carers receive this payment, with a provision of over €1.4 billion euro this year. The carer's support grant is a separate payment that was paid to over 147,000 carers on 4 June 2026, at a rate of €2,000 per person being cared for, marking an investment of €336 million.

The programme for Government has set out a commitment to significantly increase the income disregards for carer's allowance in each budget, with a view to phasing out of the means test during the lifetime of this Government. This process is well under way. Last July, the amount of weekly earnings disregard was increased to €625 for a single person and €1,250 for a couple. As part of budget 2026, I announced further improvements to the means tests. They will be introduced from 2 July. From then, the weekly income disregard will increase from

€625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers who are part of a couple. These are the largest ever increases in income disregards. They are higher than for any other payment.

In its recent report, Family Carers Ireland acknowledged the significant progress made in increasing income disregards. The report states that 68% of Irish households are now falling within the financial eligibility criteria. The impact of the increases will mean that those recipients on a reduced payment due to their means will see their payments increase. In addition, more carers will qualify for the carer's allowance. For example, a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €110,000 will retain a full carer's allowance payment and a carer with an income of €138,000 will retain a partial payment. When one considers that the commitment to remove the means test is estimated to cost a minimum of about €600 million, it is clear that a commitment can only be phased in through a number of budgets. I intend to do this over the lifetime of the Government, in keeping with the conditions of the programme for Government.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The findings of the report from Family Carers Ireland, entitled "The State of Caring 2026", should shock us all. Some of the key findings include that 75% of carers have never received respite, 76% are cutting back on non-essentials, 71% find it difficult to make ends meet, 69% do not receive sufficient formal support, and 49% are cutting back on essentials like food and heating.

A stark 48% experience severe loneliness, 32% report very bad mental health and 19% report bad or very bad physical health. Carers do significant work and save the State billions of euro. It is now time to recognise that and implement the commitments and promises that were made during the general election 2024. The Minister has the opportunity to do that on 1 July and he should do that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am very aware of the work of Family Carers Ireland. We host a forum specifically for carers every year. We did that in May. I am very aware of the challenges being faced by carers in terms of respite and other supports. The Deputy may have missed the point within the report that over 68% of families would now receive a carer's allowance payment as a consequence of the income disregards being changed from July.

Deputy Seamus Healy: That leaves 32%.

Deputy Dara Calleary: This means that somebody on an income of €110,000 can receive a full carer's allowance payment and those on €138,000 can receive a partial payment. So, we are making very substantial progress in phasing out the means test. It is a commitment in the programme for Government and I will continue to progress it. I also have other commitments and I want to ensure that we look at the people who are on existing carer's payments for support.

Carers are very important and we had a full morning of engagement with them at our carers forum, where many of the issues in the Family Carers Ireland report were raised. We are working through those with other colleagues across the Government.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Every political party, including Fianna Fáil, made a commitment in general election 2024 to abolish the carer's means test, full stop, no ifs or buts. There were no terms and conditions. There was no small print and no devil in the detail. The Government was going to abolish the means test for carer's allowance, but it has not honoured that commitment. That raises the whole question of trust in politics and politicians. The public are becoming quite cynical now about all things political.

The Minister has another opportunity to do the right thing on 1 July. He is already making some changes, which are welcome. However, it still leaves one third of carers above the threshold of the means test. The Government has the funds available. The cost ranges from about €259 million to the figure the Minister has used, which is €600 million. The Parliamentary Budget Office says €259 million. The Government has a €9.2 billion surplus in budget 2026. The Minister has the opportunity and the funds. He should do the right thing and show the Government's bona fides to carers on 1 July.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The lifetime of this Government is to 2029. I have my ambitions to maintain this commitment. Any situation where a social protection support is available to a family on €110,000 per year in full or to a family on €138,000 in part represents very good progress. These are the biggest increases in the income disregard for the carer's allowance and will come into effect on 1 July. However, I also must have consideration of other pressures and priorities within my Department. I must have consideration for the people receiving carer's allowance at the moment. That is why we were able to introduce a €10 increase in the weekly carer's allowance for 2026.

I am very much aware of, and determined to implement, that programme for Government commitment. We will continue our work with Family Carers Ireland. We had a very good carers forum and there are many issued raised within "The State of Caring 2026" report that I will work on within my Department and with colleagues across the Government. I assure the Deputy that, given what we are doing from 1 July with the biggest increases in income disregards since the allowance's introduction, I am very much delivering to my party's commitment in this area.

Social Welfare Payments

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he plans to address barriers - administrative, financial and others - to accessing social welfare payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46287/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister and I discussed this at committee. I received a response from the Minister for Health advising that the general medical services, GMS, contract does not cover the filling out of forms. As the Minister for Social Protection knows, a lot of people require medical information in order to apply for social welfare and other things. Given that filling out forms is not covered, my question is on the significant barriers, be they administrative, financial or otherwise. Once I started to look into this, I realised that there were a lot of people who found it quite daunting to approach the Department of Social Protection. Specifically, my concern is around the people on the medical card.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We are very committed in the Department to reducing any administrative, financial or other barrier that may prevent people from accessing their social protection entitlements. Our schemes are generally accessed through two main mechanisms: by assessing the PRSI contribution record of a person in respect of social benefit schemes; and by applying a means test and other conditions as appropriate in the case of social assistance schemes.

In respect of contributory schemes, we have broadened access and entitlements in recent years through the introduction of new schemes such as jobseekers pay-related benefit; the expansion of access to existing schemes, for example, to carer's benefit for the self-employed; and the extension of the duration of schemes. In respect of means-tested social assistance schemes, significant adjustments have been made in income disregards, which have enabled more people to qualify for schemes such as carer's allowance, fuel allowance and disability allowance in recent years.

The statistics back up the fact that people are increasingly facilitated in accessing our Department's schemes. Annual transaction volumes have increased from 3.2 million in 2024 to over 3.4 million in 2025. We have sought to make it easier, as we discussed earlier in the context of DCA, through the expansion of the Department's digital and IT platforms. These developments allow, for example, the auto-award of many payments, including the automatic award of approximately 85,000 back to school clothing and footwear allowance payments, which will be done over July, and the automatic award of 147,000 carer support grants in recent weeks. Many child benefit claims for second and subsequent children are also auto-awarded while the sharing of information with Revenue means that many jobseeker claims can also be awarded without recourse to seeking prior employment records.

The Department is also witnessing a very considerable increase in use of our online service platform, *MyWelfare.ie*. We are continuing to provide in-person and phone-based support services.

I will address the issue around the medical cards in my subsequent reply.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Excellent, and I hope that the Minister will confirm to me that people can apply for supplementary welfare allowance in order to pay for the GP. If this is not covered on the medical card and someone does not have the means to pay €80 but absolutely does need to apply for whatever reason, it strikes me that it should be available on the supplementary welfare allowance. I am hoping that the Minister will confirm that to me this morning. If it is not available, then I am hopeful that the Minister will say where people can get the money.

People cannot magic up €80. If they have not got €80, they have not got it. Many GPs will fill out a form, but only on a grace and favour arrangement. More and more people are finding that their GPs will not fill out the forms or that they have to pay for a visit outside of the GMS. That is €80. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that people can apply for supplementary welfare allowance because that is not the experience of my constituents. I am hoping that the Minister can confirm that this morning.

Deputy Dara Calleary: To put Deputy O'Reilly's remarks in context, we discussed this at committee last week. I followed it up. I am going to follow this up with the Deputy. It was raised by many Deputies following her intervention. The Department of Social Protection does not require applicants to obtain private assessments or specialist medical reports to submit an application for a social welfare payment. All available evidence submitted as part of the application is considered. In addition, the Department funds GPs to complete the medical portion of relevant social welfare application forms.

I am going to follow that issue up within the Department and with the Deputy. We are happy to engage with any Deputy where there is this issue. We do not need to know the specific circumstances. I do not want people being unable to access social protection support for the want of not having income. It goes against everything the social protection system stands for, with a lack of resources preventing someone from accessing the system that is supposed to help them. I am very focused on this.

I am going to be doing a lot of work on this but this is my initial response and I am happy to engage with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is very welcome to hear and I am more than happy to work with the Minister. I can provide him with practical examples of where this has happened. I can also say, as I used to represent nurses and I do not hold a massive candle for doctors, that many GPs do this. The problem usually arises when a person goes in to get a form filled and they find out that maybe there is a new GP or they have moved to a different type of service and they just do not do that form. People are not seeing the same GP when they go back and they are coming to my office. When they go for supplementary welfare allowance, that is not always clear cut either and a lot of the time people are sent back. They are told to go to the doctor because the doctor has to do it but the doctor does not have to do it, as the Minister for Health has confirmed to me.

I really welcome that the Minister is going to examine this matter. I can tell him that I will work with him and I am sure plenty of others will as well because it cannot just be an issue in my area. I would imagine it is across the board.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We will engage with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in relation to the communication of this. It is something we have noticed coming up in forums as well - that there is a genuine consideration that we require very complex medical assessments. We do not. I also meant to emphasise in relation to the domiciliary care allowance earlier that we do not require assessments of need. That is still out there. We are trying to minimise the burden on those seeking to access the services. I certainly look forward to feedback from all Deputies in relation to this. We will continue to work with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I will also ask my Department's officials to communicate this and make sure that this is communicated as we redesign forms and application processes. Forms, for many people, are no longer the means of accessing our services. We will communicate very clearly what is required and, most importantly, what is not.

Poverty Data

4. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection to outline the plans his Department has to reverse the trend of increasing levels of poverty amongst older people living alone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46289/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: My question is about older people living alone. According to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, about 30%, or one in three, are at risk of poverty. It seems quite incredible that in a country with a €9 billion surplus in cash and one of the highest GDPs *per capita* in the world that we would have such a level of people living alone and pensioners in poverty. I would like to hear what the Minister is going to do about it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As he knows, the State pension is the bedrock of our pension system in Ireland. As reflected in data from the CSO, it is effective in ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. We, as a Government, are committed to ensuring that this remains the case for current pensioners, including those nearing State pension age, and today's young workers, including those only starting their careers.

Over €12 billion was allocated to State pensions in budget 2026, an increase on budget 2025. From January of this year, the weekly State pension increased by €10, which now means the maximum rate of the State contributory pension is €299.30 per week. Since 2021, the State contributory pension has increased by €51 per week, which shows a commitment to supporting older people. This continues to be a priority for me.

It is recognised that the cost of living for a person living alone is greater than the individualised cost of one of two or more people living together. That is why a weekly living alone increase of €22 is payable to all those aged 66 and over, who are in receipt of a State pension payment from my Department. The living alone allowance has risen by over 144% since 2019, when it was €9 per week. It is paid to about 260,000 people every week. All of these recipients also qualify for the so-called free schemes under the household benefits package, including an electricity or gas allowance and a free TV licence. The telephone support allowance and the fuel allowance payment which, as the Deputy will be aware, was extended by a further four weeks in 2026, is also available subject to a means test.

The rates of primary and secondary payments to pensioners, and their adequacy, are considered in the context of the annual budgetary process. In doing so, we consider evidence from a wide range of sources, including agencies such as the CSO, and also research from groups such as the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice and its minimum essential standard of living, which has just been published today. I am very conscious about the pressures facing those living alone. It will very much feed into my work in the context of budget 2027.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The Minister said that the State pension is aimed at making sure older people do not experience poverty but, according to the CSO, one in ten is experiencing consistent poverty. That is a doubling since the year before in 2024. Notably, this is particularly acute in rural areas and in the Minister's constituency of Mayo and Belmullet. Some 27% of households are reliant on the State pension exclusively. They are living alone; they are isolated in rural areas and entirely reliant on State support. One of the things the Minister mentioned was the increase to the living alone allowance. He selectively looked at 2019. The majority of that increase happened in 2020 and there has not been a significant

increase to the living alone allowance since. What will the Minister do on the living alone and telephone allowances in the forthcoming budget? What is the threshold for him to tackle poverty for people living alone?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am very aware of the people of Belmullet. I had the privilege of being there recently at a 100th birthday, and with a neighbour who is 101. I give my good wishes to Mrs. Ginnelly who is 100 today. That is three people in one village breaking the 100 year mark. I am very aware of it and of older people everywhere, including in Dublin Bay South. We want to ensure there is an adequacy of income, particularly for those living alone. I am very aware of the gap and the cliff edge - for want of a better phrase - that people face when they lose their partner. They are left with the same expenses but their income is reduced. We are definitely looking at the living alone allowance but, as I said, when you look at the level of increase since 2019, it is 144%. It was €9 per week in 2019, so there has been a very definitive increase there, and also when you look at the other payments that are available. The fuel allowance is paid to many pensioners. That was extended for four weeks to bring it to 1 May.

We are looking at the telephone support allowance and the free TV licence. We are looking to see if those payments continue to be relevant in the context of different forms of communication, such as streaming services, etc. I want to make sure that communications are as relevant as possible because for somebody living alone, communications and the ability to have them are essential.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I would strongly welcome the Minister doing that in the forthcoming budget. To come back to the fuel allowance in particular, many older people are struggling to heat their homes. They are often staying in bed rather than getting up because they cannot afford the gas or the home heating oil.

I want to focus on the question of targeted energy credits. This is something that has been talked about in the House many times. There are 500,000 households in arrears, according to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. I assume that many households like that include older people living alone. The Minister's Department, in particular, has an obligation to look at how it targets energy credits for different people. I know it can be administratively difficult but I would be interested to know if that is something the Minister is planning to do as well for older people living alone.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The fuel allowance is paid to many people, such as pensioners, but it is paid to allow them make decisions about their own fuel and energy. I am certainly open to ideas as to how we make sure it can help people directly with fuel payments. People's fuel demands and fuel bills are different, depending on their use of fuel, what kind of heating systems they have and where they live. The whole basis of the fuel allowance, which we increased by €5 per week and extended by four weeks, is that people have the choice to use that money to make the payment for their fuel in whatever way they want. We have seen proposals and had proposals and debate about how that gets targeted but I am not sure, by taking away people's choice, whether we will worsen the situation inadvertently. There are proposals that we should give it directly to energy companies but I am not convinced that will work. For many people, that might not be their fuel pressure in terms of income. I am very

open to proposals on how we can use the fuel allowance to ensure we have more targeting. I look forward to the proposals in the Deputy's budget submission.

Social Welfare Schemes

5. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he plans to change the fuel allowance thresholds for those over the age of 66 that are a single income household; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46491/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy McAuliffe has the next four questions in a row. We are on Question No. 5.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. Could the Minister address the issue of the fuel allowance, particularly the income thresholds for those over the age of 66 in single-income households?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for his question and his ongoing work on this. As a result of that work, there have been significant improvements in the fuel allowance scheme, particularly in relation to the income thresholds for those who are 66 and over.

In January 2023, in order to allow more pensioner households qualify for the fuel allowance, a new fuel allowance payment was introduced for those aged 70 and over. People over 70 no longer needed to be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment to be eligible for fuel allowance. A single person with means of up to €500 per week or a couple with €1,000 per week became eligible. The amount of savings and investments that are disregarded was also increased for those aged 70 or over from €20,000 to €50,000.

From January 2025, this measure was extended to applicants aged 66 and over, with an increase to the weekly means that could be disregarded to €534 for a single person and €1,068 for a couple.

Recent expansions to the scheme have resulted in many more households qualifying for the payment and have resulted in the budget for the scheme increasing to an estimated €557.4 million in 2026 compared to an expenditure of €290.45 million in 2020. Since 2020, when the Deputy was elected to the Dáil, an additional 100,000 households have become eligible for the fuel allowance. I am aware there may be exceptional circumstances where a person does not qualify for the fuel allowance but may need support. It is for this reason that we can make additional needs payments, through the local community welfare service, to meet essential expenses.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to examine key benefits such as the fuel allowance, the household benefits package and the living alone allowance increase to support vulnerable groups. This will be ongoing activity as part of our annual budget planning process. I intend to continue to make improvements to the key benefits, such as the fuel allowance. I am very aware of their necessity and the support they give to older and vulnerable cohorts.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I saw a statistic that 25% of all homes now in the State are in receipt of the fuel allowance. It is certainly a very significant figure. It is coming close to nearly 500,000 homes. Any of us as Deputies can see when you walk around and knock on doors, there are homes that have been able to avail of the better energy warmer home scheme because of their eligibility for fuel allowance. My worry is about the cliff-edge for people. There might be two people over-66 living in a home and for that household, the threshold is €52,000 of annual income. Next door, if there was a person living on their own who could often be a widow or widower, their income threshold is only €26,000 but it costs the same money to heat both homes. The 50% reduction in the income threshold for a single person is very significant. Perhaps it should be something closer to two thirds of it. Particularly for those in the over-66 category, there are many people who find themselves in that situation because of bereavement and it is worth examining.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for that example. Those are the anomalies I am looking at in the context of my previous discussion with Deputy Hayes. We are also looking at the living alone allowance. A person living on their own does not necessarily have half the costs. It is a rather arbitrary figure. In particular, it is especially challenging for somebody who goes through the trauma of losing a spouse or partner and is immediately faced with that cliff-edge. That is definitely something we will look at and particularly for the older cohort, who have higher bills for energy and food and less chance to make up that in terms of day-to-day earnings. In the context of looking at the living alone allowance increase and the fuel allowance payment for budget 2027, they are areas we will be considering. I look forward to engagement across the House ahead of budget 2027 in October.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is a new scheme that is popular and people want to avail of it. If you are sitting in someone's home and as you go through the form, you say to them you are only eligible for one income threshold of €26,000. The person almost feels like they are being punished for having lost their partner. You can see it etched in their face. I ask the Minister to examine it. A 50% reduction is too significant and particularly for that older cohort. With his colleague, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Minister needs to examine how this scheme interacts with the better energy warmer homes scheme. It is an amazing scheme and you can get nearly €50,000 of works done to your home at no cost to the homeowner. Giving a gateway to that scheme, without necessarily significantly changing the fuel allowance scheme, could be one way of addressing the issue I am raising. While often people are seeking the payment of nearly €1,000 per year, they really want to make the improvements to their home to reduce their bills through the better energy warmer home scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will work with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on that. The living alone allowance is also available for people in that situation and it is €1,144 a year. The weekly rate for the living alone allowance is higher than the 28 weeks of the fuel allowance payment. I will say it to everybody about the household benefits package. There are many people who qualify for the households benefits package who are not in receipt of it. We all need to work with those who come into our offices to make sure they are in receipt of everything they are entitled to receive. That is one package in particular that I have noticed the numbers are down on. I will be doing some work on that.

The proposals and suggestions Deputy McAuliffe has made in the context of household composition and how we assess that are very worthy and could potentially make a difference. They will have to be looked at in the context of budgetary decisions and negotiations. We will be doing that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Care Services

6. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Social Protection for a report on his attendance at the annual carers' forum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46023/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I ask the Minister for Social Protection for a report on his attendance at the annual carers' forum. I note the Minister's earlier reply so I have no difficulty making that more brief because of the answer he gave to the House a moment ago.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McAuliffe. The annual carers' forum was held on 7 May this year and I was delighted to attend and speak at the forum. The carers' forum is an important platform within the Department of Social Protection and allows family carers to engage directly with my Department and officials from other Departments to discuss important issues and carers' invaluable role in Irish society. I thank Family Carers Ireland and Care Alliance Ireland for partnering with my Department in organising the forum and contributing to its success. The event brings together family carers, carer organisations and Government officials in structured dialogue and, more importantly, for the sharing of personal lived experiences.

A broad range of issues were addressed, including proposals relating to the carer's allowance means test and measures aimed at improving access to supports. The workshops also highlighted cross-Government concerns, such as access to respite services, which we discussed earlier, housing and transport. We published a comprehensive note of proceedings on my Department's website.

We fully recognise the vital contribution of family carers and as a Government, we are committed to supporting them. I am pleased to confirm that, from next month, the weekly income disregard for carer's allowance will increase from €625 to €1,000 for a single person and from €1,250 to €2,000 for carers with a spouse or partner. These are the highest ever increases. They will enable individuals with higher incomes to qualify for carer's payments. For example, a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €110,000 will retain their full payment and even with an income of €138,000, they will retain a partial payment. Additionally, the annual carer's support grant was paid earlier this month at a rate of €2,000 to over 147,000 carers at a cost of €336 million. We will have further engagement at our annual pre-budget forum on 1 July with the carers groups. These will all inform my priorities for budget 2027, the work for which is under way.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I note this question was transferred to me from Deputy Aisling Dempsey. She has spoken to me about the issue of carers. In the previous election, Family Carer's Ireland campaigned very strongly for abolishing the means test for carers. The commitment was very clear that we would do that over the lifetime of the Government. The increase in the income thresholds has to be acknowledged. As the Minister said, it has increased to €110,000 for a full payment and €138,000 for a partial payment. That very significantly includes the vast majority of people who were in that category and came to us to ask to abolish the means test.

Of course, it is not just about getting access to the payment. It is also about acknowledging that this is real work, it should not be means tested and it should not be linked to the income of your partner. I want to acknowledge that in the first budget that was a very significant amount of money spent that was not spent elsewhere. I acknowledge it was done in terms of carers.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As I reiterated to Deputy Healy, in the Family Carers Ireland State of Caring in Ireland report, it estimated that 68% of families can now access a carer's payment. We have made a very strong commitment in terms of abolishing the means test for the carer's payment during the lifetime of the Government which, as I remind people, is due to go until 2029. There are many other areas and the State of Caring in Ireland report outlines there are many challenges with respite in particular and access to transport. They were articulated very strongly on 7 May at the carer's forum. I took the chance this year and last year to get that shared experience and hear directly from carers.

I particularly want to pay tribute to and thank the young carers' group who were there. There are examples of young carers going to school and college and coming back and taking up caring responsibilities. I really want to look at what we can do to support our young carers, as well as carers as a whole.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister. To return to that point I made, often carers are women. Having spoken to them, I know they feel particularly aggrieved that just because their partner has done an extra five or six hours overtime a week or they have got a pay rise, that in some way means they lose their payment. That underlines the point that this should not be a means tested payment. It should be an acknowledgement for work done on behalf of the State. They are saving the State money. The quicker we move towards the abolition of the means test, the quicker we will be able to resolve that injustice. I acknowledge that the cases of the vast majority of people who would have previously come to my clinic on this issue have been addressed. Those people earning over €140,000 have not yet been addressed but obviously the Government is going to deal with that. I acknowledge the work the Minister has done.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There continues to be anomalies. I am due to receive a report into means testing generally across all of our Department's schemes in the coming weeks and we will be considering that. We obviously have to have means tests in many cases. We have made a commitment in relation to carers, but the kind of situation the Deputy has just described, where the caring spouse of somebody who works hard has to pay the bill for that and gets their allowance reduced, is not fair either. We are going to try to ensure this is as hassle-free as possible. Carers do extraordinary work, but it is very clear from our interaction on 7 May that

there is more we can do across government to reduce the burden on carers. In many cases, it is getting out of their way. In many cases, it is facilitating things such as respite and transport. As I said, I want to work with colleagues across government, particularly the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, at the Departments of children and education, respectively, in respect of young carers and what more we can do for them.

Social Welfare Rates

7. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will give consideration to changing the living alone allowance in the coming year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46357/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I acknowledge my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, and I apologise for my enthusiasm in my first round of questions. I think I submitted too many. I ask the Minister for Social Protection if he will give consideration to changing the living alone allowance. I note his previous reply to Deputy Hayes as well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, on her appointment and wish her every success in her new role.

It is acknowledged, as we have done this morning, that those who live alone and are dependent on certain payments from my Department face a higher cost of living than a two-person household. It is for this reason that the living alone increase is available to those in receipt of qualifying payments from my Department. The living alone allowance is a supplementary payment to those who are 66 or over, living alone and in receipt of a State contributory pension, State non-contributory pension, bereaved partner's contributory pension, bereaved partner's pension under the occupational injuries benefit scheme, incapacity supplement under the occupational injuries benefit scheme or deserted wife's benefit. It is also paid to people aged under 66 who live alone and are in receipt of a disability allowance, invalidity pension, incapacity supplement or blind pension. It is not a stand-alone payment and for this reason it is only available to those in receipt of one of those specified payments.

In total about 260,000 people receive the payment weekly. The current rate of the living alone allowance is €22 a week. It has increased by over 144% since 2019, when it was just €9 per week. The most recent change to the rate was in budget 2022 when it increased by €3, from €19 per week to its current rate of €22 per week. Any future changes to the qualifying criteria or rate of pay for the living alone allowance will have to be considered in the overall budgetary context, including possible increases to primary rates and other supports available. I look forward to input from colleagues, particularly around the qualifying criteria for the living alone allowance as well as the rate of pay. Many anomalies have been highlighted around the qualifying criteria. Deputy McAuliffe referred to one of these earlier and those are the areas I want to see if we can iron out over the course of our budgetary considerations.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The anomalies here are an issue. I know sometimes there might be three individuals sharing a home who are not in any way related to one another, and that can provide some complications. We have been able to resolve this issue in some cases. When we are dealing with anomalies, there is that issue of people sharing a home as to who gets the fuel

allowance. If one person gets it, then other people in the home do not. That is something I ask the Minister to examine.

The other thing I would say regarding the living alone allowance is that when the State spends money it inevitably has an impact on inflation. Regarding increasing the living alone allowance, this relates to costs which people already have and are already paying. People have to pay their household bills and so on. It is an area that does not have as much of an inflationary impact as perhaps increases in social welfare payments would. I am not advocating for increases in the payments but I am saying it is something to be conscious of that the living alone allowance itself does not have as much of an inflationary leakage or impact. It is something to consider.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I was wondering there, Deputy.

I want to focus this year on targeted interventions to address those particular cohorts of people who are most at risk of falling into poverty. I want a situation where we can iron out rules within the systems that may be doing that inadvertently and may be driving people in that direction. As I said earlier, there is the situation of somebody who loses their spouse or partner and is immediately faced with the same bills but with half the income. We need to work better in terms of making the living alone allowance available quicker and providing information on it. There is also the fuel allowance. I am also conscious we have not increased the living alone allowance since budget 2022, so we have some way to catch up there. The Deputy and Deputy Séamus McGrath in particular have been consistent in their work on this and I look forward to all colleagues providing input on this because it is something we all get in our constituency clinics on this particular payment.

State Savings Schemes

8. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on the operation of MyFutureFund - the automatic enrolment retirement savings system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46027/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: On behalf of Deputy Brennan, I ask the Minister to provide an update on the operation of MyFutureFund, the automatic enrolment saving scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The programme for Government contained a commitment to introduce the automatic enrolment, AE, retirement savings system. The aim of introducing AE is to address the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland and to provide workers with greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income. MyFutureFund was commenced on 1 January 2026. All elements of the system are operating as planned. The employer and participant website portals are fully functional and there is a very high level of compliance by employers registering for the scheme and remitting contributions.

Since 1 January, based on analysis of payroll data from Revenue, over 835,000 employees have been automatically enrolled in MyFutureFund. These employees work for approximately 112,750 employers. In addition, more than 9,000 employees have applied to join MyFutureFund voluntarily. Approximately €323 million of contributions have already been

collected for investment with the three contracted investment managers. This includes the employer and the State top-ups, meaning contributors have already seen a 133% increase in their fund over and above their personal contribution. In years to come, with these expected investment returns and top-ups, participants should continue to see their funds accumulate to deliver a significant savings pot for their retirement.

The National Auto-Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, is the statutory body responsible for the administration of MyFutureFund. It is running a campaign on social media, print, radio and TV highlighting the benefits of MyFutureFund for participants. Alongside this, my Department will continue to work closely with NAERSA to ensure awareness of the scheme, the easy administration for employers, and the benefits of saving for retirement for employees. I thank the staff and board of NAERSA for their exception work on the introduction of MyFutureFund, and all the team within my Department, particularly Mr. Tim Duggan who led the work and is just retiring as assistant secretary. I thank him not just for his work on automatic enrolment but his contribution to the State generally.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I join with the Minister in those comments. The establishment of the auto-enrolment scheme was a very significant measure. It had been spoken about for many years. Provision for people's future retirement is incredibly important and auto-enrolment makes it easier for people to make that decision. There is an opportunity to opt out of the scheme. While we have very significant numbers enrolled in the scheme, we want to make sure those numbers do not decrease as time goes on. I encourage the Minister's Department to do everything it can to communicate the benefits of involvement in this scheme or any other pension scheme. We must ensure that people plan for their future and have that greater degree of financial independence. I ask the Minister about ongoing participation in the scheme and how the Department is monitoring those numbers.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It has been very successful so far. A Revenue analysis shows that 835,000 workers have been automatically enrolled. Over 9,000 have joined the scheme voluntarily and 112,750 employers are involved. Contributions thus far total €323 million. As I have said, the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority is running a campaign outlining the benefits of MyFutureFund. That will continue as the opt-out process opens. I know people are under pressure. I am very conscious of that pressure but I made the point during the run-in to the introduction of MyFutureFund that, if you get to the age of 66 and have no retirement plan in place, you will face a massive drop in income. Going from €48,000 or €50,000 a year to €16,500, which is what the State contributory pension provides, is an extraordinary drop. MyFutureFund gives those 835,000-odd people a substantial cushion to alleviate the impact of that drop. That is what it is about. It is about looking to your retirement, when you will not be earning the kind of money you may be earning today, and making provision for that.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate that. I reiterate my point on ensuring that people remain within the scheme. I was recently at an apprenticeship fair and one of the people encouraging people to take up apprenticeships indicated that, by participating in the workforce earlier, they would be contributing to their pensions for a much longer period than people who went on to third level. The numbers are staggering. Whenever you start paying into your

pension, those extra few years make a huge difference. That is the reason the auto-enrolment scheme is so important. It is the reason it will have a real impact over decades. It is also why I want to ensure that we retain as many people as possible within the scheme and that the benefits are communicated.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I have said, the benefits are very much there. Somebody at the age of 23 may feel they are a long way from the age of 66. Looking around the room, I do not see anybody in that space. I assure the Members I am talking about the age of 66. However, it does happen. You get there very quickly and you do not notice it. We genuinely do have a major gap in pension coverage in this country. It is fine now, when we have four workers for every person over the age of 66, but, by the time we get to 2050, which is not that far away, we will have two workers for every such person. I reiterate that the State pension will continue to be the bedrock of our pensions system but we also have to ensure that people have adequate income provision for their retirement years. That is what MyFutureFund is about. We are the last country in the OECD to do this. That is not something to be proud of but it has allowed us to learn from systems across the OECD and from mistakes that were made. We have tried to ensure that our system is user-friendly and that it supports participants and delivers the outcomes we want. The figure of 835,000 enrolees has shown that to be right.

Employment Schemes

9. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on the wage subsidy scheme, and any incentives to support employers taking on employees with intellectual disabilities. [46367/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: On behalf of Deputy Malcolm Byrne, I ask the Minister to give us an update on the workings of the wage subsidy scheme and any other initiatives that are available to employers and those who have intellectual disabilities and need employment. I believe there is scope to improve the wage subsidy scheme, to include others and to encourage employers to participate more fully.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McGuinness for raising this matter. Supporting disabled people and reducing the disability employment gap are key priorities for me. The wage subsidy scheme is the key disability employment support provided by my Department. It aims to encourage employers to offer substantial and sustainable employment to disabled people through a subsidy.

In 2024, the Department published a review of the wage subsidy scheme following a public consultation. We aimed to make the scheme more accessible and more flexible. As a result, the minimum hours were reduced from 21 hours per week to 15 and the scheme was expanded to the community and voluntary sector and the non-commercial semi-State sector. In addition, we changed the language of the scheme to align with the social model of disability.

One of the recommendations made was to regularly review the subsidy rate. The national human rights strategy for disabled people also includes a commitment to examine an increase in the subsidy rate. The rate was reviewed in the context of budget 2026. As a result, the number of bands was reduced and the subsidy rates were increased. The base wage subsidy

paid to employers who employ disabled people is now €7.50 per hour, an increase from €6.30. Employers who employ 25 or more employees on the wage subsidy scheme can still avail of a grant of €30,000 towards the cost of employing an employment assistance officer. Budget 2026 also provided for the expansion of the scheme to those who acquire a disability while in employment, those who have a progressive or degenerative condition that worsens, and those who transfer from invalidity pension to partial capacity benefit.

We hope these changes encourage more employers to hire more disabled people to increase uptake of the scheme and I am engaging with employer organisations to this end. Later this morning, I will attend the Light the Way event hosted by MrPRICE, one of our leading providers of employment for disabled people that work with the wage subsidy scheme. I have also made administrative changes to the wage subsidy scheme to centralise processing to ensure a more consistent and quicker service for those employers that are in receipt of a subsidy under the scheme.

Deputy John McGuinness: Does the Minister believe enough is being done to inform employers of the scheme, its benefits and how it assists both employers and those who have an intellectual disability? Does more need to be done to promote the scheme? I come across a lot of people who have intellectual disabilities or acquired disabilities who would like to return to the workforce to do some work and whose health would benefit from being involved in the workforce and working a meaningful number of hours per week. If more was done to promote and expand the scheme, perhaps working with family resource centres and organisations like Talking Heads in Carlow, more employers would take up the scheme. There are plenty of people in the disability sector who would be willing to engage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I completely agree with the Deputy. Last year, we ran an overall information campaign about the wage subsidy scheme. This involved normal advertising. It led to a very small increase. We met on this issue this week. I intend to target chambers of commerce, which have a very direct connection to local businesses. Many national businesses support and use the programme. I want to see more local businesses involved because local visibility is important. I will certainly expand our outreach to include family resource centres. If any Deputy would like to suggest organisations that have a local reach and that can get us into local businesses, I am more than happy to work with them. We will be engaging. We are setting up meetings with local business organisations. We deal with the employer organisations on this matter. I want to involve organisations that have more local connections to employers and that can engage with them. I acknowledge the many local employers who do excellent work on this. As a Department, we will be running a themed week in October, work and skills week. This will look at the employment vacancies that are available and matching those with disabilities to those vacancies. Any employer that does not engage with the wage subsidy scheme is missing out on a really talented bunch of people.

Deputy John McGuinness: I encourage the Department to have an open day where employers can come and meet those who have a disability or those with an acquired disability to see how they can match those who want work with their companies. There are many organisations that are now funded to prepare young people in particular but anybody who is disabled or intellectually disabled to encourage them back into the workforce and to give them

the tools necessary to contribute to that work. The employers do not see enough of that interaction and enough of what is available to them from this whole disability sector. I refer to the Talking Heads organisation in Carlow and Kilkenny and to those with acquired brain injuries and disabilities. Much more needs to be done to give them the opportunity to come back into the workforce. They have something to contribute.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Again, I do not disagree. We have a designated employment personal adviser in the 62 Intreo offices nationwide for disabled people to meet and discuss employment options. I have changed the work and access scheme. The work and access scheme offers seven different supports to facilitate those with disabilities in the workforce. I changed it to include assistive technology, which is a new thing. In May 2026, there were 1,568 employers supporting 2,621 employees through the wage subsidy scheme. That is not enough. We have the worst disability employment gap in Europe. I am determined to address it and make changes to address it. It will also be a key part of my priorities during the European Presidency, as to how we can learn from Europe. There may be areas that Europe can learn from us in the context of reducing this gap.

Social Welfare Benefits

10. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of additional people that will benefit from increases in the carers allowance means test threshold due in July 2026; whether he has engaged with the Minister for Health and her Department to ensure that carers allowance income will not be included under the medical card means test so that those who benefit from the expanded threshold will not be at risk of losing their medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46277/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much welcome that a large number of additional people will benefit from increases in the carer's allowance means test threshold, which comes into place on 1 July. Has the Minister engaged with the Minister for Health and her Department to ensure that carer's allowance income will not be included under the medical cards means test, so that those who benefit from the expanded threshold will not be at risk of losing their medical card? I ask him to make a statement on the matter. I have heard from a number of people who have decided not to apply until the issue is clarified.

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

The programme for Government contains a commitment to continue to significantly increase the income disregard for carer's allowance across a series of budgets with a view of phasing out the means test over the lifetime of the Government. Budget 2026 has increased the earnings disregard for carer's allowance to €1,000 for a single person and €2,000 for a couple. Those changes will be effective from July this year. These are the largest ever increases in the carer's allowance income disregards and are evidence of our determination to deliver on our commitment to carers.

Since 2022, the disregard will have increased cumulatively by €667.50 per week for a single person and by €1,335 per week for a couple. This measure will benefit both those current recipients who are on means-reduced rate and who will see an increase in their payment rate

and those people making new claim applications who otherwise would have been subject to a means-reduced rate in 2026.

On foot of the increases in the carer's allowance income disregards, a single person providing full-timer care, who also does part-time work this year, will be able to earn just over €54,000 and receive a full carer's payment. Similarly, for a couple household, a person who is providing full-time care and where their partner earns approximately €108,000 per annum will receive a full carer's payment. In its recent report, Family Carers Ireland acknowledged the significant progress made in increasing income disregards for carer's allowance. It stated that 68% of households are now falling within the financial eligibility criteria.

We are still looking at what the estimated take up will be. For budget purposes, we have prepared estimates on the basis that approximately 3,000 carers nationally will benefit. Given that the scheme is demand led, and it is likely that many who are outside the means test would have not have previously applied for carer's allowance, it is very difficult to estimate the potential inflow from this measure with certainty. We will engage with the Minister for Health around the Deputy's proposal on the means test. It certainly was an issue that was raised with me on 7 May at the carer's forum in relation to supports for carers. Supports for carers, including the medical card and respite, are highlighted in the Family Carers Ireland's state of caring report. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is somebody who is very supportive of our work in this space. We will engage with her.

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much welcome the Minister's reply. However, where I am coming from is about the people who are marginally outside under the old scheme who now qualify under the new changes that the Minister has made. I very much welcome those changes because people who are providing care in the home for their immediate family or for relatives are providing a fantastic service. What I am concerned about now is where people are pulling back from applying because they are afraid of losing their medical card. That is extremely important to them, especially for anyone who is providing care but also has their own medical challenges and are still well able to provide that care. That is why I am looking for clarification. As the Minister knows, the qualifying criteria for medical cards has not changed for quite some time. That is another issue that needs to be reviewed but that is not under the Minister's Department. Can we get clarification before 1 July on this issue? It is going to affect quite a number of people who will not put in the application at this stage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: To be clear, the medical card means test is a matter for the Department of Health and the HSE. It is not a matter for the Department of Social Protection. Our commitment in relation to carers is increasing the income disregard with a view to phasing out the means test for carers between now and 2029 - the lifetime of the Government. There is the carer's support grant and increasing the weekly rates for that income for carers. I assure the Deputy that I will engage with the Minister in relation to the forthcoming increase in the income disregards. I share his concern that those who qualify are not taking it up. This is not just with carers but across a number of schemes. I want to ensure that those who can qualify for this can take it up without fear of losing other benefits. Those who are performing carer duties do exceptional work. We need to make their lives a lot easier and take the complications away. We will definitely engage with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in relation to this

urgently in the context of 1 July. She is very committed and is very supportive of work in relation to the income disregards. She is very committed to the work of family carers.

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much welcome the reply. The changes that are coming into effect on 1 July are very good. There are a huge number of people who provide a good standard of care in the home rather than people having to go into full-time residential care in nursing homes. They are providing an invaluable service. It is important that we make sure that we tick all the boxes and that they are discouraged from continuing to provide that care because they qualify for the allowance but they are afraid of applying for it as they are afraid of losing their medical card. That is an issue that we need to get clarification on. Again, I thank the Minister for the work that has been done in this area and the number of additional people who are now going to come in under the qualifying criteria, so they can get the carer's allowance in support of the work that they are doing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I reiterate to the Deputy that we will engage with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. We are looking at all of our schemes to see what is stopping people from applying. At the start of the session this morning, Deputy O'Reilly raised other points in that space. I am open to feedback in relation to that. As we go to a situation where somebody on €108,000 can still access the full carer's payment, we obviously have issues that not everybody is applying for it. I am going to drill down on those issues. We will the carer's organisations, Family Carers Ireland and the carer's allowance to increase awareness of the income disregards being increased in the manner that they are. Many people may not be aware of that income disregard, particularly carers. One point that is consistently made to me, and to all of us, is that carers often do not have the time to look at this kind of information because they are so busy, focused and engaged in their caring role.

10 o'clock

We have to work with the organisations and family resource centres in every way to get the information about the supports available out to people. I will engage with the Minister for Health on the matter.

Children in Care

11. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will provide an update on the programme for Government commitment to examine pension provisions for foster carers; when he expects this to be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46325/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: Matters relating to foster care are the responsibility of my colleague the Minister, Deputy Foley. However, the Government acknowledges the very important role of all carers, including foster carers. We remain fully committed to supporting them.

Once the minimum requirement of ten years' paid contributions is met, the State contributory pension system provides a range of measures to recognise caring periods outside of paid employment. These include PRSI credits, homemaking disregards and home caring periods. Homemaking disregards and home caring periods recognise caring periods of up to

20 years outside of paid employment in the calculation of a payment rate. Foster carers are entitled to benefit from these measures on the same basis as other family carers and parents. Questions of equity would arise if access to pension benefits was afforded to any of these groups, including foster parents and carers, on a preferential basis.

Since January 2024, long-term carer's contributions can be awarded to those who have cared for incapacitated persons for a period of 20 years or more. These contributions are treated the same as paid contributions for State contributory pension entitlement only and can be used to fill any gaps in a person's contribution record, including satisfying the minimum ten years of paid contributions required for eligibility. Foster carers who have cared for an incapacitated dependent or dependents for over 20 years also benefit from this provision. These measures assist foster carers to access the State pension system and recognise the years spent caring for children in the same way as biological or adoptive parents while ensuring that our pension system remains sustainable.

Changes to any aspect of the State pension system have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context including the sustainability of the Social Insurance Fund. I am very much aware of the importance of their work. I am happy to work with the Deputy on any proposals he may have in this space over the lifetime of the Government.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: There are nearly 4,000 foster parents in Ireland who open their homes long term to children who often come from difficult and traumatic starts in life. The Minister has met them, as have I. It is a vocation for those families. At times, I wonder how they do it because of the workload involved, but they are really committed. Part of the challenge is that the number seems to be dwindling. There were over 4,000 a few years ago. Now, there are 3,800 foster parents who have 6,000 children in their care. I do not want to see a move away from a really good family-based environment for those children either back into institutional care or into private care where they will lose the family connection built up with those children. Everything we can do to encourage parents to get involved and keep them in that area is to be welcomed and explored. I appreciate the challenged the Minister set out but looking at pension provision should be part of that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree; an extraordinary service is provided. It gives stability and changes outcomes which would otherwise be very different. Tusla manages the foster parent-foster carer system. It pays the foster carer allowance which is €400 per week for per child under 12 and €425 per child 12 or over. That is to offset expenses. Accordingly, it does not affect tax. It is not assessed as a means for social assistance payments. We will look at further supports but anything we do in the State pension context has to have the overall sustainability of the State and equity in mind. I would love to be able to give the Deputy a guarantee around that but I have to look at those elements as well in terms of our pension system and facing the challenges we discussed in the previous discussion with Deputy McAuliffe. I agree with the Deputy on the vital work being done. The Minister, Deputy Foley, worked closely with me in relation to this matter. We want to continue to work with foster carers.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the Minister's comments and the commitment to the effect that he and the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, will continue to look at and develop this area. To come at it from the children's perspective, the CSO analysis of children who come

through foster care shows they have higher rates of absenteeism from school, leave school earlier and their educational achievement generally is lower. Everything we can do to support these children, who have had a really difficult start in life, is to be considered and welcomed. I come at it from the point of view of the foster carers. I know things like the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance may be an option for consideration. I would welcome all of the supports we can consider to try to make the provision of support for those children a little easier.

I accept the Minister's comments in relation to pensions, the integrity of the pension system and how important it is to manage that, but I hope the Government and the Minsters will consider this matter in the round, seek to make progress and see if there are ways it can be developed for foster carers in the future to keep the family-based service going well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We made changes last year in relation to the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. Where we can, we will continue to do that. From the perspective of the children fortunate enough to receive foster care, it is a changer for them. Many have gone through multiples of carers and generations so it is an area I am looking at.

I am also looking at the area of kinship. Along with Deputy McGreehan, I met the Kinship Care Ireland last year. We want to see how we can do more to support that but I would not like to give false expectation either. There are many complex issues around pensions and eligibility we are trying to work through. We have to work through them with the overall sustainability of our pension system in mind. We will work with the Deputy and the Minister, Deputy Foley. Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an obair seo le haghaidh na tuismitheoirí seo. Caithfimid seasamh leo.

Social Welfare Schemes

12. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection to confirm whether an examination of improvements to key ancillary benefits such as the fuel allowance, household benefits package and living alone allowance to support older and vulnerable groups has occurred as per the programme for Government; if not, when this examination will occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46276/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: The programme for Government contains a commitment to protect core welfare rates while ensuring that available resources are targeted at vulnerable groups. It also includes a commitment to examine key ancillary benefits, including the fuel allowance, household benefits package and living alone allowance to support vulnerable groups. This is an ongoing activity as part of the Department's budget planning each year. As part of budget 2026, I increased the weekly rate of fuel allowance by €5 which increased the weekly rate payable by 15% from €33 to €38 a week or €1,064 per fuel season. In addition, in March I extended the 2026-27 fuel allowance season by four weeks, which added an extra €152 to households in most need of support and increased the fuel season amount to €1,216 for this year. Estimated expenditure on the scheme in 2026 is €557.4 million.

The household benefits package comprises the electricity or gas allowance and the free television licence, with an annual payment of €580 per recipient. The Department will invest

approximately €317 million this year in this package. The living alone allowance is a supplement to a primary social protection payment of €22 per week, €1,144 a year, made to people aged 66 or over in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are living alone. The estimated cost of the living alone allowance this year is €298 million.

In budget 2026, we extended the fuel allowance to all recipients of the working family payment. This benefits some 50,000 families. In addition, from September, those moving from disability allowance or blind pension to take up employment will continue to receive their fuel allowance for five years after exiting their payment.

These improvements, which are targeted, have resulted in many more households qualifying for the payment and have resulted in the budget for the scheme increasing to an estimated €557.4 million in 2026 compared with €290.4 million in 2020. I will continue, as part of the budget planning process, to examine improvements to key ancillary benefits.

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much welcome that over €28.9 billion is being provided in range of areas via budget 2026. There is a concern, however - and this was outlined this morning on "Morning Ireland" - that we may soon have an inflation rate of 5%. That is on the upper end of the scale. Because the cost of fuel and hearing are both increasing, we need to take action to keep pace with that in order to ensure that we have adequate supports for people who are vulnerable and who are very much dependent on the social welfare system. It is in this context that I am asking about whether the review has occurred and what we need to do in the context of planning forward, especially for budget 2027.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. We will be looking at those targeted supports. This year, we have increased the fuel allowance rate by €5 per week and extended the season by four weeks. Most importantly, we sponsored the working family payment in order that those on low incomes can access the fuel allowance payment. We ensured that we backdated this to 1 January. That is the kind of area I want to look at in the context of targeting payments to support those under the most pressure and, in particular, to support, as we have discussed at considerable length this morning, those in receipt of the living alone allowance. Anomalies in this regard have been highlighted by Deputies Burke, McAuliffe and O'Reilly. We want to look at those.

There are a lot of areas in which we can iron out difficulties. As Deputy Hayes stated earlier, the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance affect people in different ways. We have to make sure that we try to ensure consistency. That will be part of our overall budgetary process, but that is done within a very tight financial window in view of the other challenges the Department faces.

Deputy Colm Burke: I fully understand that. As was stated earlier, I have a number of people who are living in rural areas - the position would be the same in the Minister's constituency - in circumstances where there are two old-age pensions coming into the household. If one of the parties dies, there is a sudden drop in income. However, the cost of heating and travel for those individuals remain substantial. This is a huge challenge, especially for people in rural areas. The matter needs to be looked at very carefully. I fully understand that there will be many demands in healthcare and other areas in the context of the forthcoming

budget, but this is something we need to keep pace with in order to ensure that people who are in receipt of social welfare supports do not lose out because of the inflation that is either going to occur or that has occurred over the past 12 months.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The incidences the Deputy cites relate to an area I am very focused on and concerned about, namely where a person loses their partner and then faces a massive and sudden drop in income while the bills remain the same. We will be looking at all of our schemes in that context. This year, we have taken action to increase the fuel allowance and expand the scheme. On foot of the war in Iran, we expanded the season by four weeks. That is a very targeted payment. I do not know if the Deputy was here earlier for the discussion on how we target that and how we can ensure that it is targeted more by allowing people the choice to spend the money on whatever energy source they want. The position with the living alone allowance is similar. There has been an increase since 2019, and an increase in the overall budget, which is substantial, but still not enough people are getting access to it and too many are left facing a cliff edge and a financial challenge at a time of huge personal loss and grief. We need to do something in that regard, because this is not the right way to have it.

Social Welfare Benefits

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection to outline any additional disability-related supports he is planning to introduce in the upcoming budget to help disabled people with the increasing costs of living; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46362/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Is Deputy Murphy taking this question on behalf of Deputy Boyd Barrett?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes. I am fairly certain it was emailed in.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): There is no request in front of me, but that is okay. Away you go, Deputy Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This question relates to the cost-of-disability payment. Obviously, a big political issue over the past six months was the cut in the budget of €1,400-plus for disabled people and the call for emergency cost-of-living disability payments. In response, the Government stated that it is working on a cost-of-disability payment and is going to introduce it in budget 2027. The Minister had promised to bring forward a concrete proposal by the end of the month, but this has not appeared yet. Where is it? Will the Minister guarantee that it will be included in budget 2027?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am not in position to discuss in detail any measures that will be in budget 2027. Work is under way in relation to that, and the details have to be discussed within Government. However, we have made it clear that we recognise that there are significant additional costs which disabled people face in their daily lives. We are committed to addressing this as a priority over the term of this Government. That is why we have the commitment to

introduce the permanent cost-of-disability payment. This initiative will add to work done in the context of budget 2026. As part of an overall package of €1.15 billion for new social protection measures, expenditure in respect of disabled people and their carers was increased to just over €6 billion per annum. The budget contained significant targeted measures to support disabled people, including increases to core welfare rates, the largest ever increase in the child support payment, the largest ever increase in the income disregard for carer's allowance, increases in the rate of the domiciliary care allowance and improvements to the wage subsidy scheme.

In the national human rights strategy, there was a commitment to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability. Considerable work is under way in this regard. We hosted a summit at the Aviva Stadium on 13 May. Last week, I spent an hour and a half with the joint Oireachtas committee discussing the cost-of-disability payment. A public consultation payment process ahead of the summit on the cost of disability received over 1,100 submissions. I will shortly bring to the Government the report relating to the summit, the submissions made and details of the interaction with the Oireachtas committee last week. Given the high level of submissions, work on this matter is continuing. I would like to thank the team in my Department who are giving considerable attention to it.

The submissions request that universal payment be made to all people with disabilities, but with a recognition that a differentiated approach could be developed over time to reflect the fact that some forms disability give rise to higher challenges and costs than others. We are continuing to engage with disability groups. A specific workshop on disability matters was hosted as part of the national economic dialogue and we will continue to engage, including at our pre-budget forum on 1 July and with the network of disabled persons organisations that we have within the Department. I intend to bring a proposal to Government as part of my budget 2027 discussions. This is a priority for me.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not question that the Minister knows the real impact of having a disability, and he knows the figures. He stated at the conference that the additional cost for households with a disabled person is up to €555 a week. I am sure the Minister knows that the official risk of poverty rates are 32.5%. When we take into account the cost of disability, however, this rises to over 65%, which is obviously immense. The issue is whether the Government is going to deliver on what it said in the context of the uproar, rightly, about the budget last year and that we were going to introduce this. The Minister told the conference he would bring a concrete proposal on a new cost-of-disability payment to the Department by the end of June. The Minister did not repeat that commitment in his answer here. I wonder will the Minister repeat it now. It does seem to me that the timeframe is very tight in terms of this actually being delivered for budget 2027. Disabled people cannot be asked to wait again for another budget, which I worry we are on track for.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will absolutely be bringing it to Government. I still hope to do so if not by the end of June then very early in July. That is a consequence of 1,100 people who participated, including three of the four political parties represented in the House at the moment. I cannot recall receiving a submission from the Deputy's party in relation to how it might work or with regard to making the tough choices as to how it might be paid and how it might be outlined. Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats are the two other parties that are

represented here. On the day of the summit, we engaged with various groups to discuss how it could be paid.

To be absolutely clear, I cannot write the budget at this point. I wish I could and give the Deputy a guarantee on it. There will be very robust discussion, but I cannot make it any clearer that it is a priority for me to introduce a permanent payment and then to allow it to develop over the lifetime of this Government and future Governments.

We have people currently going through all the submissions to ensure that they are recognised, and I will be in a position to bring a proposal to the Government as a consequence of the budgetary process, but we are also very clear that we are going to engage with the disabled persons organisations, DPOs, and the representative organisations as part of that ongoing process. It will not be done in isolation.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The tough choices I am in favour of the Government making are putting a levy on data centres, putting a wealth tax on the multimillionaires and increasing corporation tax. They are the tough choices that we make in our budget proposals on an annual basis and in which we included a cost-of-disability payment for a number of years. They are better tough choices than forcing disabled people to live in poverty.

The Minister is saying that it will not be the end of June or early July any more. I presume he accepts that that is a very tight timeframe for a concrete proposal to make its way into a budget. The Minister made the point, and the point was made at the conference, that the cost would not be insignificant if a universal payment was introduced, which we support. This needs to be in the budget. There need to be measures to address the deep poverty that disabled people are sinking into. The figures are going to be worse reflecting this year's budget. I stress very strongly that this needs to be done as soon as possible, and it needs to be included in the budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy's proposals would drive people into unemployment, reduce our tax bases and reduce our ability to actually address this because without a sustainable economy and without sustainable resources, we cannot make these kinds of payments. That is not a tough choice. The Deputy is making a choice that will impair our ability to address and assist people with disabilities.

What we are trying to do is have a programme that works and has a backup. We had 1,173 responses to the process. That was an extraordinary response, and each response has been gone through. There were 1,086 responses from individuals and 87 responses from groups and other organisations.

The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, as the three Government leaders, attended the cost-of-disability summit on 13 May and are very much engaged in this process. They took time out of their diaries to engage with it and listen. We have done a lot of pre-work in relation to this. This will not be something that will be landed on colleagues in government when it comes, and I continue to work on this daily. We had a very good session of about an hour and half at the Oireachtas committee last week where we went through the proposals of other parties that were willing to put choices on the line in relation to this payment.

Questions Nos. 14 and 15 taken with Written Answers.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We are nearly out of time. I will allow Deputy O'Reilly to ask the next question, with one response from the Minister.

Social Welfare Payments

16. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to improve turnaround times on decisions regarding applications for supplementary welfare allowance to cover transport costs for getting to hospital appointments for patients who receive notification of an appointment at short notice and do not have sufficient time to apply and wait for approval of their travel supplement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46361/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for being very fair. I am taking this question on behalf of my colleague, Teachta Rose Conway-Walsh. It is to ask the Minister for Social Protection if he has plans to improve turnaround times on decisions regarding applications for supplementary welfare allowance to cover transport costs for going to hospital appointments for patients who may receive an appointment at short notice and do not necessarily have the time to wait for a decision.

Minister for Social Protection Deputy Dara Calleary: The answer is "Yes". I am going to engage with Deputy Conway-Walsh and any other rural TD, in particular, who may have other examples in this space. I am very much aware of people getting appointments at short notice and - this is a real bugbear of mine - people getting appointments at a time that they have to stay overnight the night before because they cannot get transport. I will engage directly with Deputy Conway-Walsh in relation to her proposal in this space.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Transport

102. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the new public transport services that have been rolled out so far in 2026; the new services that will start operating in the remainder of 2026 and in the year 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45508/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This question is in the context of the National Transport Authority, NTA, stating that it does not have money for further public transport expansion this year. Why has it been left in this position? I have a relevant local example in Athenry in my area. I know that the Minster is aware of the situation there. Will he touch on it?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Sustained investment in the public service obligation, PSO, programme has driven record public transport use, with passenger numbers up 23% and continuing to grow this year, alongside an expanded network serving over 240 towns and villages. As demand rises and congestion issues remain, Ireland's public transport system has reached a pivotal point, with an increasing need for reliable services.

A fundamental reset in funding was required to place the PSO programme on a sustainable, long-term footing in line with the programme for Government commitment. Accordingly, the 2026 PSO allocation was structured to eliminate the need for supplementary in-year funding, providing greater certainty and stability for service delivery.

To underpin this, my Department secured an unprecedented €940 million allocation for PSO services in budget 2026, which was a 43% increase on the previous year. This significant investment provides a robust foundation to ensure that existing public transport services are delivered reliably and sustainably throughout the year, enabling the system to meet rising passenger demand and assist in absorbing growing operational costs.

The NTA is managing the 2026 allocation by prioritising delivery of existing programmes in line with operational readiness and resources. Enhancements within the current allocation are prioritised. Some changes are cost neutral while others require additional resources, and all are subject to funding, readiness and capacity.

Funding for new services in 2027 will be determined through the annual Estimates process, which we will be entering into shortly. Within the constraints of the reliable resources available, the NTA will be responsible for prioritising its service plan, taking into account operational readiness, demonstrated and anticipated passenger demand, and the need to deliver value for money.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This reset the Minister is talking about means fewer new services. That is what the NTA is saying, and the impact of that is massive. I know the impact of it in Athenry, and the Minister knows the story there, where we have been promised a PSO bus service for the past two years since the previous service ended. We still do not have that bus service.

We have been told that the 6.50 a.m. train, the only early morning train service at around that time between Athenry and Galway, is ending in six weeks' time at the end of July due to a lack of funding. Athenry is a large and growing town with a population of over 5,000 people. We have Dexcom now and up and running in the town, and many people commute in and out of Galway city. There are serious problems on rail services, with dangerous overcrowding at peak times.

We are being left waiting for these services. We are being told that the money is not there for the new bus services or to maintain this vital, early morning train service. There is no justification for us being left to wait any longer. I presented the Minister with a petition signed by 1,700 people within Athenry calling for these services to be maintained. Will the Minister ensure that that happens?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The 6.50 a.m. service is not going. Let us be clear on that. I know that the Deputy has been running a bit of a campaign locally. The 6.50 a.m. train service will be retained; end of story.

What I was trying to explain in my answer was that we got a big uplift in PSO funding. For the past five years in the Department of Transport, a big supplementary budget was requested at the end of the year to basically backfill new services. I did not want to do it that way, which is why we got a big uplift - a 42% increase - in the PSO allocation to stabilise those services across this year. We are now entering into the annual Estimates process, and I will obviously be looking for additional funding in that space to provide those new services that many Deputies are asking for and that I am looking for in my area, but we need them to be set up on a sustainable footing. We have managed to do that this year. There are resource constraints too, but this year is a stabilisation year. Even though we are seeing increasing passenger numbers, which is great, I want to provide additional services, and that is why we are entering the Estimates process shortly to provide additional funds next year to roll out new services. This year has been a year to stabilise the services that we have added to already. I have taken on board a lot of the different feedback I have got from Deputies about specific services and that will be in the NTA service plan.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome the Minister's commitment on the 6.50 a.m. train. I ask that that be communicated to the NTA and Irish Rail as well, that clarity is provided to them on that. The responses I am getting have not reflected that until now but I welcome the Minister's comments on the matter today. If additional funding is forthcoming, of course that will be very welcome as well but my question is on when that will happen. In terms of Athenry, we have been waiting two years for that promised bus service. The NTA says that while it does not have any additional funding, it cannot implement that service. My big question, then, is: when that will happen? It is urgent for Athenry and, I am sure, for many other areas across the State where there are real constraints in terms of public transport capacity. I urge the Minister to ensure that this happens very quickly. The NTA wants to be able to provide more services. We all know that public transport has become increasingly popular but people want to be able to rely on it and they should be supported to do so. We need the commitment from the Government and, crucially, the funding to do that. I ask the Minister to provide clarity on when we can expect that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have spoken on the record of the House about the 6.50 a.m. train. The Deputy has raised it. Deputy Albert Dolan has raised it with me as well. That service is being retained, and I will relay that information. I am not sure how it got to the stage where there was uncertainty around it.

The broader point, which I have explained, is that about €1.6 billion is the operational cost of our public transport network across the board, most of that being PSO and fares. That is what it costs to run what we have, which is a greatly expanded public transport service, including Local Link services, trains and buses, right the way through our whole network. What I am doing now with the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, is entering into the Estimates process for next year. Now that we have stabilised an increased service, which is good, and we have seen significant increases, we have a much higher base. We will

seek additional funds for 2027 in order that we can roll out those additional services in 2027, subject to the NTA's service delivery plan. That is my intention.

Bus Services

103. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the new start date for the 199 Local Link bus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46559/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Can the Minister give me an update on the Local Link 199 service and when it is due to start? It was actually meant to start last September. A bus has been purchased for it. Drivers are in place. The community really needs this bus service up and running. There is very much a lack of clarity because the Government says one thing and the NTA says the other. Can we have a start date for this service this morning?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue again. I know there is a campaign on the ground supported by her. This is an important service that we want to get into use. I mentioned in my previous answer that this year has been a year to ensure that we got an increase in the PSO funding, which is very significant.

There has been considerable investment in services throughout the country under the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan. I think everyone is agreed that has been a real success. I have met many of the Local Link services across the country. The plan is improving how rural communities access public transport. I am pleased to state that passengers are responding to this continued investment, with TFI Local Link services recording a combined 6.97 million passenger journeys just last year, marking a record and a 19% increase on the previous year. That is just short of 7 million journeys.

In counties Wicklow, Carlow and Kilkenny, funding increased by 25% between 2024 and 2025 to over €4.6 million, boosting passenger numbers by 81%. A great example of this can be seen in route 183, which was enhanced from Arklow to Sallins. The enhanced route offers connectivity to Avoca, Rathdrum, Rathnew, Wicklow, Roundwood and Laragh and improved connections to regional public transport, including a morning connection to Arklow.

The PSO allocation, as I mentioned earlier, has risen to €940 million. That is 43% up on 2025's allocation. I want that on a sustainable footing; I do not want to have to go back looking for supplementary funding every year. That is a record level of funding we have provided and that underpins the new routes we have brought forward. It is a priority to roll out the 199 service, which is part of the NTA's service plan. The service is subject to the same considerations around funding.

To be straight, I expect that, as part of the Estimates process, with the additional funding we will receive, routes like the 199 service will operate from early next year.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister but that response just is not good enough. It just does not cut it. This service was to start last September. People have been relying on it. They have been making life decisions - dropping out of college, not able to get jobs in other parts - because they are relying on this service to go from, say, Roundwood to Bray. They were told it would happen in September. I am glad to hear the Minister say that it should happen

from next January but what people need is an actual date. We have some members of the Government saying that an announcement was to be made last week and the NTA says there is no funding for this. There is a complete lack of clarity. This service needs to start at least in September because people in those areas cannot get to college or get to many of the schools they need to get to. To say now that there will be another six months' delay, following a year's delay, is just not good enough.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have outlined that this is an important service for people. I have outlined what has been done in just the past two years in relation to Local Link services in Wicklow. I think everyone acknowledges that there has been a significant increase. This route, this service, is a priority. I want to see it in place as soon as we can. I am trying to give a realistic timeframe for its implementation because the Deputy is right that people need certainty around it. They do not need to be told it might be next week and next week and next week. What I and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, have been able to do is significantly increase the funding for these types of services to get this onto a sustainable footing, with a 42% increase and record public transport passenger numbers right the way across the country and continued growth. I want to grow that further. We are seeking additional funding for next year to roll out services like the 199. If I get additional funds this year - and it is an if - any of the services that we can roll out additionally we will do this year. I am trying to give the Deputy a realistic timeframe for her constituents. I am confident that we will be able to get this up and running early next year. We will be in our Estimates negotiations pretty soon. I want to get additional funding for that. We are looking at how that funding is made up between PSO and fares to be able to deliver new services like this, and the Deputy is right that people are responding to it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I do acknowledge that the Minister is trying to give a realistic date. I think that has been part of the problem: that people have been waiting week by week for this service to be rolled out. The difficulty, however, is that I was told in May last year that this service was funded, that the money was there for it. It was tendered and it was contracted. There is a bus sitting in Clonshaugh in Dublin empty, not running, waiting to be used on this service. Four drivers have been hired for this service. Everything is ready to go, and I do not understand how that funding is no longer there. I know the Minister is saying that he is trying to stabilise funding this year and next year and that new services will come in but this service was promised. Because we are coming into the start of a new school year and a new college year, I ask that the Minister try to find that funding for just four months of the year to get this running. It is ready to go. Literally, the bus is sitting there. I ask the Minister to try to find that funding to bridge that gap.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know people have been told this is funded. I know that the bus is purchased. People have been employed. If we can get it started earlier, we will do so. I will go back and specifically ask why that was advised previously. What the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I have tried to do - and I think we have done it pretty well - is to get that big uplift so we are starting from a higher base and then we can really be sustainable. As to what happened over the past five years, it was great to see the increases in services but there was no certainty around any of them-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Correct.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----because it was just a matter of going in every year for additional moneys towards the end of the year. I will specifically and personally check this one out and I will revert to the Deputy. I am trying to give a realistic timeline and, in fairness, she has accepted that. If it can be done sooner, we will do it sooner because I know the bus has been purchased. Let us see what we can do in that regard and I will come back to the Deputy directly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Hara, are you taking Deputy Daly's questions?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Yes.

Rail Network

104. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the rail traffic management system; to provide and updated timeline for delivery; the projected costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45509/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the replacement of the State's rail traffic management system; to provide an updated timeline for delivery; the projected costs for this; and to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The National Train Control Centre building was completed in November 2022, on time and within budget, despite significant disruption to the construction sector throughout the Covid pandemic. While the building today houses some signalling operations and Iarnród Éireann staff, as well as approximately 100 personnel of An Garda Síochána overseeing communications in the Dublin metropolitan region, bringing the centre into full operation has been delayed by slower-than-projected progress in developing and rolling out the new traffic management system, which is the software that integrates a range of complex railway systems, such as signalling and communications.

Taxpayers and train users are rightly concerned about this delay as I am too, I assure the Deputy. In my capacity as Minister, I have met with Indra, the contractor delivering the traffic management system. I met them last August and again in January of this year.

On both occasions, I expressed my clear dissatisfaction with the state of progress and emphasised the importance of bringing the project to a successful conclusion as quickly as possible.

A re-baselined programme was agreed between Iarnród Éireann, the NTA and Indra in November 2024, breaking the project into eight discrete commissioning phases to improve deliverability and realise benefits incrementally. The contractor delivered software to Iarnród Éireann in mid-April to support the planned implementation of commissioning phase 1 on the Rosslare line for early next year. A three-month software testing period is now ongoing. Decisions on software acceptance and future commissioning phases will be taken in mid-July, the middle of next month.

Given issues in terms of project delivery, I understand that the board of Iarnród Éireann is also considering potential options for the future delivery of the project. I await its recommendations, which I have not received yet. In advance of the conclusion of software testing and consideration by the Iarnród Éireann board, it would be premature to discuss schedule and cost implications for the project because I do not have that information yet.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The €50 million that has been written off on this failed traffic management system represents a shocking waste of public money. The information given to the transport committee last week by Irish Rail showed that, for years, Iarnród Éireann staff expressed concerns about the ability of the contractor, Indra, to deliver this project. Despite these concerns, millions of euro continued to be put into this project. It demonstrates a real failure in project oversight.

I understand that, in mid-2025, Iarnród Éireann recommended to the NTA that the contract be terminated due to the ongoing delivery concerns, yet that contract is still in place. The Minister mentioned that he had met the contractor. I know the Department has been kept updated on this. Why was a stop not put to this contract, given all the evidence that Indra was failing to deliver it? What has the Minister done to ensure that costs are kept under control to avoid this waste of money? What is going to happen to this contract going forward, and how will the Minister ensure that costs are kept under control?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a very important system. We need this system in place. It is not a question of just pulling the plug on it. It has to be managed through. I have said very clearly to Indra myself that I am most unhappy with the manner in which this is being delivered and the delays in the system.

In relation to the write-down amount, I note that the asset value of the national train control centre, NTCC, is also considered in the CIÉ Group accounts for 2025. These accounts were received by my Department on 18 May and are currently being reviewed in the Department and by financial advisers in NewERA, and I expect to receive them shortly. I have not got them yet. I want to look into that in detail. It is my intention to bring the accounts to the Government and have them laid before the Oireachtas in the coming weeks.

Fundamentally, though, and regardless of who delivers this system, we need it. It is important for signalling and safety. The manner in which it is being brought about is far from acceptable, and that is putting it mildly. I am acutely conscious that the money we invest on behalf of our people has to be invested correctly and projects like this have to be delivered on time.

When I have further details on this, I will come back to the House. The accounts will be laid before the Oireachtas shortly.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: It is a very important project. It is clear from the evidence that Iarnród Éireann provided that the failure to deliver the system now risks the possibility of disruption to rail services. A sum of €50 million is an enormous amount of money. We just had a discussion about the lack of funding that was available for new public transport services, and €50 million would make a huge difference there and right across the public transport system in terms of the constraints that exist. The Minister needs to ensure that the costs are

brought back under control, and that there is no risk to the safe operation of the rail network. The Minister should provide clarity on how we have got to this point and why this lack of oversight has been allowed to happen, as well as on what his own role has been in terms of oversight here.

Indra is also the contractor responsible for the delivery of the contactless payments on the public transport system, as part of next-generation ticketing. The cost of that programme is up to €269 million. Will the Minister confirm what actions he is taking to oversee that project as well?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are on track to deliver contactless payments. I have met Indra specifically about the contactless payments. That is critical for the public transport offering that we have across the country. Real-time testing rolls out on a phased basis next year, leading to a phased roll-out from 2028. That is a very intricate system. It has to operate in tandem with Leap as well, so we have to operate dual systems.

On this specifically, I want to be clear that from a rail safety perspective, contingency plans are in place to mitigate the impact of delays on the traffic management system. To safeguard the signalling resilience of the rail network, I approved an additional allocation of €5.7 million in May to enable Iarnród Éireann to commence additional signalling works to increase operational resilience within the greater Dublin area, the busiest part of our rail network.

When I have the accounts, when they are back from NewERA and that work is done, I will be assessing them. I do not micromanage every agency's budget. That is not my role. The NTA and Iarnród Éireann are supposed to manage that appropriately. I take this very seriously, though. I will be looking at the accounts when I receive them. I will be bringing them to the Cabinet. The figure that has been put out there may not be the figure. That is from what I have been told. That will be laid before the Oireachtas and it would be a good opportunity for the transport committee to further interrogate it as well. The main thing is we need the system delivered.

Rail Network

105. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the programme for Government commitment to commission a new independent feasibility study on continuing MetroLink to Dublin South-West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46573/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are about to start MetroLink out in Dublin north. MetroLink to the south west would be another transformational project. I welcome the Deputy's question on this. If we want people choosing public transport instead of cars, which they are in many areas whether for cost, congestion or climate reasons, we need to provide an integrated transport network that lets people travel throughout the city. It is for this reason that we do not try to bring forward rail lines or routes in isolation but use the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042 to inform planning and development of public transport infrastructure in Dublin, including metro lines.

As the Deputy knows, the NTA has statutory responsibility for the transport strategy and must review it every six years, meaning that the next review is due to be concluded by 2028.

As part of this review, the NTA will reassess the need for additional metro lines, among other transport options, in the greater Dublin area. This review will consider updated travel demand forecasts as well as changes in land use and spatial planning policies. This background analytical work is expected to commence over the next year. The feasibility study for a metro to south-west Dublin will be undertaken as part of this broader strategic review process. The Deputy will, I hope, understand that this approach will help ensure that it is considered in an integrated and holistic manner, alongside wider transport and spatial planning objectives for the greater Dublin area.

The projects we are delivering now include DART+ South West and DART+ West, DART+ Coastal North, the MetroLink and the extension to Luas lines, which we are doing at Luas Finglas.

As Deputy has noted, the programme for Government includes a commitment to undertake a feasibility study for a metro south west in Dublin. We will do that. The operative railway order for MetroLink was secured in January 2026. With this key milestone now achieved, attention is turning to the preparation of the review of the strategy. On this basis, I look forward to the upcoming review of the transport strategy with a specific focus on this potential new MetroLink line.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister. Getting MetroLink built and even getting it started in earnest will be a fantastic legacy for him as a Minister for Transport. He will have the full support of the Labour Party and, I think, others in opposition in getting that done in as speedy a manner as possible. We know how vital it is for our city. I am asking that he does not just stop when he gets to Charlemont. We know these tunnel-boring machines are going to be in the ground. I ask that the line be continued on to Dublin South-West through Rathmines, Terenure, Rathfarnham, Knocklyon, Firhouse and Tallaght. There is a group in the Public Gallery from St. Colmcille's in Knocklyon. Maybe by the time they are my age, the line might actually be built.

This is not a new proposal. It is something Deputy Bacik has been requesting for a long time, as has the Metro South West Group. I understand that it needs to be done in a planned, integrated and sustainable manner. It makes sense to us that a line would not stop in the middle of the city but would continue out, and that this should be done in as efficient a manner as possible.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a very good point. This year has been really significant in the delivery of metro. We have our full railway order and clean planning permission. It is out to tender and some of the enabling works have started already in the Swords area, with the realignment of the roads, and construction is to start next year.

On a MetroLink to Dublin South-West, I fully get what the Deputy is saying. This will be a six-to-eight-year build. While that is happening, this review will have been undertaken. MetroLink will be the first real integrated system. When it comes into the St. Stephen's Green area, it will integrate with heavy rail, intercity rail, DART and the Luas.

There are major opportunities to expand further. The Deputy can be assured that there will be a specific focus on this as part of the review. That review scoping work will start next year,

with the review to be undertaken in 2028. We will start building MetroLink next year and that will be rolled out on a phased basis. The review will happen. I know the Deputy will continue to advocate for it and he will have my support.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: That is great. I thank the Minister for giving clear timelines. That will be much appreciated in the area. Dublin South-West has historically been underserved by public transport. We have a Luas line that starts in Tallaght but conspicuously avoids the rest of the constituency. We support the roll-out of BusConnects and would like to see that done as quickly as possible. There are some issues with routes, but broadly speaking we support that. As the Minister knows, no growing modern city can survive on bus routes alone. It requires light rail or a metro. Given the road space constraints in this particular area of the city, extending the metro through the city centre to Dublin South-West would make sense. As I said, a previous feasibility study ended the line in Knocklyon. It would make more sense for the line to go all the way to Tallaght whether has been a huge increase in population and new housing is being built all the time.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is a very exciting time for public transport. This five-year period is a delivery period of major projects that people have heard and spoken about, including the expansion of the DART and, as I mentioned, DART+ West, DART+ South-West, DART+ Coastal North, Cork light rail, phase 1 of Cork commuter rail, which is concluding, and the commencement of MetroLink. These are transformational projects that are badly needed. A lot of them will deal with an infrastructural deficit that we have carried for a long number of years.

Thankfully, when we provide public transport options people use them. I welcome the support of the Labour Party for this project. Over the next year it is important that the Deputy and others in Dublin South-West and beyond engage with the NTA through the process of that review. We are commencing the construction and delivery of MetroLink, which will enable us to deliver further extensions to the MetroLink line, like what is being done with the Luas. I intend to bring Luas Finglas forward. Under the previous Government, the project was due in the mid-2030s. I think we can start construction in 2028. I use it as an example because it is an existing line that is being extended. The same can apply to this.

Bus Services

106. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the planned roll-out of the N8 orbital bus route under the BusConnects programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46563/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I want to again raise with the Minister an issue that is close to my heart and the hearts of residents across Dublin 15, namely, the provision of the N8 orbital bus service, a new BusConnects service linking Blanchardstown with Dublin Airport. I want to tie down a commitment the Minister made on a previous occasion that the route will be up and running by the end of this year.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is what we are hoping to do. I want to again make it clear that the NTA is responsible for the provision, scheduling and timetabling of public transport services nationwide. The Deputy knows that. It works with operators to deliver these services.

I mentioned in response to earlier questions that we have secured a significant uplift in PSO funding, a 42% increase. I do not want to get back into supplementary budgets every year to provide services. We need certainty. The N8 route is planned to be implemented as part of phase 9 of the BusConnects Dublin network redesign programme. The exact implementation date for the route will be determined by funding provisions and operational readiness.

The route will run between Blanchardstown and Clongriffin via Dublin Airport. It will be critical to the Deputy's constituents. When the route is launched it will allow seamless and easy interchange with the W4 service which runs from Tallaght to Blanchardstown. I have answered the Deputy's question on a previous occasion. As soon as we can get funding for the route it will be a priority project. We have increased the funding. I still think we will be on track for later this year or early next year to roll out the service. If we can do it any sooner we will.

There has been a significant increase in public transport use. We have substantially expanded the service. Blanchardstown and the Dublin 15 area is a major growth area. It is in the service plan. We want to deliver it. As I have said before, I would like to deliver it by the end of the year. My position on that has not changed.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: As the Minister knows, this route is long delayed. When I contacted the NTA in 2024, I was told it would be in place in 2025. When I asked about it in 2025, I was told it would be in place in 2026. When I asked about it earlier this year, I was told it would be in place in 2027. The Minister and I have discussed this route in the Chamber a number of times. He gave a strong commitment last time in terms of having the route delivered this year. I received a written reply from the Minister's Department on the same day which hedged somewhat and referred to 2026 or maybe 2027.

I am a bit concerned about what the Minister has said because I do not feel he was quite as committed to getting the route delivered this year. He raised a point about delivery of funding. I know he does not run the opening of individual routes day by day, but he is responsible for the money. I am unclear why the Minister is asking whether the money will be ready this year. He is the person with responsibility for whether there is money to deliver the N8 from Blanchardstown to Dublin Airport in 2026 to which he has committed.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To be fair to the Deputy, he has advocated for this. He mentioned he has been asking this question since 2024. The route was planned and approved before I came in as Minister for Transport. Having said that, in this year's budget we were able to secure €1.6 billion to run our public transport network. We have about €960 million in PSO, up 42% on the previous year, which gives us a much higher base.

I want to deliver the bus route this year. I have said that before. I do not have an exact date. As is the case with everything, it is subject to funding. In the Estimates process this year, I want to take another step up so that we can provide more new services across the country. This year has been very much about stabilising. I know how important the N8 is to the area. It will

be a critical link and will also link to the W4 route. I will keep the Deputy fully informed as to the date when we can get the service.going. It is still my intention to get that started this year.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The ongoing delay in the delivery of the N8 is emblematic of wider delays in the delivery of bus services. I refer in particular to my constituency. The B spine route has been delayed. A judicial review is ongoing and I understand is that is coming to an end. Large numbers of new houses are being built. The Minister and I were at the opening of new estates over the past number of years. Additional bus service in places like Hollystown, Tyrrelstown and Kilmartin Grove are important in terms of dealing with the housing crisis in our country, but those areas are not seeing an increase in the level of services and capacity. There is already pressure to extend the N8 to cover areas like Hollystown and Hollywoodrath so that people have links to the airport and other areas of high employment. Again, it comes down to the question of money and providing financial backing to open these new services.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It does come down to money. The Deputy is absolutely right. When I came into the Department of Transport we were very short of money, including PSO funding. Over the term of the previous Government, every year there was a supplementary budget, that is, additional moneys added at the end of every year. We could not plan new services properly. My big focus this year was securing an increase of 43%, up to €940 million. That is a much higher base which means we move into next year with a higher level of funding to provide new services.

I know the area the Deputy has spoken of very well. As is the case in my area, it is a major growth area in the Fingal region providing thousands of new homes, something the Deputy and I want to do and worked hard to do. We are seeing more of that happen. Additional bus routes are critical in those areas that are wholly dependent on bus services to get into town. As I said, not for fear of repetition, it is my intention, working with the NTA, to get the route started this year.

Public Transport

107. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide an update on measures being considered by his Department, the National Transport Authority and transport operators to improve late-night transport services in north Dublin, including through the expansion of DART+ and other rail and bus services; to address ongoing concerns regarding taxi availability for workers and patrons of the night time economy who are travelling outside normal public transport operating hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46292/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I want to highlight the urgent need for increased investment in public transport, specifically in north Dublin. I have raised the roll-out of contactless payments and how it has been delayed until 2028 and the need for accurate live updates for when lifts are unavailable for people with mobility or disability needs. I want to ask the Minister about more frequent services, more carriages and the timeline for the roll-out of contactless payments.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Our Department, the NTA and service operators are working hard to deliver improvements to public transport services, including contactless payments and late-night services. We have delivered significant improvements over the past number of years, which should be pointed out. I thank the Deputy for his advocacy and commitment to enhanced public transport. The continued roll-out of the BusConnects network redesign has given passengers across the greater Dublin area more late-night options that ever before. We now have 15 24-hour bus services operating seven days a week across the city.

11 o'clock

That means the vast majority of the suburbs now have access to a daily round-the-clock bus service. It is a significant change from five years ago, when there was no 24-hour provision at all.

In addition, Dublin Bus operates 12 nitelink services between midnight and 4 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, linking the city centre to suburban areas during peak late-night demand. Most other Dublin Bus routes run until 11.30 p.m. daily. Go-Ahead Ireland operates 35 routes across Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow, with most running from morning until midnight. We also have the rail and Luas services running at capacity, with additional late-night trains provided, where possible, during peak periods.

We are acutely aware of the benefits these services bring. As the Minister said, it is about reliability and putting public service transport on a sustainable footing. The Deputy's question captures a fundamental shift we must engage in, as a society and on the part of service operators and providers. That shift relates to a movement towards early-morning and late-night working. We must think differently to address the needs of those workers, including workers in the night-time economy. The Deputy's question is a very pertinent one for all of us involved in this area. We have seen change, and more change is needed. I will say more about that in my supplementary response. The Deputy has asked a very good question.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: My frustration with the current situation of ghost buses and infrequency of DART services certainly is one of the issues that got me involved in politics. I spoke this morning to a Clongriffin resident who had to run to the end of the platform and squeeze onto the train like a sardine to get to work. I understand there are restrictions on the lines in terms of the size of platforms and how many carriages can be installed but can the frequency of the service be increased? I know there is an unsolvable problem at Connolly Station but I have seen how efficiently run the transport system is in London. I do not have my head in the sky; I acknowledge we have a smaller population, that our country only recently became much wealthier and that we do not have the same infrastructure the UK has in place. However, we now have a lot more money and we have the ability and manpower to do this.

A concern is that even with MetroLink being rolled out, residents in north Dublin will still not be able to easily access the airport. The Minister of State will be well aware of the proposals for a monorail or a two-way system to connect the DART line to the airport, in conjunction with the metro, as an alternative solution. Will he comment on that?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The points the Deputy has raised are fundamental to our philosophy in terms of where we want to go with public transport. I was reflecting on that the other day when I was at Cork Airport, where there is an issue with the bus service. The Deputy is right that we need to think differently. The existing transport provision timetable has changed. The Minister is very much committed to bringing new electric and battery-electric trains on stream. Testing of that fleet is under way and we will see an enhanced offering.

The Deputy's fundamental point is about our relationship, as a country, with public transport. There are exciting things happening in Cork with the Luas and commuter rail service. We have seen that if we plan and take on board some of what the Deputy has articulated, we can get it right. The Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are very much committed to what he is advocating this morning. It is about getting people out of their car and onto a bus or train. As the Minister noted, we are seeing record numbers using public transport.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I hope those record numbers continue to rise with the quick roll-out of contactless payment and better accessibility. I welcome the engagement on those matters.

I also welcome the increase in the upper age limit for school bus drivers. The community bus service in Dublin has been lost. The No. 88 bus used to be a feeder bus service for Howth and Sutton DART stations. It did a constant loop of Howth Peninsula. Restoring that route would offer safe and convenient transport for families, for children travelling to GAA and football games and to school and for people going to the graveyard in Howth. I ask that the Department give consideration to that. It should also look at providing small-scale bus links within the BusConnects system. In such local micro-systems, the bus is a community service where users see the same people every day. That has been lost in north Dublin. Bringing it back would really benefit people.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will take the Deputy's points back to the Department. As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I am very aware of the success of Local Link services. There has been an exponential growth in the numbers using those services all across the country. Fundamentally, the Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are all about ensuring sustainability and stabilisation to enable continued growth. The Deputy is right that the numbers using public transport will rise. The Minister made the point earlier that we are at a pivotal point in the development of our transport system. We welcome the growing demand but, as the Deputy has articulated, it has implications.

What we need to do now is take on the winnable parts of public transport provision. We must get rid of the urban congestion we see in many parts of our cities and towns. Resilience and reliability must be built into public transport. I look forward to working with the Deputy on these matters. I have taken notes on what he said and I will take them back to both the NTA and the Department.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Rail Network

108. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport the reason he is delaying funding for DART+ South West; and when he intends to release the funding for this vital public transport project. [46305/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Will the Minister provide an update on when he intends to approve and release the funding for DART+ South West, which is a vital public infrastructure project for Dublin Mid-West? It is urgently needed and it is greatly delayed. Public representatives and, crucially, people living along that rail corridor were deeply disappointed when the Minister made the announcement last year that he would not honour his predecessor's commitment to approve the funding and have the project start as a matter of urgency. I would welcome an update on the matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The DART+ programme, including DART+ South West, is a priority investment for me as Minister and for the Department of Transport. Collectively, the programme will triple the length of the electrified Dublin commuter rail network and double its capacity, with customers starting to experience tangible benefits from the middle of next year when services to and from Drogheda come into operation. That is the first iteration of the programme.

In terms of DART+ South West specifically, a major milestone was cleared in November 2024 when the project secured full planning approval. Procurement for both DART+ South West and DART+ West is now progressing, with pre-qualification questionnaires for design and build works advertised for both in May 2025.

Last year, the national development plan allocated funding to advance DART+ West into construction from late next year. DART+ West must proceed first in terms of the infrastructure programmes, as it includes a new depot to house the expanded DART fleet and necessary city centre capacity upgrades to expedite the subsequent delivery of DART+ South West. The two projects are interlinked. The procurement approach will see supplier frameworks established across both projects for common project elements. That will enable us to advance the projects sooner. NDP funding was also allocated to commence the compulsory purchase order process for DART+ South West. That commenced in February this year.

I will continue to engage with colleagues on this project. It is my intention, through the frameworks I have outlined, to deliver elements of both projects together, including the depot. There is some scheduling to be done between the two projects but they are an absolute commitment for us and we intend to deliver them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The problem is that what the Minister has described is a very different scenario from what was promised by his predecessor, who indicated that funding would be announced and approved in 2025 and the project would be completed by 2030. From all the conversations I am having with public transport providers, I do not accept that the electrified depot capacity is the problem. My view is that the Government simply is not willing at this point to commit the funding for DART+ South West. That means the project will not start until 2028 or 2029 at the earliest and possibly not until 2030. The hard-working people of Dublin Mid-West will then have to wait another four to five years, which takes us into the middle of the next decade.

I think the Minister is misleading the House and the public when he tries to link the refusal to bring forward the funding for this project as a matter of urgency to infrastructural provision elsewhere in the system. Can he at least tell us----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. The Minister to respond.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have not misled the House. I do not do that and the Deputy should withdraw that comment.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is famous for it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is the first time the Deputy has come into the Chamber for transport questions to even ask about this project. He is feigning an interest in it. Other colleagues across other parties regularly advocate for this. The Deputy does not like good news and he does not like to see any progress on anything because it does not suit-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: When will we get the funding?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----his political narrative.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: When will we get the funding?

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

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have missed the Deputy from my days in the Department of housing. He continues to barrack people all of the time. He lost that debate too, in the last general election. We are going to deliver this project. We have published an NDP that is fully funded. We are bringing the funding forward on this for DART+ West and DART+ South West. It is clear; I have said it and that is what is happening. There is no resiling from that whatsoever. This period of time is actually the delivery period for many transformational public transport projects right across the country. It might disappoint the Deputy to actually see those commencing and being delivered because it gives him less to give out about.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I would be more than happy to commend the Minister and welcome an actual announcement on the actual date the funding is going to be released. I would even write him a personal letter of thanks on behalf of my constituents. The problem is that he took a decision to delay a vital piece of public transport infrastructure for five years on a commitment given by his predecessor. Those are the facts. Yes, it is the first time I have come here, but the Minister knows I have been raising this matter with him since he became the Minister responsible, and I did so with his predecessor. It is a very simple question. When will the NTA have the funding? Procurement is going to take possibly about a year, then it is ready to go. Is the Minister saying that if the NTA is ready to go and commence construction in 2027 or 2028 he is willing to provide the funding or are we going to have to wait until we get the NDP review and maybe the funding will be released by 2030? All I am asking for is an actual

date. The Minister had a long track record of misleading the House under his previous responsibility. I will not stand for it now, just like I did not then.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am in the Chair. You should not make those remarks, Deputy Ó Broin, unless they are-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Unless they are factually accurate, which they are.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, hold on a second. You should allow the Minister to answer the question you have put in time.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have respect for his constituents but it is very difficult to respect the Deputy when he continues to behave in this way. I completely reject what he has said. It is the first time in 18 months that he has come into this Chamber and bothered to take the time to raise this project that apparently he cares so much about. I contrast that with his colleague, Deputy Shane Moynihan, who has regularly raised it, advocated and sought meetings with the NTA.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As we all have. When will it get the funding?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Broin, allow the Minister to use his time to answer or leave the Chamber.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: He will not answer the question. He has 27 seconds. When will the NTA get the money?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: He is going to leave the Chamber after the question.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not know how things operate in Sinn Féin but I have a fair idea. The Deputy may get away with bullying people in his own party but he will not bully or barrack me.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: When will the NTA get the money? It is a simple question.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is there any point in even trying to answer?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am going to move on to the next question because there is no point.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Pathetic, Eoin, pathetic.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: No answers, as usual, Minister.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: You are pathetic.

Bus Éireann

109. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is taking to address the deteriorating service on the 103 Bus Éireann route serving areas including Ashbourne and Ratoath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44955/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask about the measures being taken to address the deteriorating service on the 103 bus route serving areas including Ashbourne and Ratoath to and from Dublin. There is huge frustration about the services. Not a day passes without constituents raising concerns about the service, not just to me but also to Government colleagues in Meath and in Meath East. We need improvement on these services.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this matter which I am taking on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the scheduling and timetabling of these services, in conjunction with the relevant transport operators. The services are subsidised and the NTA is responsible for the routes, fares and shared systems.

In the case of route 103 serving Dublin to Ratoath via Ashbourne, Bus Éireann is responsible, as we have said, for the management and day-to-day operation as the operator, alongside the other PSO services. The performance of all public transport operators is monitored by the NTA as part of the contractual arrangements in place between the operators and the NTA. The contracts allow for not just the monitoring of performance but also the publication of the annual performance reports and, importantly, for the imposition of financial penalties to reinvest into the network in places where performance does not meet the minimum required standards, as well as reasonable incentive payments where performance exceeds the set standards.

In terms of punctuality, the 103 has unfortunately been generally performing below the minimum contractual standards since the start of this year. However, adhering to on-time performance can be challenging given the length of the route, the variability of traffic conditions in towns and villages along the way, as well as general traffic congestion in Dublin city centre. The point the Deputy is making about improving the services is not one that we can gloss over and we need to listen to his articulation of the issue on behalf of the many people who are frustrated.

I understand from the NTA that since the start of this year lost kilometres on the 103 route have been higher than desired, primarily due to mechanical issues and bus breakdowns. In line with its prescribed allocations and available resources for the year, the NTA is currently working with Bus Éireann to introduce a revised timetable on this route later this year.

Additionally, the NTA is also meeting Bus Éireann weekly at senior management level to review all service performances and monitor the operator's plans to improve reliability. We as a Department have asked the NTA to promptly apprise us of the progress to address these challenges. When we get a report we will get back to the Deputy.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: As I said, there is not a day passes that constituents do not raise concerns in relation to the service. Sometimes it is better to use their words rather than mine. I will give an example from the last 24 hours.

> To Whom it may Concern,
>
> I am writing this email as i am so disappointed and disgusted with the Bus Eireann service Ratoath/Ashbourne to Dublin. Number 103.
>
> I have lived in Ashbourne since 2004 and now in 2026 the bus service is worse than it was 22 years ago. How is that possible?
>
> Constantly late, no shows, the last few weeks there have been buses cancelled both ways, no explanation given and the notice given for the cancellation maybe less than 20 mins. When i am trying to get home from work i get on at Harts Corner, the buses are usually full and don't stop, especially when schools and colleges are open. The bus due at Harts Corner at 17:10 is usually a coach, what's the point in that?
>
> [...]
>
> There are only so many times an employer is going to listen to the excuse, the bus was cancelled or full.
>
> What do we say to these constituents? What does the Minister of State say to them?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: First of all, it is not acceptable that there is that level of frustration and lateness for work. I accept that the issue is there. As I outlined in my initial response to the Deputy, there is engagement with Bus Éireann. We need to ensure that the frustration of people is now replaced by delivery of services. That is why the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I have been engaged fully with the NTA in terms of the review of not just the service, with the provision of staff in terms of fixing broken buses, but also in terms of the reliability. That is why we are very anxious that in this year it is about sustainability and building resilience.

Where there are issues, there are fines. I know the fines are not good or acceptable to the person whose email the Deputy read out. I will take back the Deputy's comments. As someone who uses the bus service in Cork city, I know that people are looking for reliability and punctuality and we must build confidence in the system. I understand that and I will take back the Deputy's points. I am not familiar with route 103 but I certainly find it unacceptable that the person's email is a common one. That should not be the case.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is very common. Across the political spectrum, local representatives at Oireachtas level and local authority level have met the NTA and Bus Éireann but it is like we are banging our heads off a wall. That is why I am raising this specific route here today. Considerable residential development is happening in Ashbourne and Ratoath and it is welcome but these services are not fit for purpose. If the Minister of State has this information I would appreciate it and if he does not I ask him to send it on to me. He has acknowledged that there are failures in these services. Has Bus Éireann been fined in relation to this and, if so, to what extent? It is important that the Minister of State puts the focus on this. There is a review of the Navan-Dublin bus corridor. There should be a detailed review

of this service, the Dublin to Ratoath via Ashbourne corridor. It is hugely important and very popular. Lots of people want to use the bus but are not getting the opportunity of a reliable service.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I do not have the information the Deputy requested but I will ask my officials to communicate with him. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, as a Department, have asked that a report on the route be directly given back to us.

As the Deputy said, it is a critically important route. What is happening is unacceptable. We have been very clear on that. For us, punctuality is critical, Reliability is equally important. We, as Ministers, and the Department are very much of the view that we must build sustainability in order to stabilise matters. The Department, working with the NTA and Bus Éireann, has put in place plans in respect of mechanics, drivers and recruitment. We have spoken to the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment regarding visas and work permits.

What we want is a transport system that operates for the travelling public. If Deputy O'Rourke sends us the information he has, we will certainly communicate with him in respect of the fines. There have been fines levied on the bus providers, as the Deputy knows.

Rail Network

110. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport to outline the latest timeline of construction for the Finglas Luas extension project following the resolution to legal action earlier this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46345/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Minister outline the most recent timeline for the construction of the Finglas Luas project following the resolution of the relevant legal action earlier in the year?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for tabling this important question. I am sure he will agree that Luas Finglas is an exciting project that has the potential to transform Finglas and the wider area around it. There are about 58,000 households in that area. The project will also provide benefits for those living far beyond the immediate community. The park-and-ride facility at St. Margaret's Road and the interchanges with heavy rail and bus at Broombridge, which Deputy McAuliffe and I visited, will allow anyone using those services to connect with the wider public transport network. This is a fantastic project. Importantly, the project will reduce journey times, get people out of cars, help with decarbonisation, provide a more efficient transport system and support the development of businesses and housing in the area.

As the Deputy will be aware, we have had a clean railway order in place since October 2025. Three judicial review applications were submitted. However, these have been successfully resolved. I commend TII and the parties involved on the work they did in this regard. This means that Luas Finglas now has, in effect, full planning permission. In November, my Department published its NDP in which it noted the construction of Luas Finglas.

The project team in TII is currently preparing for future phases of the project, including drafting and updating the detailed business case, the procurement strategy and the tender documents. TII is seeking to position the project to a ready-to-start stage, with the aim that the main design and build contract being tendered at the start of next year. I want to bring this forward at that point in order that we can look to accelerating it with a view to getting into construction in 2028.

This project will have immense benefits for Deputy McAuliffe's area. He has been a really strong advocate for it. If we look at the previous NDP, the project was sitting in the middle of the 2030s. TII is really excited about this project. It is 3.9 km of off-road development. We can bring it forward. The final documents are being prepared. We can get the project out to tender at the start of next year and then, hopefully, get into construction in 2028.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Minister summed up the project very well. There was a time when I came into the House seeking to explain the project to people and extoll its virtues. The point the Minister has made is that the case for Luas Finglas has been won. The funding is there and the reality is that we have to get on with the job putting the project out to tender and having it built.

This will be a transformative project. Only last week, the Land Development Agency purchased a significant piece of land adjacent to that relating to the Luas project for what it hopes will be affordable purchase and affordable rental accommodation. That would not have been possible without the Luas project. This shows the very real, tangible and immediate impact of the project.

I hope that later this year and early in 2027 we can start to do some of the enabling works that will allow us to proceed with the larger project next year and into 2028. I also hope that the project will be delivered in the next two or three years. I thank the Minister for the work he has done in respect of this project. He has played no small part in pushing it along the line.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As stated, this nearly 4 km extension to the Luas and linking up with heavy rail will be a game-changer for the Dublin north-west area and for the wider north Dublin area as well in light of the interconnection with other services. We are going to bring it forward. Deputy McAuliffe and I have sat down with senior officials from TII and have worked through the details of the plan. The TII did super work in being able to resolve the judicial review. That puts us in a position whereby we can invest and get this project started. We want to get it out to tender. There is already significant interest in it. We will have a competitive tendering process, which we obviously have to go through. We will get that done. Subject to everything going well, we will be getting this into construction in 2028. I do not see any reason why we cannot do so.

This extension of the Luas and linking it up with other services at Broombridge will be the most tangible sign of real change regarding our rail network in the Dublin area. I am very excited about it. I am looking forward to work commencing. I keep Deputy McAuliffe fully abreast of developments. The benefits for his constituents and for people in the wider area of this Luas extension are difficult to actually quantify. In the context of housing, business, quality of life and climate, it ticks every box. We are going to move it forward.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It was great to have the Minister out at Broombridge to see where the current line ends and to look over at Tolka Valley Park in order to see where the line will continue. I have already talked about the benefits. There will also be a park-and-ride facility that will be of benefit to the wider area. There are some sporting facilities, including an all-weather facility, that we can develop in Tolka Valley Park in conjunction with Dublin City Council. This is also going to create employment along the way. We are going to see some movement from employment land to housing land in terms of zoning, but the Luas will bring more jobs to our area.

I want to acknowledge TII. Its representatives have been passionate about this project. They have come out and met with residents. We have not always been able to get agreement, but they literally fought for this project on the streets, outside people's homes and at community meetings. The way we will reward them for that work is to ensure that everything possible is put in place from a Government perspective. I know it has been.

I also want to acknowledge all the community people who fought for this project. I include my colleague and former Deputy Noel Rock, who also fought for this, in that regard. We did not often give each other much acknowledgement. In fairness, there are people who champion these projects. Success can have many mothers and fathers. This will be a real benefit for my constituency.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is good of Deputy McAuliffe to acknowledge former Deputy Noel Rock, who is no longer here. It is very easy to do that, but fair play. It was very magnanimous of Deputy McAuliffe to do so.

I have been out there. I know the area very well. TII has done superb work on this. Its public consultation and outreach into communities in respect of the project is an exemplar. We are now at the delivery phase, not just across this project but also in the context of our wider rail network. We will start Luas Finglas and we will have our new trains on the northern line, which is the start of DART+ Coastal North. I have already mentioned DART+ West and tried to answer Deputy Ó Broin about DART+ South West, but he just continued to shout me down, which is fine. There are some who do not want to see this progress happening, but this project is happening. I am looking forward to visiting the area again with Deputy McAuliffe in order to walk the new route. We will keep him fully abreast of the situation.

Question No. 111 taken with Written Answers.

Bus Services

112. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Transport if the discontinued route 4 bus service from Waterford to Dublin-Dublin Airport and the stops along the route will be reinstated following the withdrawal of a service (details supplied). [46260/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: I want to raise the fact that Expressway has pulled out of providing services on route 4. We are faced with a public service obligation route being provided from Waterford to Carlow. I attended a public meeting on the matter in Mullinavat and have attended two further meetings since. I want to reflect the anger of the people who

attended those meetings regarding the lack of a response from the National Transport Authority, NTA, and the lack of proper explanation from the very beginning of this debacle.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy McGuinness for raising this matter. For context, Bus Éireann operates both PSO services and Expressway intercity services. The latter operate on a commercial basis and do not receive any State subvention. We are aware that Bus Éireann recently announced the withdrawal of some services which operate under its Expressway banner. Deputy McGuinness referenced route 4, the Waterford via Carlow service, in this regard.

The point the Deputy makes reflects a lot of the frustration experienced by people. He referred to the meeting held in Mullinavat. It is important that Bus Éireann and the NTA communicate with people, the travelling public and public representatives in a very clear and cogent manner. It is unacceptable that the decision in this regard, which was taken following a financial and operational review, was not communicated by Bus Éireann in terms of the need to provide clarity and certainty to people.

In saying that, Bus Éireann has said to us that in regard to the Expressway performance over recent years, it was concerned about the long-term financial sustainability of the company as a whole.

The NTA, as Deputy McGuinness has referenced, is the licensing authority for the commercial bus sector. As is the case with any such commercial route withdrawals, the withdrawal of these routes triggers the NTA's public service obligation termination process, the outcome of which has been published by the NTA.

I know the NTA - and I will ask it to communicate directly with Deputy McGuinness - has undertaken a detailed assessment of the potential impact to customers. The review identified that the loss of route 4 would, as we have heard, significantly reduce the capacity and connectivity between Waterford and Carlow, and that is regrettable. The NTA has introduced a new Transport for Ireland, TFI, route 365, as subsidised by the bus service to maintain vital transport links and support regional accessibility. I would be anxious to hear how that service, which will have four daily returns, will meet the needs of the people Deputy McGuinness speaks about and I would be happy to communicate with the NTA on his behalf as well.

Deputy John McGuinness: That is a statement of fact, I suppose, in respect of the response given but, in reality, it does not address the real issue of the connection between Waterford and other towns along the route to Dublin and Dublin Airport. There are students who use that route to go to college. There are those who visit the hospitals in Dublin and elsewhere, or those who go to the airport. There are those who are, maybe, socialising and use the bus service. It has been withdrawn. Bus Éireann has shown a total disregard for its customers by the manner in which it withdrew it and by the lack of information it has given. The National Transport Authority has missed the point in relation to the connection through all of those towns from Waterford to Dublin and Dublin Airport. I ask that this route be examined again, that a proper service be provided and that the customers be informed.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The new 365 route will provide four daily returns, which will provide access for passengers travelling from Waterford and Carlow to Dublin via the counties

in between. Passengers travelling onwards will benefit from connections in Carlow to existing bus and rail services to Dublin and beyond. As I said, the route will be operated by Bus Éireann on an interim basis. The new service will provide four return journeys. It will ensure continued access for passengers travelling from Waterford, Carlow and the surrounding counties will be provided for.

I take the Deputy's point on the need to have the travelling public communicated with. He said it was a "statement of fact". I hear what he is saying. I will communicate the Deputy's frustrations and the concerns of the people in regard to the NTA missing the point about the connection piece. As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I are not the people directly engaged in that but we will ask the NTA to account for it and report back to us on the matter. It is an important point. I know the town of Carlow well and the Deputy makes good points with regard to hospital and college. It is a large centre of population as well.

Deputy John McGuinness: We are missing the point here. The customers are central to all of this and their needs must be met in a modern world. The Minister of State talked earlier on about the need to use public transport. We talk about our carbon footprint and so on. This flies in the face of all of that. They are not being given the service in rural Ireland. There is a real problem here in regard to communication and providing the solution to this issue. The only solution is to speak to the customers and put on a service that will provide the same kind of service as Expressway, to do it more efficiently and to ensure that the connectivity to rural Ireland is maintained and enhanced. It is not good enough.

I want to repeat that the communication from the NTA was not what I find acceptable and the customers and the public are not being informed. They are not being listened to. Please engage with them.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: First of all, the point the Deputy made in regard to communication is critically important. The NTA should communicate clearly and succinctly people. The route 365 will have four daily return journeys. There will be that continued access but I hear the points Deputy McGuinness has made. I understand what he is saying. Connectivity is important. We have seen the success of Local Link and it has grown exponentially around the country in regard to rural transport. I will communicate the points made very eloquently here this morning with the NTA on behalf of Deputy McGuinness and the people he has spoken about.

We are committed, as a Government, to providing all of our citizens, no matter where they are, with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options. I know that public transport, as I said earlier - I do not recoil from this - plays a significant role in that. The NTA and the Department will, following this morning's questions, liaise with Deputy McGuinness on the provision of services and if the route 365 does not work, then there obviously has to be a reappraisal of what the situation is.

Public Transport

113. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will seek additional investment in public transport in light of the fuel crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46090/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: My question to the Minister is on whether he is going to seek additional investment in public transport in light of the fuel crisis. Two days ago, the Minister got the Climate Change Advisory Council's annual review of transport. It is pretty damning as an assessment in that, already, the sectoral emissions ceiling has been exceeded. The 2025 one is projected to exceed the second one. The report also calls for investment to be expedited in a range of public transport infrastructure projects. Will the Minister go along with that?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am taking the question on behalf of the Minister. As the Deputy knows, offering a more affordable and sustainable alternative for many people, public transport has had a particularly important role to play in responding to the demand driven by fluctuating geopolitical developments, as we have said, which are consequently and consistently impacting the cost of fuel. As we all know, rising fuel costs increases the likelihood of car users switching to public transport. We have seen that but that modal shift is unpredictable. What we do have is an increase in people using public transport.

As the Deputy knows, in respect of targeted measures to further support the impacted sectors, in April of this year Government approved and introduced a range of measures to mitigate rising fuel costs, including the road transport support scheme and additional supports for bus and coach operators, including providing TFI Local Link and school transport services. These supports, worth approximately €120 million over three months, are helping operators manage current pressures and maintain service levels.

While operating in an uncertain environment, the immediate priority for our Department and the NTA has been to protect existing services and ensure continuity across the network within the resources allocated to the public service obligation, PSO, programme in 2026. Where opportunities arise to enhance services in a timely and practical way, these will be actively considered and progressed.

The Department of Transport and the NTA continue to remain in close contact with operators to monitor demand and operational impacts. It is important to outline that we are carefully considering all aspects of what is happening at the moment within the available of resources, so that we can continue to provide effective, sustainable public transport where we can see benefits for the people. Additionally, our fare structures in Ireland for public transport compares very favourably with our European counterparts. I will come back further in the supplementary with other comments.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Minister of State. We are in a deep climate crisis and we are missing our sectoral emissions targets with regard to transport, as well as our targets as a whole, by a very wide margin. We are in a cost-of-living crisis. An immediate answer to both of those is investment in public transport. Yet, what the Government is doing is delaying investment in necessary public transport projects. I will quote from the Climate Change Advisory Council review:

> ... under the current National Development Plan ... DART+ South West construction will not commence until post 2030 and construction of Luas Finglas ... will not commence until 2029. The delays in construction for these shovel-ready projects are unnecessary. The Council believes that allocation of funding to advance both projects should be expedited and strongly recommends that the Government commit funding to these projects in Budget 2027.

Is the Government going to do that? Why is this delay taking place? The Government cannot blame planning or funds. Is it because of grid issues? Data centres are effectively using up all of the power in the greater Dublin area.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The fundamental point Deputy Murphy misses is that we secured an extraordinary allocation of €940 million - an uplift of 43% - for our PSO services in the budget. I reiterate what the Minister said earlier, namely that the focus for this year is on stabilisation. It is about ensuring services that are already in place can operate reliably and sustainably and that we see progressive improvements in other services.

The other point is that we are meeting our climate change objectives. More and more people are moving to public transport. There is a commitment to electrify the fleet. We have seen more investment than ever before in that area. We are very much committed to having a reliable public transport system that is a movement away from the old style of public transport provision to electric trains and buses. We are seeing that across the country and in the city of Dublin.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can the Minister of State repeat that? Did he just say we are meeting our climate change targets?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We are meeting them in terms of moving away from fossil fuel vehicles to-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can the Minister of State repeat it on the record? We are meeting our climate change targets.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am saying that we are moving towards the electrification of the fleet.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is not meeting our climate change targets. Our legally binding climate change targets are set out. They state that we have to reduce emissions in this sector or that sector by certain amounts. The Climate Change Advisory Council review states, "The sector has likely exceeded its first sectoral emissions ceiling (2021–2025) and is projected to exceed its second (2026–2030)." The Government is not meeting its climate targets. It is not coming anywhere close to meeting its climate targets. It is trying to lull people to sleep by saying things that are inaccurate such as, for example, that we are meeting our climate change targets.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We are electrifying the-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The fundamental point the Minister of State is missing is that the Government is choosing to delay investment in public transport against the advice of Climate Change Advisory Council. That is a fact.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Did the Deputy read the NDP?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will ask again. Is the reason the Government is not proceeding with the project down to the fact that all of the power is going to the data centres?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Sure that is-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I refer to the briefing note prepared for the Government's major project governance oversight group, which warned that there is insufficient power in the ESB network to support DART+. The target is 100%, and we need ten times more power. Where will that come from?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I know Deputy Murphy does not want to hear good news.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I would like some good news.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It is the job of the Opposition to hark and bark, and that is all right. We are politicians, and I understand that. One in every four euro is going on public transport investment and one in every eight euro is being spent on public transport. I reiterate that there has been 43% uplift in the budget for this year.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That was not the question.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I ask Deputy Murphy to read the NDP for transport. Has he read it?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy will have read about the Government's commitment to the provision of public transport, the electrification of the fleet, the purchase of new vehicles and the move away from diesel engines.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are not charging the vehicles. The NTA told the Committee of Public Accounts that we are not charging them because the data centres are using all the power. We have electric buses that are sitting there not being charged.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): This is not a back and forth. Allow the Minister of State to answer the question.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy does not want to hear good news. If he had his way, we would have no BusConnects, no Cork commuter rail, no MetroLink and no DART and he would be asking what are we doing.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We do not have 60% of BusConnects.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The reality is that we are developing a transport plan-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Where is BusConnects?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Ó Broin got his answer earlier and did not like it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I will be coming back in shortly. The Minster of State need not worry.

Road Network

115. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide an update on progress regarding approval of the completion of the final two stages of the Kilkenny ring road and the maintenance and upgrade of the existing sections of the same road. [46261/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: On the completion of the next phase of the Kilkenny ring road, I am seeking to establish what stage the process is at, when it is likely to be approved and when the funding will be made available. I made a recommendation to the Minister, because funding is coming directly from the Department's budget, that the €50 million or so needed to cover the project should be set aside in lump sums each year in order that when the planning process is completed, the necessary funding will be in place.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am taking this question on behalf of the Minister. In accordance with section 13 of the Roads Act 1993, as amended, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority. Work on such roads is funded from councils' resources, supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is a matter in the first case for the local authority. Any new road projects in respect of which State funding is sought are assessed by our Department on a case-by-case basis. All projects proposed by local authorities for consideration must comply with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and the Department's transport appraisal framework. Given the limited funding available for regional and local road improvement works, it is important for each local authority to prioritise projects within these requirements.

In the case of the Kilkenny city north transport project, the Kilkenny ring road, it aims to reduce city centre congestion and improve cross-river connectivity via a potential northern ring road extension. In January 2023, in line with Government requirements, Kilkenny County Council produced a strategic assessment report for the Kilkenny northern ring road extension and a draft was forwarded by our Department for review. Since then, both the public spending code and the Department’s transport appraisal framework guidance have been updated. In 2024, following the provision of funding from our Department, Kilkenny County Council

submitted an updated project outline document, POD, for the Kilkenny city north transport project. While this process was underway, funding was also allocated for traffic and junction analysis in the Butts Green area of the city to further assess and better understand traffic patterns.

In 2025, following a review of the POD by our Department, €200,000 was allocated to the Kilkenny northern transport project to allow Kilkenny County Council to progress it to phase 2, the options stage. This year, Kilkenny County Council appointed a design consultant to progress the options stage. An additional €300,000 was allocated by the Department of Transport, which will continue to liaise with Kilkenny County Council as the project progresses. For this year, €718 million was allocated through the regional and local roads grant programme for improvement and maintenance, with approximately 90% of this funding allocated to road maintenance and renewal. I will come back in with more information for Deputy McGuinness in a moment.

Deputy John McGuinness: Just to be clear, there are two issues I am trying to address here. One is the completion of the next phase of the northern part of the ring road around Kilkenny. I ask the Department to liaise with Kilkenny County Council to proactively move that process and consideration forward so that we can get to the point of approval quickly. The completion of that section has been delayed for some time. I see no reason why we cannot look at the final phase of the project in order to ensure that there will be no time lost in completing the full northern extension of that ring road.

The second point relates to the fact that TFI looked at the existing ring road and instructed the council to implement safety measures, which it has failed to do. I am asking if TFI will examine the matter again and come up with a more efficient plan.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Who has failed?

Deputy John McGuinness: TFI has failed.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will ask the NTA to liaise with Kilkenny County Council. As Deputy McGuinness knows, it is mainly the responsibility of Kilkenny County Council to decide its programme for road maintenance.

On the safety issue, I will certainly ask the council to liaise and engage, particularly as safety is paramount. I know that Kilkenny County Council has received significant moneys for road protection and renewal works. It is certainly important that there is collaboration and both entities work together to ensure the existing sections of roads can be completed.

In terms of the north ring road, there has been the appointment of a design consultant. I will ask our officials to liaise with council on the matter because it is important. I know it from Deputy McGuinness's ongoing advocacy and it is critical to the growth of Kilkenny and the area.

Deputy John McGuinness: There are a lot of cooks in the kitchen in the context of all of this. Sometimes, too many of them can spoil the dish. I ask that there be some communication

between all of those involved, namely Kilkenny County Council, the transport infrastructure people and those responsible for funding in order that the mess they have made of the Black Quarry roundabout might be addressed and to prevent traffic from backing up right along the ring road. There is still a problem with safety that should be addressed. I accept what the Minister of State said about the northern part of that ring road. I will work with Kilkenny County Council to ensure that we move quickly through the process. I again ask for the support of the Department as we do that.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: As the Deputy will appreciate, I do not have information in respect of that issue. I will certainly ask about the Black Quarry roundabout and ask people to liaise with Deputy McGuinness on the matter. I take the point the Deputy makes that too many cooks spoil everything, but it is important Kilkenny County Council, as the lead agency, can liaise with other stakeholders.

I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien's officials to liaise with Deputy McGuinness.

Transport Costs

114. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will rule out fare increases in budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45499/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Tá ceist Uimh. 114 á thógáil ag an Teachta O'Hara ar son an Teachta Daly.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Safeguarding long-term financial sustainability while being responsive to passenger needs remains a central commitment under the programme for Government. Achieving this requires a careful balance between delivering high-quality reliable services and ensuring that the network is adequately resourced to meet growing demand. Passenger numbers have continued to rise in recent years, with a record-breaking 363.5 million journeys undertaken just last year.

As the statutory body responsible for regulating fares across services operated under PSO contracts, the NTA is central to shaping a public transport system that is fair, efficient and accessible. Through its management of fare strategies, it helps to ensure that pricing structures support social inclusion and the modal shift while also underpinning the financial viability and resilience of the network.

Public transport fares in Ireland remain comparatively low due to a range of targeted measures introduced in recent years. For context, Ireland's farebox recovery average stands at 38% when compared to a 44% European average. Including the young adult card, the 90-minute fare and free travel for children under nine years of age, such targeted initiatives have significantly improved affordability and accessibility. They also increase reliance on subsidy, making fare revenue a critical component of maintaining a financially sustainable PSO model.

In line with international best practice, prioritising the reinvestment of the fare revenue is essential to support service improvements, expansion and system resilience. Maintaining a stable funding base is, therefore, critical to sustaining service levels and ensuring public transport continues to meet passenger needs over the long term.

Regarding budget 2027, the PSO funding allocation will be subject to the annual budgetary and Estimates process. As is standard in all budgetary deliberations between Departments and State agencies, a comprehensive assessment of all service provision costs and requirements will be undertaken, with a strong focus on ensuring value, fairness and accessibility for all passengers.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Minister of State. The cost of fares is obviously a significant expense for people who rely on public transport. At a time when households right across the State are struggling with rising costs, rising rents and rising everything else, there is a need for the Government to be upfront with people as to whether commuters will face an increase in public transport fares. In the Minister of State's response, he has not given any clarity as to whether fares may increase.

I want to raise the taxsaver scheme because this is one area where commuters try to save money on their fares. While many people have the opportunity to participate in that scheme, it is only available to commuters who are employed at companies that are taking part in the scheme. It has been raised with me that this requirement means that a whole cohort of people are being excluded from the scheme. I understand that the Department of Finance has a role in that also. Has the Department of Transport given any consideration to extending this scheme to all employers to make everybody eligible to benefit from it?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Everything will be considered in the budgetary deliberations for next year. As the Deputy knows, all deliberations between our Department and the various agencies under it are subject to a thorough assessment in terms of their service provision, cost and requirements. There is a strong commitment to and focus on ensuring that value, fairness and accessibility for all passengers is achieved. Looking at what we have done, we have made public transport accessible for people through the young adult card, the PSO uplift and the funding of cost-of-living measures.

The point the Deputy makes as to how we can get more people to use public transport and to incentivise them is one on which we must reflect. I certainly have heard it from many people in terms of the taxsaver scheme. If we look at the whole national fares strategy, it is one we are always looking to examine, review and analyse. As the Deputy says, this is about getting people in that modal shift. He referred to other routes in his earlier contributions. I will certainly take the Deputy's point back to the Minister and the Department, but I cannot give any answer this morning because the budgetary process has not commenced yet.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: It would be good if changes could be considered. A related issue I wish to raise is the significant difference that commuters in Galway are paying for rail fares compared to other parts of the State, particularly Dublin. I had a constituent in touch with me highlighting that rail passengers between Athenry and Galway city pay €5.10 each way for a 20-minute train journey. At the same time, a commuter travelling between Clonsilla to Connolly Station in Dublin, a journey of roughly 30 minutes, can travel for approximately €2.60 each way. Athenry to Galway is a commuter route. There is clearly an unfairness in passengers on those trains having to pay significantly more - double what a commuter in Dublin could expect to pay. At a time when the Government is trying to encourage and promote the use of public transport, why are commuters in Galway paying twice what commuters in Dublin

could expect to pay for their rail fares, especially given that public transport is much more limited in the west? Will the Minister of State review this difference in fares and ensure that commuters in Galway are treated fairly when it comes to the cost of public transport?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I think the Deputy has raised this matter before. The important point I would make is that we are committed as a Government to maintaining a fare strategy that is fair and equitable. We are committed to helping to ensure that the pricing structure supports social inclusion and the modal shift, whether it is in Cork, Galway, Dublin or Offaly. It does not matter where. For us, our public transport provision is very important. If we look at the comparison to Europe, the farebox recovery average stands at 38% compared to the 44% European average.

I will take the point the Deputy makes back to the Department. We are committed to improving the offerings for people. We have a very good model of fare strategy, and if there are improvements to be made, let us make those happen.

Question No. 116 taken with Written Answers.

Bus Services

117. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric buses currently in storage; the total cost of their storage and maintenance over the past three years; the projected cost of continued storage and maintenance until deployment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46183/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: The public accounts committee has, after protracted correspondence, finally got to the bottom of where we might be in terms of the cost of storage of 384 buses over the last four years, with 98 electric buses still in storage. These are much-needed buses that should be servicing our community. Will the Minister of State specifically tell us the cost of those electric buses, and also the projected cost, given that we are still counting for the 98 buses still in storage?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Delays in the entry into service of new buses are very much regrettable. However, I must emphasise that the storing of buses while we deploy charging infrastructure is preferable to deferring their purchase in the first place until we have a charger available for every bus. If an alternative approach had been adopted where buses were only purchased after charging infrastructure was installed to ensure no delay in fleet absorption, the cost of purchasing fleet would have significantly escalated in recent years due to inflation. As an example, if electric bus purchases were deferred by one year from their actual order placement dates, the additional purchase cost of the buses would have been approximately €12 million, compared to around €7 million in costs that have actually been incurred as a result of bus storage.

As of today, over 250 battery electric buses have been accepted into the Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann fleets across the country, including the operation of our first fully electric services in Limerick and Athlone. Ninety-eight battery electric buses are currently awaiting deployment pending the installation of charging infrastructure. The 56 buses to be deployed in the greater

Dublin area are planned to enter service later this year. The 42 remaining buses for use in Galway are all planned to enter into operation late this year and early 2027.

There can be a 12-to-48-month timeline when ordering a new electric bus, while installing charging infrastructure typically requires securing planning approval and subsequent procurement of charger supplier and installation. Achieving full alignment between the delivery of the new electric bus fleet and the charger installations is challenging. The delay is regrettable, as the Deputy said. To help address the mismatched timelines of charging capacity and fleet delivery in future, the NTA plans to award a new national electric bus charging infrastructure framework later this month. This framework, from which suppliers can be accessed for depot electrification projects anywhere in the country in the future, will replace the fragmented, project-by-project procurement approach to date. I hope that gives the Deputy some answers to her question.

Deputy Grace Boland: If hundreds of electric, zero-emission buses sitting in storage represents value for money, I would like the Department to publish a full cost-benefit analysis, the opportunity cost and the opportunity lost. Will the Minister of State please confirm that the Department will do that?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will have the Department communicate with Deputy Boland. I take the point she makes and it is a very fair point. The overarching point is we must be conscious of spending public money and I take her point on both.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

12 o'clock

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: While we are waiting, I welcome a group from Scoil Íosagáin, Coolgreany, who are guests of Deputy Ó Súilleabháin, to the Public Gallery. I hope they enjoy this morning's proceedings.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Inniu, d'fhoilsigh coiste tithíochta an Oireachtais tuarascáil shuntasach. Is é an moladh is suntasaí ná go dtabharfadh Rialtas an Tánaiste cosc éigeandála ar dhíshealbhuithe gan locht isteach arís. Tá an ceart ag an choiste. Tá géarghá le cosc den chineál sin anois níos mó ná riamh. Tá cíosanna ardaithe go dtí leibhéil nár fhaca muid le 25 bliain anuas. Tá an easpa dídine ag dul i méid i gcónaí agus taifid nua á mbriseadh gach mí. Tá líon na ndíshealbhuithe anois ag an leibhéal is airde ó aimsir an Ghorta Mhóir. Tá cúlbhinseoirí pháirtí an Tánaiste féin, Fine Gael, ag iarraidh ar an Rialtas gníomhú chun cosc ar dhíshealbhuithe gan locht a thabhairt isteach arís.

Today, the Oireachtas committee on housing published a major report. This report makes it clear that the Government is not doing enough to tackle the housing and homelessness crisis. It calls on the Government to introduce an emergency response to the crisis, including a ban

on no-fault evictions. This call comes from TDs of all parties, including Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. The committee is right. Such a ban is needed now more than ever. The situation was bad enough but the Government's rent hikes legislation has made things even worse. The consequences are plain to see. Rip-off rents have now jumped to their highest levels in 25 years. Homelessness rates continue to rise, breaking new records every single month. Evictions are now at the highest level since the Famine.

As a result of the Government's legislation, we have seen an alarming increase in the number of evictions since the start of this year. Many people and families now find themselves in desperate situations, seeking a new place to live. Those who can find a place face paying thousands and thousands extra in rent. Those who cannot find a place are left in awful situations. We are talking about working families with good jobs and sometimes with two incomes. We are talking about older people who have paid rent all their lives and parents who are robbed of the security they need to build a good life for them and their children.

It seems that everybody sees how bad things are except for the Tánaiste's Government. Even the Government parties' own backbenchers who helped drafted this report are now calling on the Government to act to reintroduce the ban on no-fault evictions. The writing is on the wall. If this intervention is not made immediately, many more people will be forced to move back into their parents' homes or insecure situations or, even worse, will find themselves in homelessness. There are many steps we can take to protect people.

A ban on no-fault evictions would provide people in housing difficulty with the safety net they need. It would relieve stress and pressure and give these people the security they need. It is not just Sinn Féin that is urging the Tánaiste to do this. This is a cross-party call for his Government to move with urgency and ambition to stem the flow of evictions. The Tánaiste now has an opportunity to make a real difference. For too long, the story of housing in Ireland has been a story of pressure, stress, desperation and hopelessness. That story can be changed, however. That tide can be turned. Hope can be restored for people who just want a secure home for them and their families. However, it has to start with better decisions. The Tánaiste has to make one of those decisions today. He has to make that difference. Will he tell people that he will make that decision and reintroduce a ban on no-fault evictions, as members of parties across this House have called for?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Doherty for his question and I thank the Oireachtas committee on housing for its work. The committee report published this morning makes 14 recommendations. Of course, we will work our way through the report and consider all of the recommendations, as we do with all committee reports.

Page 5 of the report states that these committee recommendations arise from hearings held on 16 December last year. A number of decisions and actions have been taken by Government since then. As I look through the recommendations, I am pleased to say that many are in train or in place. The report calls for a greater focus on prevention and for increased funding, which we are providing. Very importantly, the committee recommends that the best interests of the child must be a key priority in addressing homelessness, and I believe everyone across the House can agree on that. We agree and that is why legislation is being brought forward to amend the Housing Act 1988 to ensure that consideration is given to the best interests of the

child in the process of making decisions on accommodation for households. This is a key ask of many of those who work with homeless families across the country.

The report also seeks a child and family homelessness prevention plan. I am pleased to tell the House that this plan will be published before the summer recess. It is important work. We do not want to see anybody homeless in Ireland but we all particularly want to see progress made on children in homelessness. This plan is intended to drive a real focus on preventing children and families entering emergency accommodation while also providing enhanced supports for children who do experience homelessness. It will also include measures to accelerate exits and to reduce the time children and their families spend in homeless emergency accommodation. This was also a recommendation of the report.

The committee also recommends engagement with stakeholders. There has objectively never been more engagement but Government is always open to hearing any ideas from across this House as to what more could be done.

Since this committee hearing in December of last year, we have seen the legislation come into effect on 1 March 2026. That puts a range of protections in place in respect of tenancies. As the Deputy will know, we have extended the rent pressure zones nationwide. These now include the Deputy's own county of Donegal, which was previously not included. We brought in six-year tenancies. That is very important. We now live in a country where the majority of tenants are covered by an effective no-fault eviction ban. There was a debate in this House as to the right way to do that and there was debate about making sure that policies did not result in smaller landlords, those with one or two houses, leaving the market, causing a supply challenge. However, it is a statement of fact that there is now an effective no-fault eviction ban in place for the majority of tenants in the country. That also acts on a recommendation of the report.

We are also continuing a record level of investment in social housing, with €2.9 billion in capital allocated to support the delivery of social homes. We will continue to do that. The report is welcome. I take the Deputy's raising of the important issue of housing in the spirit intended. There is no more important domestic issue. However, it is not true to say that this cross-party report says that the Government should bring in a no-fault eviction ban. The cross-party report says "The Committee urges the Minister to keep all options under review including an emergency ban on no fault evictions". Of course, the Government keeps things under review. Let us not misrepresent the good cross-party work that was done in relation to this report.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste cannot seriously make up his own facts. He has twice said that it is a fact that the majority of tenancies are effectively subject to a no-fault eviction ban. That is not true and I think the Tánaiste knows that. This provision only applies to new tenancies and not existing tenancies. It also only applies to tenancies with large landlords. Please stop making stuff up. I know it is very difficult to defend the situation the Tánaiste finds himself in but a bit of truth and honesty would be welcome.

The committee is very clear. Not enough is being done and we need an emergency response. The Tánaiste is right that the hearings were held in December but the committee only launched its report this morning. What has happened since December? Rents and house prices have continued to rise, homelessness records have been broken over and over again, and the number

of evictions has gone through the roof because of Government legislation allowing landlords to increase rents over and over again. Something has to give. The Tánaiste is not listening to Sinn Féin, to advocacy groups or to people who are under serious housing pressure. Perhaps it is time for him to listen to some of his backbenchers, who are saying that there is now a need for an emergency response. The Tánaiste can shake his head all he wants but the reality is that we are seeing more evictions. We are seeing rents at their highest levels in 25 years. Despite this, the Tánaiste somehow thinks that everything is rosy in the garden and that the Government is doing everything it needs to. There is a need to introduce a ban on no-fault evictions at this point in time. The Government needs to relieve this pressure and this stress for people. There are options. The Government can stem the tide. It can take measures that will make a meaningful difference in people's lives. I again ask whether the Government will bring forward a ban on no-fault evictions, as has been recommended.

The Tánaiste: While Deputy Doherty can speak for Sinn Féin, he certainly does not speak for Fine Gael backbench TDs or Senators.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: They speak for themselves.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have seen what they said.

The Tánaiste: I speak for the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is here in black and white.

The Tánaiste: It is not helpful for the people at home or those in the Gallery for people to shout me down. The reality is that I speak for the Government in his House today and, as its leader, I speak for the Fine Gael Party.

We will follow our policy agenda, which is clearly published, while the Deputy will come into this House and continue to oppose and object every positive measure that we bring forward. Of course, the comments that I have made in relation to no-fault evictions apply to tenancies in place since the legislation came in. How could it apply to anything else? We have put that in since the legislation in March. The Deputy knows that------

Deputy Pearse Doherty: So, it is not the fact.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not the vast majority.

The Tánaiste: -----to be true. We have also taken a number of other measures, including this week, with more than €800 million through the housing, activation and infrastructure office to help counties right across this country to put in place key enabling pieces of infrastructure that are required to deliver more homes. Housing is an emergency in this country. Housing is a real challenge. The cross-party committee has done good work. Do not misrepresent what it has said, though. It has not said to bring in a no-fault eviction ban. It has said to keep all things

under review. It has made 14 recommendations. Many of them are under way. Many of them merit further consideration. They will, of course, all be taken very serious.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In the Rotunda, there are consultants on public-only contracts receiving payments for delivering babies while covering for their private colleagues. On Tuesday, I told the Taoiseach that this was happening at Cork University Maternity Hospital, CUMH, too. The Taoiseach admitted that he did not know anything about this. Today, it has been reported in the *Irish Independent* that a long-standing professional fee arrangement had been in place among consultants in CUMH. The spokeswoman for the HSE said, "This a private professional arrangement between some consultants in which Cork University Maternity Hospital plays no part". While it is no doubt true that hospital management plays no part in administering the payments, it organises the rosters that facilitate this practice. It appears from reports today that rosters are being changed and this practice has been stopped in Cork this week. However, no such confirmation has been forthcoming from the Rotunda.

We also know that there are major issues at University Hospital Galway where public consultants are being asked by management to do lab work for a private hospital. While some are refusing to do this, this is nonetheless leading to huge delays, including in tests for life-threatening conditions such as cancer. As a result, lab work is being outsourced for both public and private patients to commercially run labs. This is at enormous expense to the public purse.

This is not just about consultants and public-only contracts getting extra payments for private work or billing insurers for work for private patients. It is also having a real and negative impact on the care of public patients. These are patients whose lab work is being delayed while private work is done. These are patients whose health and lives are being put at risk.

The whole point of the public-only contract is to improve our health system and level up care for public patients so that they are receiving the same continuity and quality of care as private patients. Instead, at the Rotunda and the CUMH, rostering gaps were being filled for private consultants. This appears to be stopping at CUMH, but what about the Rotunda? Has the Rotunda been instructed to stop this practice? Has University Hospital Galway been told to stop asking public consultants to do lab work for private hospitals? What is the Tánaiste doing to ensure that the public-only contract is being enforced around the country?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. At the outset, I agree with him on the importance of the public-only consultant contract. It is something that arose from one of the better days or better periods of time in this House where the Government and Opposition worked together on a vision for the future of the health service called Sláintecare. I was the Minister at the time. The Deputy's former party leader, Róisín Shortall, chaired that committee. It has produced a good blueprint that we are all working our way through. It has taken some of the day-to-day politics in terms of policy direction out of health. That is a good thing. I want everybody who works in our health service, no matter what role they play, to understand that this Oireachtas speaks with one very clear voice when it comes to public health policy and we all expect it to be followed.

I also agree with the Deputy that there has been progress. We see the benefits of the public-only consultant contract. I will not go through them all, but as an example, St. Vincent's

University Hospital has brought about a Saturday hub with participation by 40 consultants. In Wexford General Hospital, we now have weekend consultant cover in emergency medicine, surgery, paediatrics and gynae services. In University Hospital Waterford, we have seen a minimum of 26 consultants rostered at the weekend with outpatient diagnostics running until 8 p.m. during the week and on certain weekends. I use these as examples of where when this is applied correctly, we can see the real benefit in terms of public healthcare.

In relation to some of what has emerged, I acknowledge the Deputy and Deputy Rice's work on this. The idea of anybody being given a gift or paid to do a nixer effectively is not in line with the contract. It is not an improved HSE arrangement. It is not something that the Department of Health, the Minister for Health, the HSE or the Government would condone. Measures are now being taken to ensure that this practice ceases with immediate effect. My understanding is that the HSE chief executive is currently engaging with all the regional health areas and the regional clinical directors in relation to this practice.

I wish to make a couple of other points because people - certainly not the Deputy; quite the opposite to him - sometimes try to muddy the waters in relation to this. As would be the case in all specialties, the maternity consultant on duty in any hospital is responsible for the care of all patients requiring attention regardless of whether they are private or public. This idea that if a consultant is on call, they have to be given some sort of gift or payment is not how it works. Doctors know that, too. Cross-cover between consultants is routine. It is an expected part of how our public health services are delivered, ensuring continuity of care. Any suggestion of private financial arrangements in this context is inconsistent with contractual obligations, raises concerns and risks diverting time and resources away from treating public patients. We have seen no tolerance from the Minister for people who sign on the dotted of a contract and do not adhere by it. The Deputy can be sure that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is working intensely on ensuring the full implementation.

Speaking as the Minister of Finance, and lest anyone be of any other view, I wish to say that any income, be it direct or indirect, gained from employment is taxable. Revenue has standard audit compliance procedures that it operates across all sectors. Whether it is payment in the traditional way, a gift or a nixer, please be aware of the taxable obligations on any income derived through that.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There are patients waiting on test results who want answers in relation to lab work at University Hospital Galway. They want to know what is being done in terms of their test results, which they need a quick turnaround on. Their health and lives depend on a quick turnaround. They want answers as to what the Government is doing on that. The Tánaiste has not addressed that at all. He may say what the Government is doing about that.

It is welcome that the HSE is following up on this, but when are people going to know that these additional payments that are in breach of the public-only contract have stopped? We are seeing more and more things emerging about breaches of the public-only contract. What is the Government doing to ensure that the public-only contract is being enforced? Is it waiting for a drip feed of things to emerge around the country? Is it being proactive in ensuring that the taxpayer and public are getting the service that they are paying for and deserve?

The Tánaiste: I assure the Deputy that there are few more proactive Ministers than Deputy Carroll MacNeill. She is fully committed to the implementation and enforcement of the public-only consultant contact. We have already seen strong national uptake of the contract, with 3,416 consultants signed up as of the end of May, including 1,220 new entrants. There are over 2,000 consultants who switched from the older contract as well. We now have a health service where 69% of all consultants working in our hospitals are now on the public-only consultant contract. This represents a lot of progress in the time between now and 2023 when it was introduced.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I asked about breaches.

The Tánaiste: I know. I will get those. Consultant numbers have also increased significantly.

Regarding any breaches, the Minister for Health and the wider Government have shown that they simply will not be tolerated. There is a process under way - I have briefed on this at the Cabinet subcommittee on health - within the HSE and led by the chief executive, regional health area by regional health area and hospital by hospital, to make sure there is full compliance. The Minister is very eager to keep engaging with the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Rice, as Chair of the Oireachtas health committee on this. That committee is a useful place to continue monitoring progress. This can be a game-changer for the delivery of public health. When someone signs on the dotted line and takes the larger salary, they are expected to deliver on those terms just like anybody working in the public service.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: "Certainty, clarity and stability for the rental sector" were the words of the Minister for housing when he introduced his disastrous rental reform Bill in February. He did mention the word "eviction" once. As predicted, this new law has caused carnage in the private rental sector - not stability, just chaos. There were over 7,000 notices of termination in the first three months of the year. That was a 51% increase on the year before. It is the highest level of evictions ever recorded. There are record and ever-growing levels of homelessness, with 5,604 children now officially homeless.

It is a terrible record and the new normal. It never gets the media coverage or outrage it should. Whether they are from Ireland or not is irrelevant; it is a child without a home. This week, the Tánaiste had a go at local authorities but the problem they have is the lack of powers to act whether on dereliction or homelessness. The Labour Party has long campaigned with Focus Ireland to require local authorities to take the best interests of the child into account when working with families who present as homeless. The Government has failed to act on this for nearly a decade. There are many things we can do to address evictions and homelessness. We all know we need more supply but the Government has been saying that for a decade and the problem keeps getting worse. The housing committee today published an important report on homelessness. It includes 14 recommendations, all suggestions those of us in opposition have previously called for in some form or another. We know preventing homelessness is the best use of resources. It keeps people in their existing home and is much more cost effective. The Chair of the committee, Deputy Carrigy, was correct on "Morning Ireland" when he said no child should have to spend any period of time in homelessness. This committee, which has a Government majority, has called for a child homelessness strategy, an

emergency package of measures to reduce homelessness and, critically, is open to an emergency ban on no-fault evictions for a defined period of time. We have the highest level of evictions since the Famine and the Government has the power to do something about it. Will it stand up for the thousands of children without a home? There is a Government housing Bill going through the Dáil right now. Committee Stage resumes today at 12.30 p.m. You can introduce a ban on no-fault evictions, stem the tide of rising homelessness and protect the best interests of the child. I ask the Tánaiste for a straight answer - if it will not ban evictions, what will the Government do before the summer recess to reduce homelessness?

The Tánaiste: I agree with a variety of things the Deputy said but I fundamentally disagree with the baloney and spin coming from some local authority officials in relation to dereliction. Deputy Sheehan represents a county and city with an excellent record in tackling dereliction. Last time I checked this country has one national set of laws. It is quite simple; I am not buying into this idea that all local authorities are performing equally well when it is simply untrue. Eleven did not bother collecting a cent. I can find more derelict properties in County Wicklow on my nightly walk than the entire local authority can find in the course of a year. We have to take this deadly seriously, speak with one voice as an Oireachtas and when we say dereliction is a scourge, put in place a variety of measures to help people fix it such as the living city initiative, croí cónaithe with the vacancy grant and CPO powers. Some local authorities are doing a bloody great job and we thank them for that. Some are not treating this like an emergency. It is as simple as - no one is going to change my mind on this but we are going to change the law because they cannot be trusted or depended on to deliver on this so we will bring in the powers to rectify this through the Revenue Commissioners. I know this from my own councillors. They tell me they raise it week in, week out at council meetings across the country. Councillors are frustrated about this as well. Dereliction is a scourge. Everybody needs to take it much more seriously including local authorities. Some like Limerick are doing great but some are not doing well at all and it is not on.

In relation to the best interests of the child, I agree with the Deputy as does the Government. We will amend the Housing Act 1988 so that it will be very clear that in the decision-making process on accommodation for households the best interests of the child are included. I also agree with the Deputy and the committee on the child and family homelessness prevention plan. It is committed in the Government's national housing plan. It will be published before the summer recess. I will make sure the points in that committee report, if they are not already encompassed, are given further consideration because it is an important area we all want to make progress on across parties.

We made changes on the no-fault eviction ban in March in relation to new tenancies and a no-fault eviction ban except for some small landlords. That was an attempt to get the balance right between increasing renter and tenant protections and supply. We also expanded RPZs and brought in six-year tenancies. They are practical measures. Next week we will see the rural planning guidelines to help make it easier for people to build in their communities. In the budget there will be dereliction taxation to help to tackle dereliction. This week saw housing activation funding to try to get housing going. Every day, we take more measures together to try to make a real difference. We saw in the past that a blanket no-fault eviction ban resulted in a significant spike in notices to quit when it was lifted. We need to be careful. That is why the wording of the report is quite careful in asking that we keep matters under review.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Tánaiste said local authorities cannot be trusted or depended on. That is an outrageous statement. It is the centralisation of power in the Custom House that has weakened the ability of councils to build new homes, prioritise children in homelessness and tackle dereliction. The measures the Tánaiste spoke of regarding security of tenure are completely undermined by the market rent reset mechanism baked into the legislation which allows landlords to reset rent to the market rate in between tenancies, exposing renters, the most vulnerable people in housing, to record double-digit rent increases. The Tánaiste's own backbenchers are talking about the need for a ban on evictions. What emergency measures will he take before the summer recess? Why will he not recognise that only a ban on evictions will actually reduce homelessness?

The Tánaiste: I am really confused with the Deputy's position on dereliction because he is defending the system rather than the people the system is meant to represent. People are being let down by inactivity on the derelict sites levy. I gave the Deputy an open goal and said his own council is doing a great job. Limerick is one of the best. It has no superpowers the rest of the country does not have except maybe on the GAA pitch. There are 11 local authorities that did not collect anything. It is not good enough. Deputies can come into this House, kick me around and say the Government needs to do more on housing; that is fine. The Government has a major role to play in housing but so does local government. It is unacceptable that more than €26 million could have been collected was not. We saw in the excellent journalism of "RTÉ Investigates" bizarre baloney in the excuses why this had not been taken more seriously. I am not commentating on this; I am acting. That is why this week I brought forward proposals to bring in a derelict site tax because if they do not take it seriously we will. The Deputy is defending the system but it is letting young people down. I have the table here; it is available. Look at the local authorities that did not collect any money and did not think there was any dereliction in their own county. It is not good enough. This Government is not living by arbitrary deadlines of what more are we going to do by this or that date. Every day we come to work we take more concrete actions help to tackle homelessness. This week it was the housing activation funding across the country including the Deputy's county. The child and family homelessness action plan is the next major step we will take before the summer recess.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Over the past week or so the Tánaiste has been very critical of county councils which he said think they have "done enough" on housing. He said, “There’s too much sluggishness in parts of the system, in terms of zoning land." Laois cannot be counted as one of them if one looks at what it has done on zoning this week. It has exceeded the Department of housing's targets. We need more affordable and social housing and cost rental but it has gone well past the targets. On zoning, this week Laois zoned lands on top of what is already zoned for an additional 8,200 homes. That is a population increase of between 25,000 and 30,000 in a county with about 95,000 of a population at the moment. It is in the top three highest population increases in the State. This was demanded by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Government. I have no problem with it but the facts are we do not have the infrastructure in the county. The funding allocation this year under the national development plan announced earlier for roads was zero. Cash is required. We need a new primary school in Portlaoise, Coláiste Dhún Másc secondary school needs to be fast-tracked, Coláiste Íosagáin, Portarlington, needs to be built and Saplings Special School in Graiguecullen is dependent on the goodwill of strangers apparently. The N80 bypass in Mountmellick is long promised; the

Tánaiste saw it himself when he was there a year and a half ago. It is urgently needed from Fairgreen to Kilminchy roundabout. The N80 goes through a highly populated area and HGVs hit the rail bridge and are chugging along through the market square. The whole place is choked up. Three of the very large land banks zoned this week are on the path of the Portlaoise northern orbital route which is there since my time on the council and before that.

That needs to be constructed. There is a critical shortage of wastewater infrastructure in some of the towns and villages that have been earmarked: Borris-in-Ossory with 160 homes; Ballybrittas with 114 homes; Ballinakill with 58 homes; and Graiguecullen with 437. All of them need wastewater infrastructure upgrades or network connections. A primary care centre is needed in Portlaoise. That needs to be built. Laois County Council has provided whatever infrastructure and facilities it can with the limited resources it has. Any of the Ministers who have been down - including the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, who did not invite me when he was coming but came and sneaked in even though he was only about a quarter of a mile from me - will have seen what is being delivered in Laois. The chief executive officer of the council and the councillors are saying they have done their bit, will do more when they get the money and will come up with whatever money they can as well, but the funds have to be provided for those projects. Will the Tánaiste get the chequebook out and make sure that we get those pieces of infrastructure, including roads, wastewater facilities, schools, a primary care centre and sports facilities, that are needed in the county?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Stanley. Firstly can I say, because fair is fair, that Laois is a good performer when it comes to housing. I have my sheet here. There is nowhere to hide here, by the way. The data is there. It shows who is doing a good job and who is not doing a good job. Laois has actually done quite a good job in relation to dereliction. I think there were 13 derelict sites levied during the year 2024. Laois has performed pretty well when it comes to housing delivery. It has done very well on the housing delivery targets and in relation to zoning. I acknowledge that and I thank the county council for its work in relation to that.

I am told by my colleague and friend Deputy Aird that this week Laois did receive good news in relation to funding, I believe it is €10 million, for the new road in Portlaoise. I think it was successful in two projects in relation to the housing activation and infrastructure office as well. The Government is doing its part. One of the reasons we set up the housing activation office - Deputy Stanley does have a valid point in relation to this - is that infrastructure is a key enabler for housing, 100%. That is why this week we allocated more than €800 million in funding to projects right across the country. We intend to build on that. The Deputy might that remember call 1, which is the round we have just given out, was only open to local authorities to apply for funding. In the future I think we will look at going beyond local authorities to give opportunities for partnership with private industry and with developers as well.

The Deputy mentioned sports clubs. The sports capital funding will be opening very shortly and I expect clubs in the Deputy's own county and right across the country will benefit. The Governmental will receive an update on that this month. That is important too.

We have a lot of funding. The Deputy said to get the chequebook out. We have a lot of funding allocated in relation to infrastructure. We intend as a Government to spend €275 billion on infrastructure between now and 2035. One of the collective challenges that central government and local government will have is speeding up delivery. This is why getting the

Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas before the summer recess is a key enabler of delivering on some of those projects.

Schools are a real issue, 100%, and I know there are a lot of pressure points, particularly in high-demand population areas. There will be further allocations in relation to school funding from a capital point of view in the time ahead. The list that has been published is not the final word on the matter. There will be a need to do more and the medium-term fiscal plan the Government has published has unallocated capital that we will be able to return to again. I hope education can benefit from that.

I push back slightly when I hear this idea that the councils are willing to build a few more houses if we are willing to give them A, B or C. It is not that. It is not binary. There is a housing emergency and everybody has a responsibility to do everything they can to build homes so our young people can get out of the box rooms and into their own homes. It is not the case that they will do it, but they will only do it if they are given us this. They need to do it. They need to do their job. It is a national emergency and they should get on with it. However, they will find in partnership a Government willing to work to put in place that key infrastructure to make sure we do not just build homes but also build sustainable communities.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I have to say to the Tánaiste that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, the Minister, Deputy Browne, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, have all been in the constituency. It is kind of like an election year, but it is good to see them all down there. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, was the only one who did not tell me he was coming.

Yes, funding has been allocated and that is fair enough, but the roundabout the Tánaiste is talking about that one of those is earmarked for is nearly built. I passed it very early this morning on my way here. There are big projects. The Portlaoise northern orbital route, PNOR, and the N80 in Mountmellick are key. The Uisce Éireann scheme for small towns and villages needs to be delivered on. We need to see that happen. We cannot increase the population of the county by 25%, 26%, or 27% without putting in extra infrastructure, and that is on top of what is already zoned. I appeal to the Tánaiste to go back and look again at this.

On the cost of housing, I heard the debate the other night with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and Deputy Sheehan from the Labour Party. Back a number of years ago when Fine Gael and the Labour Party were in government, the Kenny report came out. Mr. Justice Kenny was not a member of the revolutionary Marxist party of Ireland or the Maoist Shining Path revolution.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Stanley to conclude.

Deputy Brian Stanley: He was a conservative man but he came up with a very practical solution regarding the cost of land.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: The cost of land is one of the things driving up the cost of housing. The Government needs to go back again and look at this.

The Tánaiste: I think my friends in the Labour Party are suggesting they were not in government then.

Deputy Ged Nash: That report came out in 1973, so neither of us were born then.

The Tánaiste: Yes. Neither Ged nor I were born so we cannot be held responsible for that one.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is good report though.

The Tánaiste: There are a couple of serious points there. This is the first time I have ever been in this House while somebody seems to be bemoaning so many Ministers coming to Laois. Deputy Stanley obviously has not met Deputy Willie Aird. It is easier to go to Laois and try to deliver. We intend to continue to visit. Deputy Stanley is right that there is no election for quite a number of years, be assured of that, but there is a hell of a lot of work to do. We intend to be out and about on the ground in communities, including the Deputy's good county of Laois, working with communities and trying to deliver. We are delivering. We are delivering a lot when it comes to infrastructure. There were two announcements of projects this week for Laois through the housing activation office. Every €3 we are going to spend on capital over the next number of years is going to be spent on housing or infrastructure to enable the delivery of housing. That is an important thing to say.

I want to acknowledge that there is good partnership. I get a bit spiky every now and again when there are different parts of the system that needs to do more. I think that is part of our job. In general there is good partnership between the Government, local government, approved housing bodies, the LDA, and bringing in Uisce Éireann and the ESB. Everybody has to work together if we are to rectify these issues.

I take the point that Deputy Stanley makes about water and the like. The change we have made to allow developer-led infrastructure in smaller communities will make a difference in County Laois, as will the rural planning guidelines, which I expect to go to Cabinet next week.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy David Maxwell: Will the Government consider amending the incremental tenant purchase scheme 2016 to allow houses acquired under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 to be made eligible for purchase under this scheme? I want to highlight today the unfairness for some tenants with the ongoing injustice within our local authority housing system. The incremental tenant purchase scheme was launched to give long-term social housing tenants a fair path towards owning their own home. It builds generational wealth, it stabilises neighbourhoods and it rewards hard-working families. Today, however, thousands of families around the country are being fundamentally locked out of this dream through no fault of their own. These are tenants living in Part V properties. Consider the reality on the

ground where there are two tenants who have both paid their rent reliably for over ten years, both have identical household incomes and both are upstanding members of the local community. One tenant lives in a standard council-built housing estate and is granted a 40% to 60% discount to purchase their home while the other tenant lives just down the road in a home acquired through a private developer's Part V obligation. This second tenant is handed an outright refusal.

This is an arbitrary roadblock. It penalises families simply based on the legal mechanism the council used to acquire the land, the bricks and mortar. While we all agree on the crucial importance of protecting social housing stock, we cannot build a fair system on a foundation of discrimination. Tenants in Part V homes do not want to destroy mixed-tenure communities; they want to permanently invest in them. They want to ensure their children have a permanent stake in the area that they can call home. It is now time for the Government to review these outdated guidelines. We must introduce a fairer model that protects the State's investment while ending the housing lottery for Part V residents.

I put it to the Tánaiste that this is not a theoretical issue. It is a very real and pressing concern for families across Cavan and Monaghan and around the country. Under the incremental tenant purchase scheme, houses acquired by local authorities are excluded from sale. Social housing tenants living in a Part V property cannot purchase their home through this scheme. The core issue is that many families entered these homes with the understanding that they would have an opportunity to purchase them. However, due to legislative changes introduced around 2016 that pathway has effectively been closed off on those Part V homes. These are not just houses; they are homes where people have raised families, invested their own money and built their lives. Many of these tenants are now in a position to secure a mortgage and wish to purchase their home. Due to their age, however, this opportunity will not remain open indefinitely.

Cavan and Monaghan county councils and other councils have a strong record in housing delivery. I believe there is scope for a practical and fair solution here. I am asking the Government and the Minister to consider allowing flexibility within the scheme, especially to enable local authorities to transfer Part V status in cases where tenants do not wish to purchase, thereby opening a pathway for those who do.

This is about fairness, recognising long-term tenants and enabling home ownership where it is both desired and achievable. The primary goal of the Part V is to build long-term, socially integrated and mixed-tenure communities. That is commendable but to deny a few families the chance to own their own homes that they may have lived in for up to 20 years needs to be addressed. Will the Tánaiste commit to reviewing this matter?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Maxwell for raising this issue on behalf of people in Cavan and Monaghan where he sees it as an issue on the ground, and it has been brought to his attention. The programme for Government and the Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, commit to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their home. The aim of the tenant incremental purchase scheme was to try to strike that balance but balance is always a subjective term that requires constant monitoring to ensure the balance is always right. That balance is between increasing the scope for those who are in receipt of long-term housing support to purchase their local authority home and doing it in a way that does not unduly diminish local authority housing stock.

As Deputy Maxwell reminded us, there is a difference at the moment where the scheme provides for the purchase by eligible tenants of council houses which are available for sale under the scheme, and the scheme is underpinned by the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 and the housing (sale of local authority houses) regulation of 2015. Those regulations provide for a number of specified classes of houses to be excluded from sale, including houses transferred to councils for the purpose of providing social housing under Part V, which is really the nub of the issue that Deputy Maxwell brought up. Some other classes of property, for example, houses specifically designed for older people, group Traveller housing schemes and houses provided to facilitate people with disability transferring from institutional care to community-based living are also excluded from the current scheme.

The provisions of Part V of the Planning and Development Act are, as Deputy Maxwell said, designed to enable the development of mixed-tenure sustainable communities, and to make sure that there is that mix and that the aim is not eroded over time. We all agree, and I know the Deputy said it too, that the continued development of mixed-tenure communities is important in terms of social integration and cohesion.

The Deputy's broader point about the need to review and engage on this is one that I, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, are happy to engage on as well because it is always important to keep these things under review. I know that the Deputy has some real and practical examples in his own constituency, and if he is happy to share them with me and the Ministers, we will certainly have an engagement in relation to them.

Deputy David Maxwell: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. As I said, this affects a number of families around the country. The people who have come to my office only want to have security in the knowledge that they can own their own home. A number did get a chance before 2016 but their financial circumstances at the time did not allow them to take up that offer to secure a home loan, so they had to decline it. After making a home in these houses, working hard, saving their money and building a track record in savings, some people can now apply and be successful with a home loan application for the house they have lived in for maybe up to the past 20 years but they are now being told, "Sorry, just keep renting it". This is not every Part V house. Not everyone wants to buy but for the families who do, can we look at the scheme?

With the announcement of €850 million under the housing activation fund - I thank our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for all his work on this over the past year - to unlock houses around the country, including up to 1,195 houses in Monaghan and 750 in Cavan, and other initiatives the Government is bringing forward to help increase the housing stock, if we increase the housing stock, will that help us to alleviate that problem?

The Tánaiste: That is a very fair way to put it. As housing supply begins to rise in Cavan, Monaghan and across the country, should we then go back and ask, "Hang on, do the balances we had in place at a time of more constrained supply merit being looked at again?". That is a logical thing to do.

I thank the Deputy for his words in relation to the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, who has been a real reformer with the Minister, Deputy Browne, in trying to find practical ways of increasing housing supply. The changes we have made in relation to Uisce

Éireann, allowing developer-led water infrastructure, and the rural planning guidelines that we are bringing to Cabinet next week are two measures that will have benefit across the country but they will have particular benefit in constituencies like the Deputy's in Cavan and Monaghan.

We are eager and happy to engage on this issue. It is that balance. We do believe, as I know the Deputy very much does, in mixed-tenure development. We need to make sure that we do not erode that stock or mix over time but, as supply begins to increase, we will certainly keep these matters under review and are happy to engage further on it.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The television licence is in big trouble, and it has had its day. Sales, as the Tánaiste knows, have collapsed. New figures show that fewer than 300,000 licences have been sold so far this year. When we consider that nearly 1 million licences were sold in 2022, we can see the scale of the problem. One-in-three households liable to pay has simply stopped paying the television licence. It is a staggering drop in the past four years, and the public are sick to their teeth of the raft of financial scandals at RTÉ, the constant waste of public money and that culture of entitlement that does not seem to have gone away.

People are voting with their feet. That is the reality. Sales are plummeting every year, and it presents a real problem for the funding of public media. It also presents the Government with a decision. It has to choose whether to chase hundreds of thousands of people through the courts for not paying their television licence or it can move to a modern, sustainable funding model though the Exchequer. It is time to face reality. The TV licence has to be scrapped. Will the Government scrap the television licence or is its intention to just pursue 300,000 or 400,000 through the courts?

The Tánaiste: It is not that crude at all. I thought that we were going through a Thursday where the Deputy was not going to call on me to abolish a tax or a charge or spend loads more money but I should have known that it is Thursday, and it happens every Thursday. The reality of the situation is that public service broadcasting matters. Public service broadcasting needs to be funded. I encourage the Deputy to support public service broadcasting. There have been a range of scandals and crises in RTÉ but there are also really good and decent people working in public service broadcasting. There are also really good people working in public service broadcasting beyond RTÉ. I think people in Ireland value public service broadcasting; I do. I have my television licence, and I am sure the Deputy has his.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is the Tánaiste going to do about it? Will he answer the question?

Deputy Jen Cummins: The summer provision programme has been very difficult this year. It used to not be difficult to implement but this year it has been particularly difficult. I have spoken with parents and principals who feel very disrespected. They have had to assume an extra burden this year, and the stress has really been really unacceptable. The issues include the short timeframe that the portal was opened. It was then reopened thanks to pressure from

Members, including the Tánaiste. They are also upset about the business case model they have to put forward, the reduction in staffing and that the parents who did not get a school place are now not getting to get a home-based provision.

Inclusive education has been an omnishambles this academic year. Has the Government got a handle on this, and will it be able to make sure that things are sorted out for the next academic year? Will the Government apologise to any child who does not have a summer provision this year because they are going to be at home when other children are having the time of their lives in the summer?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cummins for raising the issue, and I respect and accept the sincerity in which she does so. The first thing I suggest is that in general we should be having earlier engagements and conversations in this House, in committees and, of course, with the school communities. I take that point. I suggest that perhaps at an earlier time post this summer, we have the conversation about next summer because there are always learnings. I take that point.

I am going to balance that by saying that since 2019, the summer programme has gone from strength to strength. We have more than 1,800 schools and 71,000 children participating in the programme. That compares to 545 schools and 23,000 children in 2020, so there is an increase of 210% in child participation as well. The point I am making is that there is growing demand. I thank the people who will be involved in providing the programmes across the country this year. I am very happy, and I know the Minister will be, to have a detailed discussion about any learnings from this in terms of the future.

Deputy Ged Nash: Some 14 step-down beds are to be removed from the Cottage Hospital in Drogheda. This will leave Ireland's largest town with no transitional care beds whatsoever. On Tuesday, up to 30 staff at the Cottage Hospital were told that their jobs were being unilaterally moved to the Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. This move is being justified by the HSE on the basis that there will be a net gain of step-down beds in Louth and Meath by the end of 2026 but I know for a fact that there are no plans at this point to staff those additional beds in a new unit in Ardee. What is actually happening is that the service in the Cottage Hospital is being gutted. Staff are being moved to currently unstaffed beds in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital because management there are simply not allowed to recruit the staff that they can prove they need to staff those new beds.

Does the Tánaiste agree with this robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul strategy? It is unacceptable.

The Tánaiste: No, I do not. I thank Deputy Nash for raising this issue. I accept the importance of it. I will follow up on the matter with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and the HSE and will ask that they engage with Deputy Nash today on it in the context of seeing what more can be done. I take the point that it is an expansion of capacity that we need. Let me engage further on this with the Deputy today.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The transport committee has been discussing the topic of road safety for the past six months. We have heard detailed and often very upsetting evidence from a range of organisations, from cycling groups all the way through to the Road Haulage

Association, and the one point that unites them all is that they all do not have confidence in the Road Safety Authority, RSA. The Tánaiste will recall that in 2024 a radical reform of the RSA was proposed. This would have split it up and allowed the authority to focus on the central issue of saving lives. In December of last year, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, scrapped that reform plan. The Minister of State attended the transport committee yesterday. He doubled down on scrapping the reform plan and said that he would prefer reform from within. Eighteen months into the lifetime of this Government, we have still no idea of what those reforms actually are. A total of 190 people died on our roads last year and 79 have died to date this year. Does the Tánaiste have confidence in the RSA or does he agree with the organisations and families of victims that want to see real reform of this organisation?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Gorman for raising this issue. I acknowledge the very good work that has been done by the Oireachtas committee, which is chaired by my colleague Deputy Michael Murphy, who continually keeps me apprised of this work. I very much look forward to the report of the committee. My message to everybody on the committee is that we should not rule anything out in relation to steps that may be needed. I approach this issue with humility. In the context of what we are doing in relation to road safety, I can only say that we need to do more. I am not satisfied that the current structures are delivering the outcome we need, but I also want to hear from the committee and to see if there can be a cross-party consensus as to what the next steps should be. I have heard different ideas from different victims' groups, including the idea of a road safety commissioner and the like. There is some logic in that. I also think of where the Road Safety Authority is today versus where it was in the past. We think of Gay Byrne and all of that era.

I have an open mind on this. I will engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, but, from my perspective, the next important development is the report on road safety, which I think we expect relatively shortly from the Oireachtas committee.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Action 1.7 of the LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021 contains a commitment to taking into account LGBTI+ needs in public libraries and compiling and updating a reading list under the Healthy Ireland at Your Library initiative. That includes reading materials recommended for children as young as 12. Will the Tánaiste indicate who exactly reviews the reading list and the age-appropriateness of the material on it before it goes to libraries, which are serving children as young as 12? What Minister, Department or agency signs off on the list? What mechanisms are available to allow parents who find explicit sexual content on the shelves marked for 12-year-olds to have that material reviewed or removed? As the Tánaiste is aware, Children's Books Ireland has already had to pull at least one title from its Pride reading guide after concerns were raised, yet the book remains on library shelves and is still linked to the HSE's parental materials. Does the Tánaiste agree that parents deserve an answer as to who is responsible and what mechanism is available to them?

The Tánaiste: I truthfully do not know the answer, so I will not pretend I do. However, I will endeavour to find information and ask the relevant Minister to respond to the Deputy. All information and books should always be age appropriate. I think that is something we all

believe is important in both our libraries and education system. I will ask the Minister of State with responsibility for our libraries, Deputy Buttimer, and the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to come back to Deputy O'Flynn directly.

Deputy John Connolly: I ask that the Government offer some guidance to local authorities on providing access to our bathing waters for people with limited mobility or wheelchair users. The bathing season commenced on 1 June. That term is somewhat archaic. I think we need to look at it. Many people cannot access the waters, and there seems to be some divergence among local authorities as to how they address this situation. I understand that Mayo County Council is very proactive in the area. Unfortunately, however, despite having the apparatus to do so and despite there being two blue-flag beaches in Galway city, people with limited mobility or wheelchair users cannot access our bathing waters. There is a young family in my community. Their daughter, Ruby, a lovely child, is a wheelchair user and she has a strong desire to get to the bathing waters with her family when the weather is good, something I have the good fortune to be able to take for granted for my children. I ask that the Government offer some direction to local authorities as to how they can address this.

The Tánaiste: That is a really good idea. I think of my local beach in Greystones, where tracks were put in place relatively recently that allow people to walk, push buggies, use wheelchairs, etc. This has been transformational in terms of improving accessibility to the beach. The Deputy's point about accessing bathing water in and of itself is an important one. We are back to this issue again. We do not have to split the atom here. If some counties are doing it well and others are not, we need to share that information. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will certainly ask that this happens. I am sitting beside the Minister of State with responsibility for local government. I will ask that we look at how we would convey best practice from some local authorities to others. We will come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Peter Roche: As the Tánaiste is aware, this is Men's Health Week. Government policy acknowledges or recognises that improving men's health has clear benefits for families, partners and children right across society. A key part of that is the experience of early parenthood. I refer to paternity leave in particular in this regard. A report this week titled Extra Time with Dad shows that Ireland is falling way behind. We provide just two weeks' paternity leave. That is the EU minimum and it ranks near the bottom in OECD terms of leave for partners. In practice, many dads face a 75% drop in income while on leave. Some seven in ten of them rely on top-ups from their employers, with a similar proportion experiencing financial strain. Does the Government acknowledge and see the need to address that deficit?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche for raising this important matter. Of course, we all want to make sure that new parents, mums and dads, are able to spend time with their babies. There are currently two weeks of paternity leave available in Ireland. It is also important to say there are also nine weeks of parent's leave and benefit available to both parents. Parent's benefit is currently paid at a rate of €299 per week. Let us be truthful here: the take-up of parent's leave is much lower among men than it is among women. Again, we should try to unpack this because I think some of the issues the Deputy talks about may well be correct: young families, mortgages to pay, financial commitments and people trying to balance a range of issues and bills that a household will face. There is a commitment in the programme for

Government to introduce pay-related parent's benefit whereby your payment would be linked to your salary, similar to what we have done in relation to pay-related jobseeker's benefit. That is a good model. People who have worked hard and paid into the system then are able to get something back from that system at a time when they might need it as well. It is a commitment I am keen to see progressed, and I will ask that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, updates Deputy Roche on it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There is a huge issue with scramblers in my constituency. Following the new laws that came in earlier this year in the aftermath of the tragic death of 16-year-old Grace Lynch, communities were hoping that this would see a reduction in the use of scramblers. However, I have had to phone the Garda numerous times in the intervening period. On Monday night last, I had to phone the Garda three times because of scramblers being driven in a dangerous manner in communities right across the northside, including on St. Mary's Road, Sprigg's Road and Kilmore Road. In Fairfield, there is a beautiful park that Cork City Council put in, a walk-around for people, but the scramblers are using it like a track. I met with people there two weeks ago. They said that they tried to talk to the lads on the scramblers to tell them that it is dangerous but that all they are getting is abuse. We have a serious issue now. Local gardaí tell me they do not have the resources. I am asking the Tánaiste for two things. First, will the Government give the Garda the resources to tackle this and to stop it and to tackle these scramblers? Second, will it give local authorities funding to put in tracks or trails? Some people do not want to play sport. They want to be in the arts or they want to drive cars or bikes. They have to be given an outlet, and right now there is nowhere for them to go. What must happen immediately is that the use of scramblers must be stopped, because I fear there could be another tragedy.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Gould for raising this issue. I met with Grace Lynch's parents last week and was really struck not only their advocacy but also - I do not wish to speak for them - by the very clear views they have on what more that can and should be done in this space.

1 o'clock

I am very happy that we would engage with Deputy Gould on this as well. There is definitely an issue. I had a good conversation with the Minister for justice and the Minister for Transport on it this week. There is a legitimate issue around supporting the Garda, including potentially in relation to their driving training, resourcing and the likes. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, he is very much committed to that. I also think there is a real issue around ownership and how we track and trace it. Other countries, quite frankly, have done that better than we have so far. I have mixed views - "mixed views" might be the wrong phrase - on the facility piece because from some of what I hear back, I am not sure if some of these people are looking for somewhere to go and do this. I think, and the Deputy would see it in his own constituency, there is sometimes an element of intimidation and the likes. I will reflect more on that point. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will ask that the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien and O'Callaghan, come back to him with an outline of the next steps we intend to take.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Thank you.

Deputy Michael Collins: In light of the ongoing and deepening crisis in the fishing sector and the severe impact it continues to have on coastal and inland communities, can the Minister provide an update on the fishing task force established by the Government earlier in 2026 to examine the future sustainability and viability of the sector? Can he confirm the task force has met in accordance with its intended schedule, the number of meetings that have taken place, and the current status of its work? When can fisherman and affected communities expect concrete measures arising from the process? Given the urgency on the ground, will he also clarify what interim supports or actions are being advanced pending the task force's final report?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Collins for raising this important issue. The Food Vision seafood sector group was launched on 16 February by me and my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. The group was established in a response to the significantly reduced fishing opportunities for 2026 and will operate under the auspices of the Food Vision 2030 group, through which we have had a series of Food Vision subgroups to look at and tackle key areas. It is considering the challenges facing all three components of the Irish seafood sector, from the catch fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing. The group's membership is comprised of representatives from across the seafood industry. Mr. Michael Berkery, the former general secretary of the IFA, has been appointed as the independent chairperson for this group.

In answer to the Deputy's direct question, he was tasked with drafting a chairman's report by June of this year. There has been a series of meetings since 16 February, the meeting of the task force group that I attended in Howth. The deadline for receipt of seafood industry submissions was 2 March. On 10 and 11 March, there were five sector-specific meetings held in the Department's Backweston campus. Representatives from across the seafood industry have attended and have had a series of meetings. That work has been ongoing. I commend everyone on their very strong commitment to this and look forward to receiving the chairman's report in the near future.

Deputy Emer Currie: When Coolmine Community School opened in 1974, it was one of Ireland's first community schools and a trail-blazer for education. It had an enviable mix of academic achievements, extracurricular activities and social activity. For many in Dublin West, it represented a modern community with a strong sense of identity and pride. Many of the parents of students attending today are former students who remember that pride. More than 50 years later, however, the building remains largely unchanged. While Blanchardstown has grown into one of Ireland's largest and most dynamic communities, the spaces where our students learn have been left behind. The young people of today deserve facilities that are as ambitious as they are, and that match the quality of education they are getting at Coolmine. Very recently the school's patron and the board of management submitted an application for a new school building under the major capital works programme. I have looked at the figures. Between 2015 and 2023, over seven years, €750,000 was put into emergency works. More has gone in since I was elected. Can the Tánaiste encourage the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to visit the school, which I am doing, and give its development the priority it really deserves?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Currie for raising this project. She has worked with Coolmine Community School and the board of management to get an application for a new building into the Department, which was submitted a couple of weeks ago. I can confirm that the Department received the application from Coolmine Community School on 5 May for that large-scale capital funding to provide a new school building. The Department recently already agreed a brief for the provision of two special education classrooms as well, which will be delivered as quickly as possible through modern methods of construction. The application that is submitted now will go through its detailed appraisal and there will be good engagement with the school. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to visit the school with her in the near future.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The results of a survey of parents in Kildare have been published, the majority of whom do not have access to childcare in September. What those results mean is that a number of parents are not able to go back to work. They are having to reduce their hours or give up their jobs because they simply cannot access a fairly basic service in a very fast-growing county. We are seeing significant issues in Kildare regarding capacity and conditions for the workforce. While we still seem to be no closer to that €200 per month commitment, I really welcome the State-led pilot. It has the potential to do something really positive but I think we would all agree that is in the medium to long term. What can I say to these parents in Naas, Kilcock, Maynooth and Celbridge who really have no option but to give up their job because they cannot access this childcare service?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. On foot of his raising it, I will specifically ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to engage with him on the particular and immediate issue he is highlighting in Kildare. I take that point. When I talk about what we are going to do more broadly, he is highlighting an issue that is a factor in the here and now for people. We are significantly increasing our investment to childcare, core funding and the employment agreements for people working in childcare. We are fully committed to that €200 per child, per month in the lifetime of the Government. That is a commitment in the lifetime of the programme for Government. Myself, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Taoiseach have all said we want to see progress made on that over the course of the next four budgets. Specifically in the here and now, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The FAI released a statement on 12 June justifying playing Israel behind closed doors and outside Ireland. It spoke of consultation with stakeholders, in particular the Palestinian Football Association which the statement strongly implied backed the FAI's position. Today, the Palestinian Football Association has had to release a statement saying it did not endorse or support the decision to proceed with the games: "[O]ur position regarding Israeli football remains unchanged and unequivocal." It stated that: "[T]he PFA categorically rejects any attempt to promote or impose matches with an occupying power that systematically targets Palestinian athletes and sports infrastructure."

Did the FAI not deceive the people of Ireland and the global media with this claim? Did it not shamefully twist the words of the most hard-pressed and vulnerable sports association? Will the Tánaiste call on the FAI to come in front of an Oireachtas committee to explain this

and the entire venture? I refer also to the sports Ministers who are backing these immoral games and shameful decision.

The Tánaiste: Of course, the Ministers are not doing that at all. Let us be clear. This is a decision the FAI has to take. If we start making decisions on the floor of the Dáil in relation to running Irish soccer, God knows where we will end up. The reality is there are very clear rules that UEFA and FIFA have. Those rules specifically exclude and preclude parliaments from making decisions in relation to the governing authorities. The FAI has gone through a process, I think it has gone through a robust process. It has made a decision. The last thing any one of us would want to do is take a decision that ends up benefiting the Israeli football team and disadvantaging the Irish soccer team. I hear about what the players have had to say about not wanting pressure in relation to them.

I have not seen that statement from the Palestinian Football Association. I take in good faith what the Deputy said. My own note tells me that the Palestinian Football Association stated: "The Palestinian Football Association expresses its appreciation for the principled positions taken by the Football Association of Ireland in support of the rights of the Palestinian people and Palestinian athletes."

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Today's statement was contradicting the way the FAI used that.

The Tánaiste: In fairness, that statement says that the Palestinian Football Association expresses its appreciation. There should always be engagement between governing bodies that the taxpayer funds.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Parents in Cork could be spending €800 to €900 a month for childcare. That is if there is only one child they need childcare for. It could be well over €1,000, or €1,500 if they have two children. It is absolutely breaking families, and that is if they can find childcare facilities at all. In large parts of my constituency, in places like Douglas and Carrigaline, it is effectively impossible to find a place. The Tánaiste went to the people in the last election and talked about €200 a month. The new maximum fee cap of €183.70 a week is a reduction but is still closer to €200 a week. We are a very considerable distance from €200 a month.

This is absolutely breaking families. The Tánaiste and his party like to talk about the squeezed middle. Any parent who needs childcare is definitely in the squeezed middle. There is no doubt about that. We have not seen any progress in the last budget. We need to see progress in this budget for families who are absolutely broken by childcare costs.

The Tánaiste: We definitely needed to see more progress and the Minister, Deputy Foley, is ambitious about making that progress. Under the new maximum fee caps, we have seen the highest possible upfront cost for a typical full-day place of 45 hours per week drop. The Deputy is correct that that is still too high. However, the cost has dropped from €198 per week to €183.70 per week. The commitment is very clear. It is not just my commitment; it is a commitment every political party in the House gave. The parties in government and Opposition parties agreed that the direction of travel is to get to €200 per child per month in the lifetime of this Oireachtas. That commitment is in the programme for Government. It is a commitment

every member of the Government has signed up to. I agree with the Deputy that we need to make more progress in the budget. I, along with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Foley, have all said that is our intention.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: When will the long overdue emergency funding for rural roads in Wicklow and Wexford be delivered? The Tánaiste may have driven on some in the south-west of Wicklow. It is absolutely disgraceful that we are now in June, in the middle of a dry period, when it is perfect to do works. We have waited since November, when Storm Claudia struck. Wicklow County Council sought between €15 million and €20 million and Wexford sought a similar amount. These counties have historically had the worst rural roads in Ireland. I have been driving on them all of my life. In Wexford, €194 million is needed to bring the roads up to what is classed as an acceptable standard. It is a perfect time to do the work. I have repeatedly requested funding since November, and for the past 12 years. It is absolutely shocking that those of us who live in rural Ireland and drive on small country roads have to have our cars wrecked and are unable to drive on safe roads. When will the funding be delivered?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. As he knows, I know the roads in Wicklow and Wexford well. He is correct that like many counties in the country they saw a significant impact from that storm. Work has been underway. I spoke to Wicklow County Council about submitting documentation to the Government, which I am sure also applies to Wexford. That has happened, in fairness. I would like to see the process come to a conclusion very quickly. The Deputy is correct that there is a window when the weather is relatively better than it often is. It is a concern for Deputies across the House. I will follow up with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and come back to the Deputy with a timeline.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish to raise the significant issue of back-to-school costs. It is my understanding that children who are entitled to school-based July provision will have to pay upwards of €120 for extracurricular activities during that period. I also wish to raise a significant issue in regard to schools requiring children to get laptops, tablets or ICT equipment for the coming academic year. It is my understanding that the Minister, Deputy Naughton, has written to all of the relevant schools in regard to this, but schools are still requiring them. A parent has contacted me. She is a carer for her husband and does not receive carer's allowance due to the means coming into the house and is not entitled to any exceptional needs payment. Anybody who applies for an exceptional needs payment to pay for ICT equipment finds the payment does not cover that. Will the Government extend the exceptional needs payment to cover ICT equipment for schools? Will it also look into the payment of upwards of €120 for those availing of school-based July provision for extra curricular activities?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this issue, which is quite a serious one. The summer programme is fully funded by the Department of Education and Youth and schools are supposed to run the programme within the budget provided by the Department. I am not unfairly having a go. Of course small costs above and beyond might arise and a decision may be made to do something outside the programme. I get that somewhat. The level of cost the Deputy is highlighting is completely at odds with the purpose of the programme, which is taxpayer funded as part of the education system and open to all who qualify for it. I ask that

the Deputy pass on the information to the Minister for Education and Youth who will examine it. The Deputy's second point is also correct. There is cross-party consensus on the idea of free school books. What we do not want to see is that free school books are now free school books being replaced with everything going onto a tablet, laptop or the likes. The Minister has written schools about this. I ask that she further engage with the Deputy on this on foot of him raising the issue. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Calleary, about the exceptional needs payment and he will come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I wish to raise the ongoing and very serious issue of excessive waiting times in the accident and emergency department in Cavan General Hospital. As the Tánaiste is aware, residents of County Monaghan do not have access to an accident and emergency department in their county. Instead, they have to travel to Cavan hospital to receive emergency care. This places significant and unstable pressure on services. I continue to receive deeply concerning reports from constituents who are waiting for up to 24 hours before being seen by a nurse or doctor. The situation is simply not acceptable. Today, I urge the Tánaiste to consider the case for restoring a full accident and emergency service at Monaghan hospital. Doing so would significantly alleviate the pressure on Cavan hospital and ensure that the people of Monaghan, a county with a growing population of over 65,000, have timely and safe access to emergency care.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Bennett. While we do not have plans to open new emergency departments, we do have plans to continue to drive investment into hospitals at levels 2 and 3, including Monaghan hospital. I remember visiting it a number of years ago. It is a very good hospital and it is ambitious about doing more. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue, I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to her on Cavan emergency department wait times and any further plans in regard to Monaghan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We all know the great work done in our maternity wards across the country. I would like to thank all of the doctors, nurses, midwives and consultants who provide care for women across the country. My wife gave birth to our three children in the maternity ward in CUH and received the best of care. It has come to my attention that for some reason one of the State's four tertiary maternity hospitals serving the south of Ireland, CUH, does not have a dedicated consultant in maternal medicine to manage complex medical conditions in pregnancy. Is there a plan for funding and recruitment to establish such a service or post? Can the Tánaiste bring this matter to the attention of the Minister for Health and HSE?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will bring it to the attention of the Minister for Health and ask that she engage with the Deputy directly on the women and infants health programme and the HSE on the need for that consultant post for complex conditions during pregnancy.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I also want to raise summer provision, something I raised a number of weeks ago. I welcome that the application process reopened and thank the Tánaiste for that. I want to raise concerns brought to my attention by schools in respect of delays with approvals and information from the Department regarding staffing requirements, in particular for schools which are seeking additional staffing requirements to deal with children with higher

needs. There is a total lack of certainty. These schools are under intense pressure as they try to prepare for the summer programme in the coming weeks. I ask the Minister to take the matter up with the Department as a matter of urgency. There are further delays in terms of approvals for home-based provision. Many parents across the country are in the dark as to what approvals they will get. As the Tánaiste knows, teachers and SNAs need to be sourced for home-based provision. Parents are in a very difficult position. I ask the Tánaiste to please take this matter back to the Department and ask him to inject some urgency into this and get information back to parents and schools.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this issue. It is not the first time he has raised it. He raised the application process window on a previous occasion and I was pleased that we were in a position to reopen it. I will now speak with Ministers Naughton and Moynihan on clarity and staff requirements for schools, in particular the issue the Deputy highlighted around home-based provision and the need for clarity for parents. I am conscious it is a very tight window. As I said earlier, and I say sincerely, once we get through the summer we should have broader engagement on how we can learn lessons. The Minister and the Government are very committed to the programme. We have seen a huge increase in the number of people using it and the number of schools availing of it, which is all great, but there are timeline issues and clarity could perhaps ease the stress and anxiety for people in future years.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.59 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.19 p.m. and resumed at 1.59 p.m.

2 o'clock

Rare Diseases: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I begin not with policy, but with people. I acknowledge with sincerity and respect the people across Ireland who are living with a rare disease and the parents, partners, children, siblings, carers, families and friends who walk that journey with them every single day. The Government is committed to improving the lives of people living with rare diseases. That means working to support earlier diagnosis, better co-ordinated care, appropriate access to treatment and stronger patient partnership. I acknowledge the work of Members of both Houses, including Deputies Lahart and Pádraig O'Sullivan and Senator Costello, in continuing to raise awareness of rare diseases and the experience of patients and families.

We know that many rare conditions are complex, lifelong and, in some cases, life limiting. We also know that families can face real challenges in accessing diagnoses, services, medicines, technologies and supports in a timely and co-ordinated way. That is why the programme for Government includes commitments to publish and fund a new national rare diseases strategy, improve access to orphan medicines and examine new approaches to earlier reimbursement of certain treatments, including an early access scheme for rare diseases.

Last August, we published the National Rare Disease Strategy 2025-2030, which gives Ireland a clear national framework for improving diagnosis, treatment and support for people

living with rare diseases. At its heart, the strategy is about improving quality of life, supporting fairer access to healthcare and making sure that innovation in research and treatment translates into real benefits for patients and families. It responds to a reality that many families know all too well. While each rare disease may affect a small number of people, rare diseases together represent a significant public health challenge. An estimated 300,000 people in Ireland are living with a rare disease, and the impact on individuals, families, health services and wider society can be substantial and complex.

To ensure the strategy moves from words to action, a three-year strategic implementation plan is being finalised. Its purpose is to turn the strategy's recommendations into clear actions, timelines and governance arrangements in order that progress can be planned, tracked and delivered in a way people can see and feel. The first phase of implementation will focus on priority actions across several important work streams, including research and innovation, international co-operation, European reference networks, data and registries, education and public information, and screening, diagnosis and access. Across all of that work, three cross-cutting themes will remain central, namely, governance and accountability, implementation and monitoring, and patient partnership. The latter is highly important and even more so when it comes to the nuances of people's experience of rare disease.

In every discussion about rare diseases in this House, people reference the real lives of the children, young people, adults and families in their areas who carry a weight that is often unseen. Families may spend years searching for answers, moving from appointment to appointment and telling their story again and again, hoping somebody will join the dots for them. For many people, living with a rare disease is defined not only by a diagnosis, but by uncertainty, waiting and having to navigate a system that was never designed for something so complex. That is why it is so important that we are discussing rare diseases here today. I thank those who called for the debate, including Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, who is in the Chair. It is important that we lend not just our voice, but also our commitment to action.

Collectively, rare diseases are not rare at all. There are more than 8,000 different rare diseases, with approximately 300,000 people in Ireland and 30 million people across Europe living with such diseases. That is one in every 17 people. It is not a marginal issue. In fact, it touches every community, every county and every constituency represented in this House. One of the strongest messages I hear, and I know Deputies hear it too, is about the importance of listening to patients. People living with rare diseases want their experiences to shape the services on which they rely. They want to be treated as partners whose expertise is trusted. The national rare disease strategy makes clear that people living with a rare disease must be treated not as passive recipients of care, but as equal partners in shaping policy and services. That is fundamental to better decision making, better design and better outcomes. It is why patient and public involvement must run through every aspect of our response, from policy formulation and service design to research, clinical trials, awareness and education. If we are serious about reform, we must be serious about listening and about how we listen.

A point I hear clearly from patients, families and advocates relates not only to access to care, but to how that care is experienced. For many people living with rare diseases, care can still feel fragmented, with different appointments, different specialists, different locations and different parts of the system that do not always connect as they should. That is even more significant when it comes to parents bringing their children to different appointments in the

paediatric hospital system. That process could be much better co-ordinated from the perspective of the child and the family, particularly those families that have to travel for appointments, which often will be many times in a single month. When that disconnect happens, the burden falls on individuals and their whole families as they try to hold everything together. The national rare disease strategy is very clear on that point. It calls for equitable, inclusive and integrated health and social care, including access to wrap-around supports, better transitions between child and adult services and improved care co-ordination. It acknowledges the particular burden created when people and families are left to co-ordinate complex care themselves across multiple specialties and settings.

A total of 13 care co-ordinators have been provided to support patients in navigating the health service. We are also continuing to develop integrated rare disease care pathways, several of which have already been developed and approved. The HSE's national rare diseases office hosted a symposium in May focused on improving diagnostic pathways, care pathways and supports. It brought together patients, policymakers and healthcare professionals. Two further events are planned later this year. That engagement is important. Care pathways are not an abstract policy tool. For people living with rare diseases, they mean the difference between joined-up care and fragmentation; between clarity and confusion; and between confidence and crisis.

We must be honest in acknowledging that accessing integrated, organised and well-co-ordinated care remains one of the major pressures felt by families, as they have articulated clearly. When community, disability, primary care and acute services do not align as they should, the burden falls back on the individual and the family. That is not fair. Awareness and education among healthcare professionals are greatly improving and the implementation plan addresses those issues directly. For far too many families, however, their experience is still one of navigating complexity alone.

When I launched the national rare diseases strategy last August, a phrase that really stuck with me, which I understand captures the experience of many families, is "diagnostic odyssey". It refers to the long, painful journey to find out what is wrong, which often leads to years of uncertainty in which symptoms progress but answers do not come. The strategy addresses this directly, acknowledging that many individuals wait far too long for an accurate diagnosis and that this delay can have lasting consequences. This situation is not unique to Ireland. The World Health Organization has highlighted that many people across the world never receive a timely or adequate diagnosis. It has emphasised that improving early diagnosis must be a priority. When diagnosis is delayed, everything else is delayed, including access to treatment, support and understanding. That is why early diagnosis is so crucial. It helps to bring certainty and, in some cases, it can change the course of a condition entirely.

That is why the continued expansion of newborn screening is such an important step forward. I acknowledge the presence in the Chamber of the deputy chief medical officer, Professor Ellen Crushell, who works in paediatric care and is working alongside me to try to bring in as many conditions as possible. We have seen progress this year with the introduction in April of screening for rare conditions such as severe combined immunodeficiency, SCID, and spinal muscular atrophy, SMA, which brought the total number of conditions screened for under the newborn bloodspot screening programme to 11. This can allow intervention to begin earlier, when it matters most, thereby slowing or preventing progression in some cases.

This is just a beginning and not the end. Every step we take toward earlier diagnosis is a step towards a fairer system in which families do not have to fight so hard simply to be understood. The national screening advisory committee, NSAC, and its dedicated newborn screening subgroup continue to work to review and consider further expansions of the newborn screening programme. I have given a political direction that it is an absolute priority to work as quickly and efficiently as possible to bring in as many conditions as we can as quickly as we can, recognising the enormous impact it can have on families to be able to find out what the situation is with their child much sooner than might otherwise be the case.

The national strategy for accelerating genetic and genomic medicine in Ireland was launched in December 2022. It sets out a clear vision for a modern, national genetics and genomics service that is equitable, timely and centred on patients and their families. It recognises that advances in genomics are transforming how we understand disease, particularly rare disease, and commits to building a system where people can access the right test at the right time informed by clinical need. In practical terms, that means developing national infrastructure, strengthening laboratory capacity, supporting clinical workforce expertise and ensuring genetic and genomic services are integrated into everyday care in order that earlier diagnosis becomes the norm, not the exception.

The HSE's national genetics and genomics office was established in 2023 to implement that strategy and to co-ordinate a national approach to genetics and genomics, ensuring patient and public involvement and partnerships, building the workforce for the future, enhancing clinical services, and strengthening infrastructure. We are now beginning to see that vision take concrete form. The national genomic test directory, launched at the end of 2024, is a significant step forward in delivering a more consistent and equitable approach to testing across the country. It was developed by the HSE's national genetics and genomics office and the directory sets out clearly which genetic tests should be used for specific clinical indications, who should receive them, and how they are to be delivered. It is designed to ensure that patients receive the most appropriate test, in a timely way, and in the correct setting, reducing variation, avoiding duplication and supporting better clinical decision-making. The test directory's initial focus was specifically in the area of rare and inherited diseases, and now it is looking to expand the test to other specialties.

The test directory operates alongside the national genomic processing service, which was launched earlier this year. This is a centralised pre- and post-analytical service that manages sample processing and routing to quality assessed laboratories for genomic testing, as well as the return of associated reports, which then streamlines and accelerates the flow of samples and results. For families who have too often experienced delay and uncertainty, this represents an important step towards a more streamlined, predictable, and responsive diagnostic system, one that can shorten the diagnostic journey and bring clarity sooner in the lives of those who need it. We will continue to strive for timely diagnosis through improved care pathways and build our capacity in genetics and genomics.

I want to speak also about hope because hope is often what sustains families through the hardest moments. For people living with rare diseases, that hope is often tied to treatment, particularly in relation to orphan medicines. These are often newly developed, high-tech and high-cost treatments, with limited or emerging evidence. These are treatments that give people hope where it might not otherwise be found. Specific treatments have only been developed for

a small proportion of rare diseases, which makes every advance significant. The national rare disease strategy recognises this reality. It clearly states that orphan medicines can offer hope where previously little existed, and it aligns with the programme for Government commitment to review options for earlier reimbursement of orphan medicinal products and to examine, which we are doing, early access schemes for rare diseases.

The Government recognises the importance of access to innovative medicines for patients in Ireland, especially for patients diagnosed with rare diseases. Annual public expenditure on medicines is now approaching €4 billion, which is an extraordinarily sizeable sum and a very significant investment by the State. Recent budgets have provided dedicated funding for new medicines, supporting the HSE in approving reimbursement for a substantial number of new medicines, including many medicines for rare diseases.

The recent framework agreements on the supply and pricing of medicines, finalised in March 2026, are designed to enable faster access to new innovative medicines, to strengthen security of supply, and to support a structured process towards a 180-day timeline for reimbursement decisions by quarter 1 of 2029. I want to thank all of the State representatives and pharmaceutical sector representatives who concluded this agreement because it is for the benefit of all of us that we have this measure of certainty for the next four years, particularly at a time of very difficult and changing geopolitical external circumstances.

Crucially, the State and the pharmaceutical sector also agreed to develop a piloted, early access programme for rare diseases, in line with the programme for Government commitment. That matters hugely. For families waiting for access, timelines are not abstract. They are measured not in months but in moments that matter to each person and each family. I am conscious that access to orphan medicines is complex. It necessarily involves questions of evidence because we are a country that is still determined to focus on science and scientific outcomes and evidence. It necessarily involves questions of evidence. It necessarily involves budget implications, sustainability and fairness across the health service. Those are practically impossible conditions to ask anybody to make decisions in and yet the people in our national centre for pharmacoeconomics are tasked with making exactly those decisions. I want to thank them for their work in making such complex and difficult decisions.

We are trying to improve the system responsibly, transparently and in a way that better serves patients. That is why I have now approved a comprehensive, end-to-end review of the entire medicines approval and reimbursement services, covering every stage, from initial assessment through to final patient access. That has now progressed to tender stage, with an anticipated completion timeframe of six to nine months, once the contract is awarded. The aim of the work is clear. It is to identify where delays in our processes arise, where our processes can be streamlined and how we can ensure that decisions are made as efficiently and transparently as possible, while maintaining the necessary rigorous clinical and value assessments. I want to be clear that it is up to us to be disciplined in our processes but it is also the responsibility of the pharmaceutical companies that have developed these medicines to make the applications to us in a timely and complete way so that people know that we are able to assess them. That is not always the case. Sometimes the fault is on our side and sometimes it is on theirs. What we are trying to do is make sure that our processes are as robust and tight as possible in every way to make sure we are discharging our obligation and responsibility to

get the medicines we can get that are evidence based and that we can sustain for people who need them.

The framework agreement we reached, the early access, the commitment to the move towards a 180-day reimbursement timeline and partnership and urgency from all parties can translate into faster, fairer access to orphan medicines for those who need them most. This is exceptionally important to me my Department and I know to every person in this House.

I am very conscious of the advocacy of individuals and families whose lives have been affected by rare diseases. Some of those have been very topical and in the news because of European Medicine Agency, EMA, approval for certain drugs. Many of those drugs are not available across Europe at the moment. It is very much a country-by-country experience at the moment. I am conscious, in particular, of those people whose lives are affected Friedreich's ataxia, a rare genetic neurological condition. I know that many Deputies may raise access to treatment for this condition today, and I want to respond carefully and respectfully. I met many of the families and many of the people suffering from Friedreich's ataxia, privately and in the audiovisual room briefing. I was very glad to have the opportunity to meet those patients, as I have had the opportunity to meet other patients.

Skyclarys has been authorised at European level for Friedreich's ataxia. In Ireland, as with other medicines, any decision on reimbursement must follow the statutory pricing and reimbursement process I have just described. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics carried out a rapid review and recommended a full health-technology assessment to consider the clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the medicine. That application remains under active consideration by the HSE. The discussions and the information received and the timing is all of real interest - of course, it is - to all of the patients and their families. Again, I would reference my earlier comments about the need for both parties to provide all the relevant information at an early stage. The application remains under active consideration and I cannot discuss commercial negotiations, which are confidential to the State and would prejudice all us were I to do so. Please forgive me that I am not able to go further in my remarks than this.

I want to emphasise that, as Minister for Health, I do not necessarily have a role in pricing and reimbursement decisions. We have created our political institutions to be robust and independent. We have given protection to scientists making these decisions in our collective interest. We have increased access to medicines because of the processes that we have put our confidence in. That will generate many good days and it may also generate difficult days but we have to continue to believe in a system that is based on science and that has served us well so far. The decisions are made by the HSE under the 2013 Act, which Deputies are familiar with. They are informed by clinical, economic, budgetary and other relevant considerations. No reimbursement decision has yet been made on Skyclarys.

I really understand that for families this sort of process language can feel very distant from the reality of living with a progressive condition. I also understand the frustration when a medicine has been authorised at European level but has not yet completed the national reimbursement process. I discussed this with my colleagues in Luxembourg on Tuesday last. We talked about the difficulties that many countries, particularly small ones, are facing in this regard. This drug is not authorised or available right across the EU. It is different in every country. However, the issue more broadly is about access to drugs and companies making applications for drugs that have been approved by the EMA and to be able to be the sort of

market that can attract and fund applications is really difficult for many of us. I still feel that many of the European countries are working - not deliberately against each other as such - in a vacuum of information because of the confidential pricing structure that in many cases gives all of the information to the company and not to the European states that might work better in partnership. We really need to reflect on this.

As I said, authorisation and reimbursement are at different stage right across Europe in relation to this medication and other medications.

I have asked my officials to continue to engage very closely with the HSE on the progression of all rare disease medicines through the reimbursement pathway while respecting the statutory independence of the HSE's decision-making process and protecting the independence of the scientists involved. I fully understand the extreme difficultly for families. That is why the wider programme for Government commitments on orphan medicines, reimbursement timelines and early access are so important. We must improve access responsibly, fairly and transparently while ensuring that decisions are evidence based, science based and sustainable for the health service as a whole.

We are beginning to see tangible progress in individual conditions. One example is Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a rare, progressive and life-limiting condition that affects boys and young men and on which families have advocated. I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet some of the patients and families who were waiting for a reimbursement decision following EMA approval last June. I am pleased to say that the medicine givinostat was recently recommended for reimbursement by the HSE's drugs group and was approved by the HSE senior leadership team just this week. It represents a positive step forward, not only for those directly affected, but for what it demonstrates more broadly. I thank the HSE for the speed with which it acted in relation to this at health technology assessment, HTA, level, at rapid review level and at every other stage of this process. Where the decision or process was with the HSE, it acted with real speed.

In order to get this application made in Ireland, I had to ask the Italian health minister not once, but twice, to encourage the Italian company to make the application in Ireland. The Taoiseach had to ask Prime Minister Meloni to encourage the Italian company to make the application in Ireland. That was a real barrier and we were trying to do our best within it. I hope that the genuine efforts we are trying to make within the constraints of companies making applications within Ireland is reflected honestly to patients, both as regards givinostat and the other medication, Skyclarys. It shows the drive and resolve of the HSE in terms of making these decisions very quickly and not adding to the time it takes to get access to important medicines.

I want to reflect that we are seeing important developments at a European level that will help shape access to medicines for people with diseases, in particular rare diseases. The reform of the EU pharmaceutical legislation, often referred to as the EU pharma package, is the most significant overhaul of the sector in 20 years and has a clear focus on access to safe, effective and affordable medicines. We are trying to actively see how we can partner with other member states to make us a more attractive market for pharmaceutical companies for new and innovative drugs.

For orphan medicines, we are trying to strengthen incentives for innovation while encouraging faster and more consistent availability of treatments. That complements wider European work on critical medicines, biotechnology, life sciences and clinical trials, and it reinforces our own national efforts. With the European Presidency, I will be president of the European health Council and Ireland will hold the pen to make as much progress as possible in relation to medical devices regulations and the biotechnology Act, as well as progressing the trilogues with the European Parliament on the biotech directive.

With the Minister, Peter Burke, I have just from four hours of meetings this morning with the life sciences and pharmaceutical sector to work out how we can do better at bringing the innovation that is developed in Ireland to patients in Ireland through the life sciences strategy and other ways. We really are trying. However, it is important that people understand that, by virtue of our small market size, Ireland is not always prioritised by pharmaceutical companies launching new medicines. We benefit from working with like-minded states such as through the Beneluxa initiative. Beneluxa plays a role in member states' shared priority of securing access to high-cost, innovative treatments in an affordable way while respecting the national competencies of pricing and reimbursement.

We have been working closely on the initiative on horizon scanning, health technology assessments, information sharing and policy exchanges but there is a great deal more we can do in streamlining European processes. We have had some success through the Beneluxa initiative already, for example, the reimbursement of Libmeldy, and we will continue to progress that.

We can speak later to research but the treatment of rare diseases is increasingly recognised internationally as a core health policy. The World Health Assembly adopted its first ever resolution on rare diseases in 2025. Ireland is supportive of that. We need a much stronger European environment drawing together all of the different aspects of the EU health and life sciences plan. This can help us get drugs to people who need it.

I started with people and I want to end with people. All of my officials and all of the people in the HSE are just people as well, cognisant of the impact of the decisions, access and speed at which we work on the lives of people with rare diseases. We are here to do everything we can to try to maintain our science- and sustainability-based system and to deliver for the people whom we know need the help we can try to get them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): I now call Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: I want to start by commending the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and the role he has played in campaigning for better supports for patients with rare diseases.

Rare diseases affect more people than many realise. A rare disease is defined broadly as a life-long or life-threatening condition affecting no more than one in 2,000 people, which essentially means a condition that affects no more than 3,500 people on our island. Taken individually, these conditions are rare. Taken together, they affect one in 20 people across Ireland. This means hundreds of thousands of people, parents, children, carers and families whose lives are shaped by conditions that too often the health service is not properly equipped to understand, diagnose, treat or support. For those families, rare disease is not an abstract

policy area; it is daily life. The shortcomings and successes of the health service and medical research define their lived experience.

This too often manifests as a long wait for a diagnosis, if one ever comes; long distance travel across the country and abroad to find a suitable expert; and fighting for access to scans, therapies, medicines, educational supports, home supports, disability services, mental health supports and, at times, medical cards. Parents and families become case managers, counsellors, researchers, advocates and campaigners because the State has not put the right supports in place for these communities. People living with rare diseases face that on top of the same capacity problems, waiting lists and delays in physical and mental health services that we know exist right across the board.

The publication of the rare disease strategy was, therefore, a very important and welcome step. It is a long overdue strategy and is essential for realising earlier diagnosis, care co-ordination, registries, research, access to medicines and harnessing the capacity of the health service and medical research to improve lives. The test will be in the implementation and delivery of measurable progress. A second test will be whether the HSE and the health and social care trusts in the North can genuinely come together to maximise access to care and expertise, given that we are talking about very small groups of patients who will be better served if we optimise services through all-island delivery.

Awareness is the first challenge. Rare disease patients are too often met by a system that has no or limited knowledge of their conditions, where to refer them or how to support them. This means that symptoms can be missed, referrals delayed and families left scrambling for answers. Earlier diagnosis will require better awareness across primary care, emergency care, paediatrics, adult services and community services. It also requires investment in genetics and genomics, which the Minster mentioned, genetic counselling, laboratory capacity, data systems and specialist workforce planning. We cannot promise earlier diagnosis without building the capacity to deliver it.

Care networks are just as important. Patients should not have to rely on luck, personal advocacy or overseas contacts to access expertise. Care pathways must be strengthened. We need proper clinical links, referral routes, shared learning and all-island co-operation to maximise the capacity and expertise shared across our health services for these very small groups of patients. For some very rare conditions, the number of patients is so small that collaboration across Ireland, across Europe and between specialist centres is essential. Complex rare disease cases should have accessible key workers who can manage them.

The time and emotional burden of a rare disease is enormous. Families should not be left to manage it all by themselves and to co-ordinate appointments, therapies, medicines, travel, disability supports, social protection supports, school supports and home care on their own.

I want to talk about access to medicines for rare diseases because it is an area that needs to be reformed. The Minister mentioned givinostat and Skyclarys. Delays in this area have an impact on patients. I think we all accept there must be a process to protect the taxpayer and secure value for money and, of course, the independence of it and the scientific underpinning but the current reimbursement process is not designed properly for rare diseases. Applying the same cost-effectiveness model used for common medicines creates predictable delays and unfair outcomes because that system is not suitable for assessing orphan drugs. It is not good

enough to tell people with rare diseases that they are too expensive to help. Ireland needs a dedicated, timebound reform of the rare disease medicines pathway.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak about rare diseases today. One of my constituents has a rare disease and is a great advocate. Today, I wish to speak about a condition that affects thousands of people across Ireland, yet remains widely misunderstood and too often invisible, and that is neurofibromatosis, NF.

Neurofibromatosis is classified as a rare disease. It is a genetic disorder that causes tumours to grow on nerves anywhere on the body. These tumours are usually benign but their impact is anything but. This can lead to chronic pain, disfigurement, hearing and vision loss, mobility issues, learning difficulties and, in some cases, life-threatening complications. As NF varies so wildly from person to person, no two journeys look the same. Despite the seriousness of this condition, neurofibromatosis remains under-recognised and under-resourced within our health service.

For those with the condition, one of the biggest obstacles to care is delayed diagnosis, and many families spend years trying to obtain that diagnosis. If they do eventually get it, access to specialist care is extremely limited. An early diagnosis is essential for issues such as medical management, psychological care and educational supports. Of equal concern is that there is no neurofibromatosis centre in Ireland, meaning patients rely on fragmented services spread across multiple hospitals and healthcare settings. Children may receive good paediatric support but once they turn 18, they face many difficulties in accessing the care they need. Adults with NF struggle to access neurologists, psychologists and pain and other specialists who understand their condition.

Over the years, I have submitted many questions in regard to all these areas and I hope the Minister will continue to work with me on this issue so we can provide better services for those who are affected. I had two children in with me on work experience last year, Paul and Charlotte, twins who both suffer from NF. They were a joy to have in the office for the few days. Their two younger siblings, Rafael and Roman-Jean, also have NF, as does their mam, Gillian. Gillian lives in Maynooth and she really is a great advocate in campaigning to get a neurofibromatosis centre in Ireland.

We talked about orphan drugs. I often feel very sorry for the man who goes out on "Prime Time" to explain why they cannot cover this drug or the delay, particularly when drug companies make so much money. When you think about the people and the scientists who work in those laboratories, they are not doing it for the money; they are doing it for the recognition and because there is a drive in them. It is really important that we financially support the research into this. Maybe it is for legacy that they want to do it but they do want our interest. The motivation is not always money but they do need the support.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I strongly welcome this debate on rare diseases. Only last week, I had the privilege of welcoming young adults living with Friedreich's ataxia, FA, to Leinster House. Tragically, they are waiting and watching their conditions deteriorate rapidly, not due to the lack of medical progress but due to what I can only call administrative neglect by the HSE. Skyclarys is a breakthrough drug for those over 16 with FA. It is widely used

across European public health systems, yet it remains out of reach here. These families have now endured nearly 700 days of anguish waiting for the HSE to decide on the reimbursement.

The paperwork was submitted ahead of the deadline for the last meeting. The families have proof but the HSE's response was that while it was submitted on time, it was not opened until after the deadline, and it was, therefore, excluded. What kind of underhand carry-on is this?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is just not true.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Can the HSE simply shut its eyes and pretend it saw nothing? Then we had the Taoiseach stand up here last week and give a different date, adding insult to injury for families already at breaking point. There is no accountability on that side of the House.

I have spoken to Emily's family throughout this week. They are devastated. Once again, they have been kicked in the teeth and kicked to the back of the queue. As a mother of four young lads, I find it crippling to see what these parents endure watching their children's health decline while the HSE drags its feet. No parent should have to fight this hard for their child's treatment.

Just this week, they got more bad news. The specialist clinic recommended annual visits but, due to resource shortages, it only sees the patients every 18 months. This has now been pushed from August to October. Friedreich's ataxia places immense strain on the heart. Emily's cardiac check-up is now delayed far beyond clinical recommendations. That is simply not acceptable. We need adequate resources for these combined ataxia clinics immediately and we need the Taoiseach to correct the Dáil record on what he said last week and acknowledge the profound hurt he has caused those with FA and their families. They deserve better. They deserve action and they deserve it now.

When is the next HSE drug group meeting and will they be included on it? If Skyclarys cannot be introduced fast enough, can there be an interim access where they can get it, whether it is through Europe or if there is another way? Every minute, as the Minister knows, it is debilitating for them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ward might indulge me for a moment.

Deputy Mark Ward: Go ahead, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: The tours are on, and I wish to welcome the members of Rosslare Harbour Women's Shed who have come to visit us today and are in the Gallery. They are most welcome. I call Deputy Mark Ward.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the women's shed here as well. My family now lives in Wexford as well. My father is in the men's shed in Gorey and he loves it down there. Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about rare diseases. I have been contacted by many residents in my area about Duchenne muscular dystrophy. As the Minister knows,

Duchenne muscular dystrophy is a severe, progressive genetic disorder that weakens muscles and affects around 100 children in Ireland. Two of those children are in my area. They are brothers Conor and Dean from Lucan. They are nine and ten years of age. I met with their parents, Karen and Jamie, as they fought to secure life-saving treatment for their two beautiful boys. They were campaigning for their boys to have access to the drug givinostat. Givinostat is not available for Duchenne muscular dystrophy in the Republic of Ireland despite being available across the North.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is available, since yesterday.

Deputy Mark Ward: I was at a recent briefing in Leinster House and listened to families affected by Duchenne muscular dystrophy. I cannot say there was one person who left that briefing, across the parties, who was not affected listening to the real-life stories of these families' struggles in trying to get this lifesaving drug. I thank every person who contacted, rang or emailed me or called to my constituency offices in relation to this. There has been progress and I welcome the Minister's comments in relation to the progress. I accept the struggles she had with other jurisdictions in trying to get this across the board so that is to be welcomed as well.

While it is welcome, we still have a bit to go. What I would like to see happening is that the next step in this process is not delayed. In fact, I would like to see the next step in this process prioritised so that the drug givinostat gets to the children who need it. Families should not have to watch their children lose abilities while waiting for access to treatment that already exists. Lost abilities cannot be recovered.

As we heard directly from parents, "time is muscle". They are some of the most poignant three words I have ever heard in any briefing from anybody - "time is muscle". Every day these children are waiting for this life-changing medication, their children's muscles are literally wasting away.

Parents and campaigners also want to see equal access to the drug for Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Campaigners want to see that the eligibility criteria for givinostat are aligned with the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, approach, ensuring access for boys who can walk or stand with or without support.

They are looking for the same criteria that is there so that boys in the South are not disadvantaged over boys in the North and everybody receives equal access to care.

I will finish up on a small point. We are talking about early diagnosis and how it is key for early intervention. I speak as a person who is living with multiple sclerosis. I often say I am not living with multiple sclerosis but multiple sclerosis is living with me - and God love it. However, it took me a long time to get to that place. I know it is not a rare disease and there are about 10,000 people living with multiple sclerosis in Ireland but it took me a long time to get diagnosed. I was waiting to get diagnosed and get the treatment I needed. The treatment provided by the HSE is absolutely brilliant. The neurology service in Tallaght is absolutely fantastic. If you can get early intervention for no matter what it is, it makes a big difference. The access to public health nurses in Dublin Mid-West needs to be looked at. There are

children who are not getting their full developmental checks and that is something we could look at as well.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is welcome that the issue of rare diseases is on the political agenda. It has been neglected for far too long. In a large part, it is thanks to the advocacy of parents and families as well as political allies within the system here. Members of the health committee, including Deputy O'Sullivan and Senator Teresa Costello, have raised this issue consistently. One of the things I find quite difficult as a health spokesperson is the fact we are constantly hearing from families and individuals who have to come to Leinster House and who have to campaign to get access to medication. We are talking about people who are sick, who have deteriorating diseases and who have limited energy. I do not think that energy or time should have to be spent campaigning, advocating and pushing the political system into reform. It is something we need to reflect on and try to achieve change for people, so that families, young people and people with rare diseases can live their lives to the full and not have to spend their time and energy campaigning and advocating for progress on these issues. Any real reform of services and reimbursement processes would be far more beneficial than anything that is said in this House in terms of statements. That is what is crucially important to families.

Last August, the new rare diseases strategy was finally published but it should not have taken seven years for a new strategy to be published. The previous strategy expired in 2018. Such an extensive gap without any guiding services or rare diseases policy is unacceptable and cannot be repeated again. Equally, we cannot afford a repeat of the failure to implement all of the recommendations from the last plan. It is one thing publishing a plan but ensuring it is implemented is something entirely different and the latter should be our focus. We see this across the board. In this State, we have implementation deficit disorder when it comes to many of the State's strategies and plans. Too often, they gather dust on the shelves of Government Departments instead of being implemented in full.

I accept that this time around with rare diseases, an implementation oversight group has been established and that is certainly welcome. We need to see an implementation plan published that will outline the necessary actions required to achieve the strategy's recommendations. That must have timelines and funding commitments. That is crucially important for all of our strategies, in that they are time-bound and within the budget and there are the resources and funding to make sure the actions happen. Otherwise, we will not see progress. The programme for Government committed to publishing a new rare diseases strategy and that has been delivered. However, other commitments remain outstanding. The first is a review of the entire reimbursement process. A year and a half into the Government's term, that work is just beginning. I understand the tender details were only approved at the beginning of this month. We were told that this review, once commenced, would take about six months but given past performance, there are serious question marks on the timeline. Mazars, which carried out the previous reimbursement process review, was tasked with that job in 2019 but it was 2023 - four years later - before the long overdue report was published.

Rare Diseases Ireland has raised concerns about the next review, given how little change the last review brought about. I can completely understand these concerns. Rare disease patients have already waited long enough and many do not have the luxury of time. More immediate action is required - not more delays. The current reimbursement process is failing patients, in particular patients with rare diseases. They should not have to campaign tirelessly

to progress decisions on orphan drugs or need to lobby Government and Opposition to reform the reimbursement process. This is a heavy burden which the rare disease community should not have to carry. Take for, example, the children who have Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Last week, they finally received the good news that the HSE drug group recommended givinostat for reimbursement but they have had to campaign tirelessly and fight to get to that stage, all the while watching the symptoms progress.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is just not true.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: If I picked the Minister up right, I understand the HSE leadership has signed off on that. We want to know when drugs will be in the hands of patients. For those boys, every day without treatment means further loss of muscle functions. Some boys who were able to walk a year ago have since lost that ability. It is heartbreaking for parents to watch as their children's symptoms progress, losing their independence and mobility, especially when effective medications exist. It is also crucial that the eligibility criteria for givinostat mirrors that of the North. Across the Border, treatment is available to boys who can walk and stand with or without support. The same must apply in this jurisdiction.

At the same time, people living with Freidrich's ataxia, FA, are still waiting for a decision on Skyclarys. This is the first and only treatment for around 200 people in Ireland living with this progressive and life shortening disease. It is those living with rare diseases and their loved ones who are forced to fight for access to treatment. Skyclarys has been shown to markedly improve neurological function in those with FA and they are still waiting for access. Their illness is not waiting; it is progressing every day. I understand an application for Skyclarys was submitted in August 2024, which is almost two years ago. What happened to the 180 day timeline for decisions? That obligation on the HSE is set down in legislation and yet, it is rarely met.

I have been pursuing progress on the application for quite some time and have been repeatedly been told by the Minister that the HSE cannot comment on negotiations with pharmaceutical companies. I accept this but I do not accept the delays and the process is the problem. That is what we need to look at. We now know the HSE received a commercial proposal on 27 May and are waiting for the HSE drug group to make a recommendation. This must be prioritised and should be on the agenda for the HSE drug group meeting. That meeting should be scheduled without delay. The prospect of further delays cannot be countenanced and for people with FA, every delay means abilities lost and independence reduced.

This is not just about some rare disease conditions or some treatments. We need to improve the system for everybody who has a rare disease. Otherwise, the same issues and delays will continue to occur. It is entirely predictable. We should not be putting any more patients with rare diseases and their loved ones through this. We need a system that works and this is particularly important when it comes to orphan drugs. We are still waiting for real progress on the programme for Government's commitment and the rare diseases strategy recommendations on an early access scheme for new medications for rare diseases. Ireland is an outlier in Europe for not having an early access scheme place. Yet, our Government has only just begun looking at this with a pilot initiative in development.

Where is the sense of urgency? People with rare diseases need action now and, more importantly, greater access to innovative new medicines, like their counterparts across Europe. Without a specific system for orphan drugs, people with rare diseases will continue to have to protest outside the gates of Leinster House and tell their stories over and over again. This should not be necessary. People with rare diseases have enough to contend with without the emotional and physical toll of consistently having to fight for treatments and reforms of the system.

I welcome the news on European co-operation on these issues and the opportunities with the European Presidency to have greater co-operation across Europe on this. I would also like to briefly speak about the newborn screening programme, which was recently extended to include severe combined immunodeficiency, SCID and spinal muscular atrophy, SMA. This expansion of the programme was approved by the previous Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, in 2023 and yet, it took three years to implement. This is despite the fact that funding was approved in 2024 to operationalise these additions. The previous Minister had said it will be rolled out by the end of 2024. That is simply not good enough. Additions to the newborn screening programme must be prioritised. This is made very clear in the rare disease strategy. The primary focus of the screening programme is to identify babies with rare conditions and improve outcomes. Early intervention can prevent the onset of disease symptoms or delay disease progression, improving the quality of life of newborns. According to the rare disease strategy, screening can be used for up to 50 rare diseases but Ireland still only screens for 11 conditions.

While I accept there is considerable variation across Europe, Ireland lags behind the European average of screening for 18 conditions. As of last year, Italy was top of the pack by screening for 48 conditions. That was followed by Austria screening for 31 conditions and Portugal screening for 30. Clearly, Ireland has some distance to go if it wants to be a leader in this area and that should be our aim. I understand that HIQA is currently examining the potential addition of congenital adrenal hyperplasia, CAH, and a further three conditions will be considered following that. It is welcome that we are now seeing movement in this area. However, we cannot allow another three year window between announcement and rollout if these conditions are approved.

I draw the Minister's attention to a survey conducted by Rare Disease Ireland earlier this year. In it, 60% of respondents were found to be pessimistic about the potential impact of the rare disease strategy to improve lives. That should give the Minister pause for thought. Almost a year on from publication, one thing is sure; it has not been a great start. People with rare diseases are continuing to be left behind by the system and this cannot go on. The second year of this strategy must deliver real change. People with rare diseases cannot wait any longer.

As I was saying at the start, we find ourselves in the House making statements on the important issues,but not progressing on the reforms that are so badly needed. We should focus our time, energy and efforts in this Parliament on actually achieving change. I welcome the acceleration of legislation from the Department of Health. We got the legislation yesterday. However, we need to see more of that, more legislative reform across the board in the area of heath, and to see real change. That is what makes a big difference for people and families. It is not speeches in the Dáil that change lives for people; it is the work of real reform, improving

services, improving access to drugs and changing legislation that has the real impact on people's lives. If we are going to have a Parliament that works better, that should be our priority.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Rice. Before I call the next Member, I wish to welcome, from my own village of Ramsgrange, the group Blokes With Cameras. They have had a few women join them today and they are all most welcome. I now call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I think it was five weeks ago the Tánaiste suggested we do these statements and I commend him for that. I thank the Minister for being here. We have had many a discussion over the 18 months since the Minister was appointed. I wish to start by commending her. She has showed an awful lot of interest in this area since she has taken up office; far more, than many of her predecessors of the ten or 15 years prior, I might add. I commend her for that. The news of the review was kind of lost last week with the whole reimbursement or the positive recommendation of givinostat, which was obviously very welcome. It is not fully there but it is a positive recommendation nonetheless. What got lost in that was that the Minister had started this end-to-end review. This was a programme for Government commitment, as she alluded to in her speech and it is something that I and colleagues in my party have long asked for. We chased, harassed and harried our previous colleague, Stephen Donnelly, in relation to such a review and could not get it over the line. I genuinely give the Minister honest praise for that. It is appreciated by the families concerned at the centre of these campaigns.

I do not want to repeat a lot of what was said. We all have constituency clinics and meet patient groups and people who have these rare diseases. They rank amongst the hardest stories I have listened to in my seven years up here. Many people will be familiar with Friedreich's ataxia, which I know the Minister obviously cannot speak about today in any great detail. The heartbreaking stories of those families and individuals such as Craig Coady and Emily Felix have been referenced here, as have those of many people we have brought into the House. What those people have to go through is dehumanising in a way. They have not had the best luck in the world with the disease they were diagnosed with, and to compound that further we have a system that unfortunately nearly encourages them to go on "Prime Time", "The Claire Byrne Show" and come in here and bare their souls to us and to the nation. To me that is fundamentally wrong, but, nonetheless, they felt they had to do it.

I am heartened in the last few weeks with the progress on givinostat, as I have said. I am not the most religious person in the world but I am saying prayers every night before I go to bed in relation to the Skyclarys drug, which, despite what was said earlier, will be at the next drugs group meeting in July. There is also an attempt to bring that meeting forward. It is incredibly difficult.

I am encouraged by the Minister's words on this review when she stated that:

> The aim of this work is clear: to identify where delays arise, where processes can be streamlined, and how we can ensure that decisions are made as efficiently and transparently as possible, while maintaining the necessary rigorous clinical and value assessments.

That is fine. That is good. We have already had the transparency piece answered by Mazars. Mazars was a bit of a letdown for me and for many other people involved in the campaigns over the years. It solely and exclusively dealt with transparency. It has achieved an awful lot in that regard, but the challenge is around the process. Back in 2021, I published a Bill which would provide a separate pathway, like other people have referenced here. I do not think any system - I referenced this when I was on "The Claire Byrne Show" recently - that assesses a cough syrup or a medicine for migraines should be the same one that is used for these high-tech drugs. It makes no sense. The implementation of a quality threshold per quality-adjusted life-year added is €45,000. We know these drugs are going to cost in excess of that. Again, adherence to that in the assessment needs to be reviewed. I will not give the Minister a lecture about it because the review will be the review and she will have all the professionals in the country feeding into it. I do hope it differs from Mazars and that it provides a meaningful review and not something tokenistic. Mazars was the provision of an online transparency tracker and that was kind of it. If it is tokenistic like that, then unfortunately it will not have my support. However, I am optimistic because the Minister has approached this in a very forthright manner and, as such, I hope this will be a fruitful review.

I get very frustrated listening to people from within the Department of Health appearing on radio and TV justifying delays. As the Minister rightfully said, in the case of givinostat, she was able to knock heads together, reduce timelines and get people around the table. That did cut some of the waiting times in comparison with other medicines. The biggest delay in the system is the health technology assessment, HTA, and the negotiation piece, and there is nothing to stop us having that negotiation piece while people are accessing medicines. That can happen retrospectively and that also needs to be looked at as part of any review. It happens in other countries. There is also the possibility of burden-sharing and risk-sharing with drugs. Again, I hope that will feed into the review. Many other countries do it. If a drug is effective, then a company can get reimbursed. If a drug is provided and it is not effective, the company gets a reduced amount or does not get reimbursed at all. Schemes like that need to be looked at because the fundamental thing here is to try to get medicines to people as quickly as possible. However, my concern is that the argument of the rare disease drugs and the new cancer drugs is getting lost in that €4 billion. The new drugs budget typically ranges from between €20 million and €50 million per annum over the last few years. I am saying it and nobody has contradicted me. If the Minister has evidence to the contrary, I would like to see it or hear it. That represents less than 1% of the total drugs budget and for me that is not a meaningful apportionment of the existing drugs funding that is there. If clarity could be brought to me on that, I would appreciate it.

I wish to speak about the delays. Yes, the HSE is to blame for some of the delays. Probably more often, drug manufacturers are to blame. That needs to be acknowledged. It also needs to be acknowledged that many manufacturers do not want to come here not just because it is a small market but because they know they are going to feed into a system that will, as was alluded to earlier, take between five and 800 days in going through a HTA predominantly and a reimbursement process that is not fit for purpose. I do not blame them if they go to Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. We are not talking here about France, Italy and big countries. We understand why manufacturers go to those bigger markets, but there are other smaller countries across Europe which have a higher proportion of reimbursed drugs than we do. That is a fact. The number increased recently. I acknowledge that we have reimbursed the bones of 50 drugs,

give or take, over the last three years, which was a dramatic increase on the previous decade. However, it must also be said that only 30% of all EMA-approved drugs in Europe are available here, compared with an EU average of 45% or thereabouts. Even on that 15%, if we could just get ourselves on a par with our European counterparts we would be setting the bar quite high. I would like to see that happen.

The reason I became involved in rare diseases six years ago is that I met a constituent and supporter of mine who was diagnosed with a disease called amyloidosis. It was a very rare genetic disease that predominately affected people in Donegal. This poor man below in Cork, due to his genetic history, was unfortunately diagnosed with it. That is how I became involved with it. We lobbied for a drug called patisiran at the time and we were successful in that. However, as I said at the start, I think it is dehumanising, whether it is amyloidosis, Friedreich's ataxia or Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

3 o'clock

It is dehumanising that we put people on that platform. I call it Groundhog Day. As I said to the Minister's colleague Deputy Aird when he first approached me about a constituent of his, this is just going to be repeated. All of the eggs are in the basket of this review. When this review is done, it will probably be the last attempt at a review for the next five or ten years. I really do hope it is meaningful and thorough.

I will leave it on a positive note. I complimented the Minister at the start. She has gone above and beyond. She has met people privately in a personal capacity. She has met the families who are at the core of it. She said that the whole thing here is to provide hope. I know she has children. I also have children. Most people in this Chamber today have children. I always put myself in the position of their parents when they are fighting for these medicines and treatments. We would do anything for our children. Everybody in here would. We cannot blame the parents who are involved in these campaigns for doing the same. All the eggs are in the basket of this review. I hope there will be a positive outcome in the next six to nine months that gives people real hope.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I have spoken to the Minister about Paudie Coady. He is 16 years old and has been diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia. His brother passed away from the same condition last year. It is a terminal condition. It is unbelievable that his father, Craig, has buried one son, has another son who is dying and that his wife is now in care because she has Huntington's disease. I cannot even get my mind around the tragedy facing this family. I know why Craig gets up every day. He gets up every day because he wants to do his very best for Paudie and for his wife.

There is now a drug that can reduce Paudie's symptoms, give him a longer life and improve his quality of life. I have spoken to the Minister and to the Taoiseach and other people have raised this issue in here in respect of different people. Paudie can walk for about ten minutes. He can go to school and can just about go on a holiday. He can do a few things. He is looking at his friends growing into big strong men while he declines. Paudie should be given access to the drug Skyclarys under the compassionate access programme. We know this drug would have a huge positive effect on Paudie's quality of life. I know the Minister is a compassionate woman. She is a compassionate Minister. We need to make this drug available to Paudie on an exceptional basis. The Minister has the power to do this. It has happened in other European

countries. Will the Minister talk to the Department about approving the drug under the compassionate access programme to give Paudie a longer life and a better quality of life? I know we are all going to die but this child is going to die and there is a drug that could really help.

I spoke to Craig, Paudie's father, a while ago. He feels that those in the Government who have met with him have been genuinely sympathetic and supportive. I do not want to dismiss that here. I do not want to make politics of this. However, at the end of the day, the Minister has this ability under the compassionate access programme. No family or child should be denied hope because of money issues. I sincerely ask the Minister to consider this.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is important to say that I do not have that power.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister says that she does not have that power. She can address the issue later.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The power is there.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I welcome this opportunity to speak on rare diseases. I spoke on the issue in the previous Dáil. I do not think I have spoken about it in the current Dáil. It has been said many times that, although rare diseases are classified as rare, we all probably know somebody who has one because one in 17 people in the country, a total of 300,000 people, have a rare disease. It is a very difficult issue to talk about. The system to approve medicines in this country has been poor. It has resulted in medicines that are available to sufferers of rare diseases under the public system in other countries, including some medicines I will discuss in a few moments and that others have already mentioned, taking longer to get to the people who need them in Ireland. I know the Minister and her predecessor have worked to change that. We need to make progress to expedite the system and to ensure that we get the best drugs in the world into treatment programmes for people in this country who have rare diseases.

I take this opportunity praise the families of those children living with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Their tenacity in fighting for their children is unbelievably admirable and we are glad to have met so many of them in recent years. I acknowledge the work of Senator Teresa Costello and my colleague Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, who has been steadfast in his work and advocacy for sufferers during all his time in the Dáil. I will also mention the former TD, Denis Naughten, who did a great deal of work over many years. I am so glad for those children living with DMD that the HSE drugs group has recommended reimbursement. It is now imperative that those children get access to this drug as soon as is practicable.

At the core of this fight was the sheer length of time it took for this medicine to be considered and to go through the assessment process for reimbursement following EMA approval. I am sure that all of us in this House, including the Minister, agree that the process needs to be reformed. Our health spokesperson, Deputy Marie Sherlock, wrote to the Minister more than a year ago about access to this medicine. While it might have been given approval faster than other medicines, it was still too slow, taking far beyond 180 days. This is especially so as it had been made clear that these children simply did not have time on their side. As a result, some young people living with DMD will unfortunately not be able to benefit from this very

welcome decision. It would be good to hear from the Minister and the HSE senior leadership team as when the drug will be formally approved - that may have been done; I am not sure of the timelines - and when these families can expect this medicine.

I will raise, as others have, Skyclarys and the treatment of Friedreich's ataxia, a rare neurodegenerative disorder that progresses very quickly, resulting in neurological decline, the loss of bodily function, mobility and independence, and ultimately death. Approximately 200 people in Ireland have Friedreich's ataxia. I know the Minister met some of them earlier this year. Skyclarys is the only approved treatment for this condition. It was approved by the EMA in February 2024 and is available in many states across the EU. As yet, it is not publicly available in Ireland. An application was lodged here in August 2024. A constituent of my colleague Deputy Sherlock has told us that she and others are losing hope. People she knows have lost the ability to stand upright, to walk, to feed and dress themselves and to speak clearly. Just like those children with DMD, time is not on the side of those with Friedreich's ataxia. This person has said:

> I am not asking for special treatment - just the fair treatment that patients in Germany, Italy, and many other European countries already receive. Please help to ensure that the "National Rare Disease Strategy" becomes a reality for those of us who cannot afford to wait any longer and, by doing so, provide access to this life-changing treatment.

The HSE drugs group needs to consider this medicine with the utmost urgency.

The reality that Irish patients cannot access many novel and innovative medicines that other citizens across the EU can is a let-down coming into our EU Presidency. We believe the EU Presidency presents a clear opportunity for the Minister and for Ireland with regard to the procurement of medicines, particularly orphan and innovative medicines. During the Covid pandemic, the EU proved how effective the collective procurement of treatments can be through its procurement of Covid vaccines. We must work to create a similar process for the procurement of medicines, particularly rare medicines, which can be costly for states with smaller populations to procure.

It has been well flagged to the Minister and to many of us here that the value-for-money or quality-adjusted life-year assessment needs to be looked at given the small number of patients with rare diseases, where there are treatments. Many innovative medicines struggle to meet this threshold. This needs to change. I welcome the recent announcement of a review into the reimbursement process. I hope this will consider my point regarding the quality-adjusted life-year assessment.

Rare disease patients can wait up to 722 days for decisions to be made on orphan medicines. This is far above the European average. I welcome the plan to a more structured approach of achieving a 180-day reimbursement decision. As the Marie Keating Foundation has stated, we must make the 180-day timeline a dependable standard as opposed to an aspiration. Ireland is now the only country in western Europe without a formal early access programme. We need to see the consideration and introduction of a compassionate early access programme. This is about recognising that for rare diseases, time is often not on the side of those with such diseases. In some cases, the earlier a medication is started, the more effective it can be in slowing illness progression down. The Minister has stated that she is working on this. We will support her in that regard.

While prostate cancer is certainly not a rare disease, I want to raise once again issues with accessing innovative medicines, which is certainly an issue that also relates to rare diseases. It comes down to access. It is the case that access to private medical treatment here can, in turn, grant access to medicines that one cannot get in the public system. The Minister will agree that this is utterly unfair. We accept the need for value for money, but we must demand equitable access to treatments. I reference Pluvicto, which is a medicine to treat men with metastasized prostate cancer. This is a matter I have previously raised with the Minister. The drug is not reimbursed by the HSE, yet a patient in, for example, the Mater Private Hospital can get access to it. The inequity is unacceptable. I ask that the Minister might at some stage provide an update on the HSE's engagement with the manufacturer in relation to this medicine.

In the context of other issues that we raise in the Dáil, we sometimes can get a sense that a Minister or the Government do not quite get the issue or understand it. I do not think that is the case with rare diseases. The Minister and the Government understand the issue and the difficulties relating to it and are aware of what needs to be done. She will have our support if we are moving in the right direction. I hope that we do so. I hope that we can get the 180 days. I hope that people, especially children, with rare disease can get access to various novel medications that have been approved elsewhere as soon as possible. I hope that we do not have to have statements on rare diseases too often and that we can move forward.

Deputy Colm Burke: Fourteen years ago in June 2012, the first meeting was held with the then Minister for Health, James Reilly, in Farmleigh House, when a whole lot of people involved in the area of rare diseases, including parents and different lobby groups, were brought together. That was the first that a serious effort was made to get everyone together in order to see how we could plan forward to deal with the many rare diseases that are there.

Rare diseases may be individually uncommon but, together, they affect 300,000 people and their families across Ireland. Behind every diagnosis is a child, parent, carer or an adult who is living with a condition that often requires specialist treatment, ongoing support and access to innovative medicines. The publication of Ireland's National Rare Disease Strategy 2025-2030 was an important step forward. The strategy provides a roadmap for more integrated person-centred care and recognises the unique challenges faced by those living with rare diseases. However, for many families, progress on paper has yet to translate into improvements in daily life. Recent findings from Rare Diseases Ireland are concerning. Four in ten respondents reported poor access to healthcare services. More than 40% rated their physical health as poor, while over one third reported poor mental well-being. Nearly four in ten families described their financial situation as poor due to medical costs, travel expenses and reduced income arising from their condition. More strikingly, only a small minority expressed optimism that the new strategy will improve their quality of life.

One area requiring urgent attention is access to orphan medicines. Currently, patients in Ireland wait, on average, more than 800 days between a medicine receiving market authorisation and becoming available to patients. This places Ireland among the poorest performers in the European Union and well behind the EU average. In 2018, I was involved in the health committee as regards producing a report on how we could speed up access to medicines. That report that has not been acted on. It is disappointing that some of the proposals set out in the report have not been followed through on. We must continue efforts to improve assessment processes, pricing negotiations and reimbursement pathways in order that effective

treatments can reach patients more quickly. However, while these reforms are being pursued, we cannot ignore the immediate pressures facing families today.

The National Rare Disease Strategy 2025-2030 rightly recognises that the costs associated with rare disease diagnosis should be considered in medical card assessments. It also highlights the need for integrated care pathways, co-ordinated community supports, special services, respite care, psychological supports and smoother transitions from childhood to adult healthcare. These commitments must now be implemented with urgency. Families should not have to wait years for access to treatment while also struggling with financial hardship, travel costs and fragmented services. Our responsibility is not only to improve access to orphan medicines but also to ensure that every person living with a rare disease receives the support they need to live with dignity and security. The strategy provides the framework; we must now deliver on the action.

Going back to 2012, I was one of the only Oireachtas Members at the event in Farmleigh House. While a lot of progress has been made in 14 years, we need to expedite that progress in the next three to four years. We have medication in a lot of cases, but what is needed is access. It is important that we improve the process for making sure that the medication is available in a timely matter. I ask the Minister and the Department give priority to that matter. A lot of progress has been made. We need to make a lot more, but in a shorter timeframe.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on rare diseases. An estimated 300,000 people in Ireland are living with rare diseases. For their families, the challenges are absolutely immense. Too many face long waits for diagnosis, fragmented care and difficulties accessing treatments that could significantly improve or extend their lives. While each rare disease may affect a small number of people, collectively, rare diseases affect one in 17 people in this country. This is not a niche issue; it is a national issue. The Oireachtas and the Government need to work together to make sure that there is a national response.

I welcome the National Rare Disease Strategy 2025-2030 and the commitment to improving diagnosis, care, research and access to medicines. Strategies alone do not change lives, however. Patients need to see real and tangible improvements.

One of the greatest frustrations for patients is that scientific advances are moving faster than our ability to deliver such advances to the people who need them. Ireland is a global leader in pharmaceutical innovation. We manufacture some of the most advance medicines in the world. We are rightly proud of the jobs this creates, the investment it attracts and the contribution the sector makes to our economy. There is a desperate contradiction at the heart of our system that we cannot continue to ignore. The medicines are developed here. The innovations happen here. Our researchers, scientists and healthcare professionals are helping to drive breakthroughs that are changing lives across the world. Our economy benefits enormously from that innovation. Too often, however, Irish patients are upon the last to benefit. We have seen this recently in the context of heartbreaking battles to get people care and treatment. The drugs highlighted in the media recently are givinostat and Skyclarys. I congratulate my colleagues Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan and Senator Teresa Costello on the strong and diligent work that they have done in relation to these two drugs. Thankfully, givinostat has been approved but people with Friedreich's ataxia are waiting for Skyclarys to be approved.

This inequity is to be found across the entire healthcare sector, including in the areas of rare diseases and cancer. We have effectively developed a two-tier system where access to innovative medicines can depend on whether a person has private health insurance or on their ability to pay. Patients who are treated privately can often access new therapies far sooner than those who rely on the public health service. That is not equity. It is not what Sláintecare promised. It is not what the Irish healthcare system should be. Healthcare should be based on need rather than income. The chance of accessing a life-changing treatment for cancer, for example, or, indeed, a rare disease should never depend on a person's financial circumstances.

That is why an early access programme for innovative medicines is essential. Patients with rare diseases and cancer should not have to wait for years to access treatments that have already demonstrated significant benefit elsewhere. We also need a greater and more sustainable budget for new and innovative medicines. Investment in these therapies is not simply a cost, it is an investment in better outcomes, longer lives and better quality of life. We must strengthen our commitment to clinical trials and research. I met Cancer Trials Ireland recently and heard how clinical trials are not only improving patient outcomes but also saving the State millions. They provide patients with access to cutting-edge treatment and help to build a stronger and more innovative health service. For patients living with rare diseases and cancer, every day matters and every delay is excruciating. Our responsibility is to ensure innovation does not stop at the laboratory door or the factory gate; it must reach the patient. It is a standard our healthcare system should be judged by and the standard our patients deserve.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak today. An estimated 300,000 people in Ireland live with a rare disease. Too often, they are faced with years of uncertainty, navigating a fragmented system. This must change. The national rare disease strategy is welcome and provides a framework but it must be properly funded and implemented. It promises integrated life-course care pathways, expanded newborn screening and wraparound supports. To deliver this, the Government must deliver the necessary funding. The development of diagnostic, critical specialist and general multidisciplinary capacity must be a priority. It is still the case that access to life-changing drugs is far too slow. Government must deliver on its own commitments in the programme for Government. I welcome the Minister's commitment to a review and the additional capacity in the system. A tracking system was committed to which must be delivered on. Importantly, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to try to ensure early access. Government must ensure early access happens. I acknowledge the pilot but while pilots are something, they are by their very nature exclusive. I noted the Minister's comments early on Skyclarys for Friedreich's ataxia. She has to know time is of the essence and every day counts. It is similar for boys with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. I welcome recent developments with respect to accessing givinostat but I implore the Minister and the Government to maintain momentum until every child who would benefit from that drug has access to it. We must also ensure the drugs reimbursement system is fair, transparent, accountable and commands public confidence. That is why I am proud Sinn Féin Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill 2022 which I cosponsored with colleagues will go to Second Stage next week. This Bill is about ensuring integrity in our health service. It will require pharmaceutical companies to declare all payments and transfers of value to healthcare professionals and organisations, ending the current inadequate voluntary system and bringing Ireland in line with international best practice. An estimated 300,000 people are

waiting for action. They need timely diagnoses, access to medicines and a system they can trust. We must deliver for them.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I express solidarity with the many people and many children suffering from rare diseases in Ireland. I pay tribute to the many who have to speak out publicly about what they and their families are going through to bring pressure on the Government to approve various medicines, people like Archie Ennis and A.J. Slevin. There are far too many and we should not have to know about their stories. It speaks to something very wrong in how our society, the economy and the pharmaceutical sector are organised. I recently read about research done in France which showed the majority of new medicines developed offer no therapeutic benefit or advancement and about 25% represent real therapeutic advancements. In the vast majority of research, money is going into marketing, research into products with massive markets already and therefore they are just variations on drugs to keep patents ongoing. There is very little in prioritising people's needs and rare diseases. Where there are developments, pharmaceutical companies are holding out to get as much money as they possibly can for them. We need a very different sort of pharmaceutical sector in public ownership in the public interest. I welcome the recommendation of the HSE drug group to approve givinostat for Duchenne muscular dystrophy. I add a request for children like A.J. who will not be of an age to benefit from it - I think you need to be six - that support is given in the meantime - for example, support from the HSE with splints to ensure their muscles do not get weaker while waiting for access. I hope access is granted for whoever needs it as soon possible. On Friedreich's ataxia Skyclarys is the only drug that has been shown to slow the disease. It was approved by the EMA and is available in other European countries. I will quote from a constituent:

> The NCPE issued a harsh verdict for Skyclarys on 17 December 2025. While I understand the HSE is still in discussions with the manufacturer, the delay is costing my niece time to slow this cruel disease. It is already heartbreaking watching her fade even though a drug that works exists but is out of reach. In the 570 plus days since the application for its use in Ireland was lodged, many in the community have lost the ability to stand upright, walk, feed or dress themselves and to speak clearly. Many have lost all hope.

Time is ticking. We need urgent movement on Skyclarys and the other orphan drugs that have not been approved in our system.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I add to the calls for the availability of treatments for Friedreich's ataxia and Duchenne muscular dystrophy and to recognise the very brave patients and their advocates who have made this case in Leinster House. Skyclarys is the first and only approved treatment for Friedreich's ataxia which around 200 people live with in Ireland. This medication can slow the progression of their condition. The company that makes Skyclarys has put the official pricing proposal to the CPU and now the situation is fully in the hands of the HSE. Patients do not know how long it will take for the HSE to make its final decision. On 26 May, I asked the Minister for Health for a definitive timeline on consideration of Skyclarys for reimbursement. Many patients and their advocates were really upset when it became apparent Skyclarys was not discussed at the 10 June meeting of the HSE's corporate pharmaceutical unit. It is important this process is completed as quickly as possible. I ask the Minister to do all she can to ensure Skyclarys is included on the agenda of the August meeting

of the CPU. I would also like to raise the approval of givinostat for people suffering with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. I have raised it as have others on several occasions with the Minister for Health since EMA approval was granted last year. Last week the HSE recommended the drug for approval. This week the SLT signed off on this, bringing children with Duchenne closer to accessing this medication in Ireland. The Minister said the timeline for children getting this medication will depend on supply and the final approval steps. I urge her to use all possible influence to speed up this process so that children who desperately need this medication can avail of it. The approval of this treatment is welcome but it should not have taken this level of concerted lobbying by parents and patients to achieve. The Minister says decisions around pricing are not made by her personally and they are rightly in the hands of experts. That is the right approach but the issue is not with the making of the decision, it is the process, the time it takes and a system that has become overly bureaucratised and needs to be streamlined.

A review of that system is going on at the moment. That review is timely and I hope we get the result quickly. I hope we get the changes that are necessary made to the system of reviewing approvals for these orphan drugs because patients and their families deserve better.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I recall in the Dáil about a decade ago when Leo Varadkar was the Minister for Health. He said that he would almost become a socialist when it comes to the issue of the drug companies and the health industry. It did not quite work, obviously. Here we are again asking why it is taking so long for drugs to be approved in this country. These are drugs that we know are having life-saving impacts. We are a small country so, in some ways, a rare disease in a small country is even more difficult. Cystic fibrosis is very common in Ireland, yet that took ages as well.

I echo the calls for the treatments for Friedreich's ataxia and Duchenne muscular dystrophy, DMD, to be approved as quickly as possible. I spoke on that issue a year ago in the Dáil. Families are going through heartbreak. DMD in particular is a progressive disease. I read that givinostat has now been approved. I am asking the Minister of State to ensure that this is moved as quickly as possible so that givinostat benefits as many as possible.

I want to mention a case that was brought to my attention of a young woman, called Debbie, who has been diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour, a WHO grade 4 glioblastoma. As the House can imagine, she has undergone extensive neurosurgery removing huge parts of her brain, as well as radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The problem is this. There is a revolutionary second-line treatment available called dendritic cell therapy, DCT, available in Germany. It has been overwhelmingly positive in its results in the first few years at trial stage. Debbie has comprehensive health insurance but this therapy is not available on VHI anyway. It should be available to all, of course, but I just cite the fact that insurance companies are not providing insurance cover for many conditions. This results in families having to do GoFundMe to raise money to go abroad, all when people are in such dire health situations. The family in question have done so and have had to raise huge amounts of money. This is treatment inequality.

Cutting-edge treatments like DCT are available in other European countries but are not available in Ireland despite the fact that a lot of the pharmaceuticals in question are manufactured in this country up the road from where I live. There are also health insurance barriers and systemic delays. Even basic administrative requirements such as requesting

medical records to go to another country add up with regard to people's life expectancy and quality of life. The system is failing people like Debbie and we need to act to make that treatment available.

Deputy Barry Ward: The terrible thing about this subject is that it comes down so much to economics and it should not. It should come down to individuals and everything that we can do for them. I want to echo what many speakers have said in this debate about how we need to accelerate the progress in relation to the provision of treatments for rare diseases. The fact that they are rare diseases should not mean that people do not have access to the treatments they need.

I have listened to some of the comments on how we need to have a pharma industry that works for the people. While that is laudable and entirely appropriate, we also have to be mindful that the money spent on research and development comes from private investors, and much of it essentially comes to nothing. The hope is that researchers strike upon some drug or treatment that actually solves a problem and, therefore, is marketable, saleable and profitable. If we had a situation where we were spending public money on research and development for pharma companies, the public would rightly be outraged by the amount of money that was spent on programmes that simply came to nothing in the end. Let us not be naive about this. We need private investment and we need the pharma companies, which are expert at this whereas the State is not, to innovate in this space and develop the very treatments that we are relying on them to create, patent and market to solve problems.

There is, however, a legitimate criticism to be made of certain pharma companies. We have individual markets on drugs throughout the European Union and I understand why that is. Since Ireland is a small market, it is not going to be as profitable for a large multinational pharmaceutical company to make the application to have the drugs included in the payment scheme and all the rest of it in this jurisdiction, because there are fewer people here who are going to consume the drug than in somewhere like France, Germany or Italy. That is a particular shame and it reflects very poorly on the pharmaceutical companies that they do not do this.

Duchenne muscular dystrophy has been mentioned today. It is a case where the application has been made. I raised the issue this morning with the Minister for Health. My understanding was that she was waiting for the application to be made. It has now been made and we hope it will be accelerated. It is a case where time is very much against people who are suffering from Duchenne muscular dystrophy and we need to provide that treatment as soon as possible.

Another example is eosinophilic esophagitis, EoE, which is a chronic, allergic inflammatory disease of the esophagus from which people suffer and that can be treated by a particular drug produced by Sanofi. Some 50% of its global production is in Waterford, yet that drug is not available for treatment of juveniles in this jurisdiction. My understanding of the reason it is not available is quite simply that Sanofi has not made the application. There might be really good reasons for that and if there are, then let us have them out, but my concern is that because Ireland is a smaller market for these drugs, it disincentivises the company from making what is presumably a costlier application from the point of view putting together material than it might be in another country. For dealing with rare diseases in the longer term, perhaps we should be looking at a single European Union market for these things, which would be a single

EU authorisation or application market so that we no longer suffered from being the smaller market within the European Union. We could tell drug companies to apply to the European Union and then they would get to run their drugs in Ireland and get to avail of the schemes in Ireland. In that way, we would solve this problem.

Deputy William Aird: I join with other speakers in highlighting the issue of rare diseases. In particular, I want to speak about a condition affecting a small number of people in Ireland, which is SMA, a genetic disorder that affects motor neurons in the spinal cord, leading to progressive muscular weaknesses, loss of function and even shortened life expectancy. For many years, families affected by SMA lived with little hope of effective treatment. Thankfully, however, breakthroughs in research mean that there are therapies available today that can dramatically improve the quality of life for many patients.

Ireland can be proud of the progress that has been made. The State has agreed reimbursement for innovative SMA treatments for children and young people. These decisions have transformed lives, and this is something we should acknowledge and commend. However, there remains a small group of adults with SMA who have been denied treatment because their dates of birth do not comply with the chosen cut-off date. Approximately 16 adults in Ireland with SMA are currently excluded from reimbursement of treatments that are available to younger patients. Through no fault of their own, they miss an opportunity afforded to those who came after them. As a result, we have a situation where two people with the same condition are treated very differently. A patient diagnosed as a child will continue to receive the treatment into adulthood but another adult with the same diagnosis and the same clinical need may be unable to access reimbursement at all. That is unjust and inequitable. It discriminates against this small group of people because of their age. I appreciate fully that decisions on reimbursement must be evidence based, clinically informed and financially responsible but I ask that, alongside the necessary procedures, we apply a degree of joined-up thinking, practicality and humanity. We need to think outside the box for this small group of adults. Their lives could be improved by treatments that are already recognised, licensed and reimbursed elsewhere for others with SMA in this country.

When this group of adults looks to Europe and sees other adults with SMA accessing therapies, and when they look to Northern Ireland and across the Irish Sea where similar patients are receiving treatment, and when they see younger Irish patients benefiting from these medicines, is it any wonder that they feel frustrated, excluded and let down? Rare disease policy requires us to think differently. One size does not fit all. Traditional health technology assessment models are designed around larger patient populations.

Rare diseases do not fit neatly into these frameworks. This is why flexibility and innovation are practically essential. I ask that every effort be made to explore practical solutions for this exceptionally small group of patients through management access arrangements, conditional reimbursement measures, special rare disease pathways and other approaches. There is scope for constructive engagement that balances fiscal responsibility and compassion. Our national rare disease strategy recognises that people living with rare disease face many barriers. These 16 adults are experiencing a unique barrier - their age. I know the Minister is committed to improving outcomes for those living with rare diseases. I know that significant work is underway with the Department-----

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

Deputy William Aird: ----- and I ask that special attention be given to this group-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is eating into other Members' time.

Deputy William Aird: -----and that the Minister engages further with EMA Ireland.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: First, I want to pay tribute to the parents and families of young boys with Duchenne muscular dystrophy who have campaigned for access to givinostat. I commend them for their work, and I also acknowledge the work of colleagues in this House, such as Senators Teresa Costello and Anne Rabbitte, and Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, for their work in driving this from a parliamentary perspective. I also acknowledge the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health for their engagement as well.

Many people in the House today have already spoken about the positive news that we got regarding givinostat. However, we are still waiting for that good news when it comes to skyclarys in relation to Friedreich's ataxia. This something that the Government and the HSE must prioritise, particularly its corporate pharmaceutical unit because, as other Deputies have said, time is something that these families do not have in abundance, and we need to ensure that these types of medications are in the hands of families to ensure that they can limit the impacts of these particular rare diseases.

One thing that frustrates most people is the process and the time that it takes. We welcome the review into how rare diseases are dealt with. Deputy Barry Ward has already spoken about the need for a single European market when it comes to accessing drugs for rare diseases, and it is something that I was going to speak about. It makes sense. We are a small nation with a population of just over 5 million people and a small market to these pharmaceutical companies, but when we combine that with all of Europe, particularly when a lot of these drugs are being approved from European bases, we need to use that strength in numbers to ensure the access for people with these rare diseases.

There is a bigger issue in Ireland when it comes to access to drugs. The long-term illness scheme has not been updated since the 1970s. I appreciate the costs that are involved in this, however, if we look at permanent anaphylaxis, for example, young children and adults who need access to EpiPens cannot get them. This is something that we really need to review, particularly when it comes to long-term illnesses. We need to review how people with rare diseases, and people with diseases that are not that rare, access drugs in this country.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I want to pick up on a point made by Deputy Ward. He is right that an awful lot of these decisions come down to economics, and that is not the way it should be. There are clearly medicines that not only can make a profound impact on people's quality of life but can actually save lives. Of course, there has to be a system and decisions have to be made in an appropriate way, but that cuts very little mustard with someone like Craig Coady, who has lost a child through Friedreich's ataxia, and is now worried about his other child. It cuts very little mustard with a parent of a child who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy

and who is watching their son's functions, muscular abilities, strength and ability to live their life to the greatest level possible go further and further from them.

The key point is that there has to be processes, but they have to be efficient, quick and responsive, and in our view that is not the case at this moment in time. In the first instance, I welcome the fact that there is now a rare disease strategy. The implementation of it will be key, but there are a number of key points that Ireland is falling down on. First, in relation to orphan medicines, in the instance of the 5% of rare diseases that benefit from an orphan medicine, where treatments exist, access is delayed. The State is an outlier when it comes to early access. There is no early access scheme for rare diseases. That should be happening. Rare Diseases Ireland has made the call that it should happen within one year of EMA authorisation. That is the case already, for example, with givinostat, which will benefit those with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. It has already been approved by the EMA, but it has been quite delayed getting through the system here. It is also the case that the reimbursement system is not designed for rare diseases. This is not a contradiction, but sometimes when we talk about rare diseases, we think of it the wrong way. Each disease is rare in and off itself, but when we take them cumulatively, they are not rare. It is not unusual for someone in the population to have a rare disease. It affects quite a lot of people, but by the nature of each individual condition, which has a smaller evidence basis as patient populations are smaller, the reimbursement scheme is not working for them. Smaller numbers are affected and it is not designed for rare diseases and this needs to be addressed.

I echo the point made in relation to the long-term illness scheme as well. There are instances, and I can send the Minister an example, where there are two people with the same disease with slight differences and one qualifies and one does not. That is not good enough either. The process clearly needs to be improved, but I welcome the progress made and I encourage the approval of givinostat and skyclarys.

Deputy Michael Collins: Rare disease is an issue that affects thousands of families across Ireland, yet too often it receives far too little attention in this House. In particular, many patients face struggles gaining access to the medicines and treatments that could transform or even save their lives.

The word "rare" can be misleading. When people hear the term “rare disease”, they imagine something that affects only a handful of people, but when we put all of these conditions together, the reality is very different. Today, around one in every 17 people in Ireland is living with a rare disease. That means hundreds of thousands of people across the country are affected in some way.

Behind every statistic is a family. There is a child waiting for a diagnosis. There is a parent fighting to access treatment. There is a young adult wondering whether their condition will deteriorate before a medicine becomes available, and there are families carrying enormous emotional, physical and financial burdens while having to navigate a healthcare system that is often difficult to access and even harder to understand. A treatment may exist. A medicine may already be approved elsewhere in Europe. Patients may know that the drug could help them, yet they can still face lengthy delays before that medicine becomes available in Ireland.

I particularly want to acknowledge the families who have spent months and years fighting for access to givinostat for children living with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The recent

recommendation from the HSE drugs group to approve this treatment is very welcome news and a testament to the determination of parents who simply refused to accept that their children should be left waiting while the clock ticked on. These families have shown enormous courage and persistence. They have attended meetings, spoken to public representatives, told their stories in the media and campaigned relentlessly because they understood one simple truth — time is muscle. Every day matters when a child is living with Duchenne.

I welcome the decision by the senior HSE leadership team to approve this treatment following intensive lobbying by Muscular Dystrophy Ireland, affected families and patient advocates. It shows what can be achieved when people come together and refuse to give up. We must now ensure that eligible children can access this medicine without delay and that the lessons learned from this campaign are applied to other rare disease treatments in the future.

I am calling on the Minister to ensure that the managed access protocol is expedited for these families. Independent Ireland believes that every citizen should have access to healthcare based on need, not on where they live, who they know or how effectively they can campaign for attention. We believe that patients suffering from rare diseases deserve the same urgency and commitment from the State as patients with more common conditions.

The publication of Ireland's national rare disease strategy was an important and welcome step. It recognises the need for earlier diagnosis, better care pathways, improved research, stronger patient involvement and improved access to orphan medicines, but strategies alone do not change lives. Implementation changes lives. Families do not need another glossy document sitting on a shelf. They need action, appointments, diagnostics and, where appropriate, they need timely access to treatment. The current system often evaluates these medicines using frameworks designed for large population treatments.

As a result, patients can experience lengthy delays before decisions are made.

Independent Ireland believes there is room for a more flexible and patient-centred approach. Our party believes that where a medicine has demonstrated clear clinical benefit and has received European regulatory approval, every effort should be made to ensure that Irish patients are not left waiting unnecessarily while administrative processes continue. Independent Ireland has consistently argued that public services should be built around the needs of citizens rather than bureaucracy. The healthcare system is no different. The needs of patients and families must come first. Recent agreements aimed at accelerating access to new medicines are welcome. However, the true test will not be what is written in an agreement; but whether patients and families notice a difference in their everyday lives. Can a child receive treatment sooner? Can a family avoid travelling abroad? Can a patient access a medicine before irreversible damage occurs? Those are the questions that matter.

Independent Ireland has consistently highlighted the challenges faced by families living outside major urban centres. Many rare disease patients must travel repeatedly to Dublin and to specialist centres for consultations, diagnostics and treatment. The financial burden, the time away from work and school and the emotional strain this places on families can be enormous. We need faster diagnostic pathways. We need improved support services for families. We need better regional access to specialist care wherever possible. We need a medicines approval system that recognises the particular challenges associated with rare diseases. More importantly, we need to listen to patients. Nobody understands the shortcomings of the system

better than those who live with these conditions every day. Their voices must be at the centre of decision-making. A society is often judged by how it treats those who are most vulnerable. Families affected by rare diseases have shown extraordinary resilience, courage and determination. They should not have to spend years fighting for recognition, they should not have to spend years fighting for treatment and they certainly should not have to spend years fighting bureaucracy while their conditions deteriorate. Our job in this House is to ensure that hope is matched by action. That is what fairness demands. That is what compassion requires. That is what Independent Ireland believes should be delivered.

I wish to ask the Minister of State about Friedreich's ataxia and the medication Skyclarys. Where are we in relation to getting patients access to Skyclarys? The brother of Emma O'Shea in west Cork died from this disease. I met a group of young people who were here in Leinster House a few weeks ago. One was a young lady who was devastated by what the disease was doing to her. Every second without Skyclarys medication is a death sentence. I ask the Minister of State, how can we in opposition help the Government? We are not here to blame the Government, but how can we help? Surely if one of our children needed Skyclarys, we would find a way. I ask the Minister of State to please tell me how we can help. In his summing up, he might let me know where developments with regard to Skyclarys are. I have been in contact personally with Emma O'Shea continuously, even just up to a few minutes ago. She is struggling greatly and wants to know when there will be an announcement. I am not here to point fingers; I am just here to plead on behalf of that lady and other people who need Skyclarys. I would really appreciate when the Minister of State is summing up if he could give us some guideline. There was talk it might be announced last week - that did not happen - and that it could be announced next month. If it is, we would be absolutely overjoyed. This is a life-and-death issue. If Emma lost her brother, it is quite possible she could lose her own life. She is determined to fight on. There was a very strong piece in the *Southern Star* today about Emma and what she was suffering and going through. I would really appreciate if the Minister of State would give us some idea as to where the process is and whether there is a possibility in that regard. It might be clearer next month. If it is, it will certainly lead to saving Emma's life and the lives of many more out there.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to speak on behalf of families and patients with Friedreich's ataxia and muscular dystrophy. I want to speak particularly for Eric Fitzgerald, a young man from Ballyhaunis, in County Mayo, who is losing power and muscle and whose lower limbs have weakened significantly. His condition is getting progressively worse. For Eric, the passage of time means the loss of muscle. It is extraordinarily sad. I met a group of young people with Friedreich's ataxia last month. I met a wonderful young woman called Emily Felix. Emily's story is again exceptionally sad. Emily has started recording her voice because she is losing her voice and losing muscle. That tells you how painful this disease is.

There is some hope, however, and that hope is in the form of the medication Skyclarys. It was approved by the European Medicines Agency in 2024. While it is not a full cure, the clinical guidelines show that it will reduce the progression of the disease by half for some patients. For many patients, that is the difference between living and surviving. It would have an immense impact on these young people's lives.

I know there is a very important meeting coming up in August. Many families across Ireland are clinging on to hope. I ask the Minister of State to make sure that the voices of these families are heard in that CPU meeting and I ask him to update this House as soon as possible.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. While some conditions are more widely known than others, both common and rare diseases have far-reaching impacts across our society. In recent times, awareness and advocacy campaigns have brought these issues to the forefront of public and political discourse. We have seen this through initiatives such as the FTD brothers' campaign raising awareness of dementia and through the courageous efforts of families affected by Friedreich's ataxia who have spoken publicly about the urgent need for medical intervention. In my home county, there are a number of families living with Friedreich's ataxia. I think particularly of Liam and Kiara Lynch and Theresa Kane and her two young children.

For those who are unfamiliar with this disease, it is a rare, inherited neurodegenerative disorder that can cause progressive damage to the nervous system and the heart. There is a treatment that has the potential to slow the progression of this and it offers life-changing benefits and, crucially, more time for those living with the condition. Approximately 200 people and their families are affected by Friedreich's ataxia in Ireland, and ensuring early access to this treatment would make a meaningful difference to each of them.

This issue highlights the broader challenges around access to innovative medicines for rare diseases. We must adopt a more responsive and flexible approach in Ireland to ensure that patients can access new, potentially life-altering treatments in a timely fashion.

In recent weeks, I have met with Biogen, the producer of Skyclarys, on a number of occasions to urge efficiency and urgency in its negotiations with the HSE. I have also engaged with the HSE and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to push as strongly as possible and to make sure that we get this drug, within the constraints of the proper negotiations that have to take place on behalf of the State. These discussions are progressing, albeit slowly, but we must examine our wider approach to rare diseases. A recent paper from the Alliance of Rare Disease Companies Ireland highlights the need for reform, noting that the current one-size-fits-all model for assessment and reimbursement is not fit for purpose. The programme for Government includes a commitment to review the drugs reimbursement process. However, it is essential that specific consideration be given to innovative and orphan medicines as part of this review.

I have recently learned of the managed access approach, which is used in other countries such as France. This model allows patients to access new treatments immediately while data is gathered over a defined period. A formal review takes place, with negotiations continuing in parallel. It is a pragmatic solution that prioritises patients' care while ensuring robust evaluation.

We need to be more innovative and flexible in how we approach access to medicines. There are critical conversations and they must continue if we are to ensure that patients receive the life-changing care they need when they need it. I would also support further research and development incentives for our pharma industry to do research into producing new drugs that may give an improved quality of life to our citizens and work in tandem with the managed

access programme so that when these innovative drugs are developed, they are accessible and can be used by our citizens.

I thank the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, for her engagement with me on this. It is important that we come to a conclusion shortly to make sure that our citizens and those who are suffering, particularly from Friedreich's ataxia, get the treatment they need to give them an extended quality of life.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to these statements on rare diseases. I chair an *ad hoc* cross-party committee in the Oireachtas on the subject of rare diseases and have done for some time. My speaking time is very limited.

4 o'clock

To put it in context, one in 17 people in Ireland has a rare disease. In this Dáil Chamber, that would mean ten Members would have a rare disease. If we populate those ten around the seating in the Chamber it actually brings it to life and gives it reality. We all know someone and there are possibly colleagues who have rare diseases.

As colleagues with whom I have been privileged to work will know, particularly Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan who spoke earlier, I never put this on the record but have said to groups that when we are fighting for a cause that includes the word "rare" in terms of the disease, and "orphan" in terms of the drug, we know we are fighting an uphill battle. Any advocacy work that begins with those two words means being out on the extremes and the sidelines, fighting. My colleague, Deputy Dr. Martin Daly is here and he will know far more about this than I do. One of the ways I look at this is that we are learning much more about the recognised, mainstream diseases, as it were. Drugs are becoming much more targeted and there are more hybrid approaches to tackling many of the regular and everyday conditions that we meet. Where there would have been orphan drugs before, we have an awful lot more hybrid drugs that are born out of existing medications. I fully understand my colleagues mentioning specific conditions. I am reluctant to do so out of the knowledge, having dealt with some constituents over the last decade and beyond, that for every condition we mention here that is in need of assistance, there is probably someone sitting at home saying "what about my condition?" that is one of the 2,000-odd rare diseases.

I commend the dynamism, innovation, creativity and research that is going on among the best of our pharma companies. We are very well placed here. I have often told the pharma companies that they really ought to be pushing their weight about a little bit more. Ireland depends hugely on them. We should have far more clinical trials here. It is an issue that the rare diseases group recognises. I commend the Minister on some of the work that has been done recently. Particularly, I welcome the commitment to establish a national rare disease registry and an implementation oversight group. They are some of the things that can be done. I will defer to my colleague, Deputy Dr. Martin Daly.

Deputy Martin Daly: I acknowledge the families and people who live with rare diseases for their advocacy and their resilience. I am not going to go into individual diseases. It is welcome news, though, that givinostat has been approved. I pay particular tribute to the current Minister for Health, who has really taken on the issue around givinostat and is also looking at the reform

of the accessibility for orphan drugs for people. I also pay tribute to Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, who has been at this for a number of years. It is sometimes a demoralising task. I commend also Senator Anne Rabbitte, and Senator Teresa Costello on her unstinting support for families who are living with boys with Duchenne dystrophy.

I will just make a couple of points. We have to factor everything into these rare diseases. They are often chronic, progressive, debilitating diseases. We need to factor in the cost of care without the early intervention of these drugs. That is not to give an open chequebook to pharmaceutical firms that produce orphan drugs. While we are grateful that they take on the research and development of orphan drugs, by their nature they are exclusive to that condition, so they have a closed market and considerable leverage over states in terms of the cost of those drugs. Some of those drugs that are designated orphan drugs achieve wider applications and become very profitable for those companies, outside the rare disease piece. I think of drugs like rituximab and Avastin, some of which have applications in inflammatory diseases beyond the rare diseases, such as inflammatory arthritis and in the area of treatment of cancers. That needs to be balanced.

We also need to understand that it cannot always be that the State has to just open the coffers. We have to balance it. There is a defined budget and we have to balance the needs of other people in the system. That is not taking away from the need to have a proper, efficient system of evaluation and bringing these drugs to patients who need them. As a small country, we lack the heft and leverage with these companies. We should be operating through the European Union to try to have better negotiating leverage. We need better-managed access to these drugs and early access schemes. We are not engaging properly in clinical trials, for a country that hosts so much pharma industry. That is a recurring theme. I would like to think that a ring-fenced fund could be achieved out of the tax revenues from some of the pharma companies, that would be designated for the treatment of rare diseases. At the end of this, I want to remember the people who are suffering from these diseases and the families who live with them. We cannot imagine unless we walk in their shoes.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I was really pleased to see this on the agenda. It is very important that we have this discussion in the Chamber today because it really matters. On orphan drugs and clinical trials, it is important to have that negotiation power for the leverage we need, and it is really important that we address this on an all-island basis and have an all-island system. We have been looking at this within the Good Friday Agreement as well in terms of an all-island national healthcare system. It is clearly coming through that were we to have an increased population for all of the island, it would make it much easier and much more efficient to have those clinical trials. It is important to note that going out from here today.

I want to raise the urgent need for access to Skyclarys. It has been raised many times in the Chamber. I was watching on the screens. There are over 200 people living with Friedrich's ataxia in Ireland. For those diagnosed with this devastating rare condition, this drug represents far more than another medicine. It offers hope for slowing progression, preserving mobility and maintaining independence and giving families precious time together, yet many families in Mayo and across Ireland are forced to watch their loved ones deteriorate while waiting for the decision on funding through the HSE. Every month that passes means a loss of function that can never be regained. Time matters enormously for people with progressive degenerative conditions. Skyclarys was approved by the European Medicines Agency in February 2024 and

is available to patients in the US, UK, France, Germany, Austria and other countries. Meanwhile, here in Ireland we continue to lag behind. We rank 23rd out of 27 EU countries for the speed at which we reimburse treatments for rare diseases. That is simply not good enough. Countless families in Mayo and many other places have contacted me directly, pleading for Skyclarys to be approved. One email came from a 32-year-old man who has lived with Friedrich's ataxia his whole life and has been in a wheelchair since he was 17. He and his family should not have to spend their days campaigning, fundraising and begging for access to medicine that could change the course of his illness.

Friedrich's ataxia is only one example. Boys living with Duchenne muscular dystrophy who were waiting over a year for a decision regarding givinostat only received the positive news this week that this drug would be reimbursed. I certainly welcome that but there are so many families trapped in similar situations while bureaucratic processes drag on. We need an urgent decision on Skyclarys. Beyond that, we need fundamental reform of the entire medicines approval and reimbursement process. I am glad the Minister has started that but six months is a long time for some of these families.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. I acknowledge all of the groups that have reached out to me and to my office. We all have a responsibility to do everything possible to ensure that all the people of Ireland can get the best treatments, medicines and supports available.

I want to highlight specific conditions which have already been mentioned. Members of the Friedreich's ataxia group are still awaiting approval and access to a drug. There has been some movement on that, which I welcome. I welcome the opportunity to meet the group and the extraordinary individuals who are advocating, including Emily. The group travelled to Leinster House and successfully highlighted the unacceptable and prolonged wait they continue to endure. Emily put it very simply to me, namely that every delay has real consequences for her independence and function. That is why the opportunity to have this debate really matters.

For these families, this is not simply an administrative process. Every week and month that passes can mean further deterioration in not only their physical health but also their mental health and quality of life. They want an opportunity to live independently as most young adults do. I welcome that the Minister and Taoiseach have engaged directly with the Italian manufacturer to encourage an application. I appreciate the response the Minister shared with my office on 27 May.

I urge that every effort be made to progress this as quickly as possible because every time there is a delay in the treatment of a rare disease which is brought to the attention of the media or this House by successful campaigners, it shows that there is clearly a systematic error in how we deal with the new medicines and treatments that become available.

I also want to highlight something multiple constituents have raised with me, namely Duchenne muscular dystrophy. I thank Stephanie for meeting me. It is a devastating and progressive condition but she was very strong and said she would be watching the debate. I want to welcome the positive recommendation from the HSE drug group. I thank it for the work that has been done on that. There is a lot more to be done and I will continue to engage with the Minister's office. I will always acknowledge when work has been done successfully.

The former Minister for disabilities, Finian McGrath, got me into politics and worked tirelessly on the provision of a cystic fibrosis unit in Beaumont Hospital. I recently attended a meeting of Cystic Fibrosis Ireland and met service users and people currently attending treatment centres. A lot more can be done for those with cystic fibrosis. I welcome the 20-bed unit in Beaumont Hospital and the installation of other units. People with cystic fibrosis cannot be in close contact with others. There needs to be more public awareness of the difficulties facing those with cystic fibrosis and the other rare diseases mentioned by Members of the House today.

I would encourage us to speak more about this issue. This is one of the first opportunities I have had since being elected to the House speak on this important issue. We, as legislators, have an obligation to make the lives of the people of Ireland better. I welcome the work the Minister of State has done with special education in my constituency.

With regard to rare diseases, it needs more attention. When errors in the system pop up, they need to be dealt with as quickly as possible. We are not just dealing with a leak in a tap. Rare diseases affect people's lives and development. It is something that we need to fix.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

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

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the loss of staff at St. Francis Junior School in Priorswood in the context of its new DEIS plus status.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the steps being taken to address and mitigate storm water overflow discharges affecting Dublin Bay, including their impact on bathing water quality along the Dún Laoghaire coastline.

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

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

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

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

Deputy Joe Neville - To discuss ongoing water issues in Kildare North, including a low water reserve in Donadea and surrounding areas as well as ongoing pipe bursts in Leixlip and the mismanagement of Uisce Éireann in North Kildare.

Deputy Ged Nash - To discuss the HSE's decision to close 14 transitional care beds in the Cottage Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth, and redeploy staff to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital.

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

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - Uisce Éireann to minimise disruption from planned water outages in Lusk.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the ongoing issues with Courtbrack, County Cork, water supply, which has been under a boil water notice for almost one year.

Deputies Claire Kerrane and Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss Fórsa's planned industrial action at Oberstown.

The matters raised by Deputies Barry Heneghan, Joe Neville, Robert O'Donoghue, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Louise O'Reilly have been selected for discussion.

Rare Diseases: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank all the Deputies from across the House who have contributed to this important discussion. The contributions from across the House have been thoughtful, constructive and, above all, grounded in the lived experience of the families and people affected by rare diseases. Many Members have spoken with real insight and compassion about the challenges faced, the long wait for diagnosis, the difficulty navigating services, the strain placed on families and the understandable frustration when access to medicine and treatments are delayed.

What has come through clearly is that while the details of individual conditions may differ, the themes are constant. People want answers sooner. People want care that is more joined up. They want greater clarity, better support and, where possible, access to new and innovative treatment in a timely and compassionate manner. Above all, they want to be heard, not occasionally but as a core part of how decisions are made. I want to acknowledge the powerful advocacy that Members have reflected on today. I want to pay tribute to Deputy O'Sullivan, others in my party and Members across House who have advocated.

Deputies have brought the voices of patients and families directly into this Chamber. This ensures the work remains grounded in the reality of people's lives, not just in policy frameworks. I want to take a moment to acknowledge Craig Coady, who was here today, and his son Paudie. I have known the family for many years over my time as a public representative. I know Craig has been to the fore in accessing drugs for Paudie. I pay particular tribute to him for the advocacy and engagement he has had with Members across the Chamber. He has advocated on behalf of his family and I pay tribute to him for the outstanding person he

is, considering the burdens that have been placed upon him. He is working very hard and I reach out to him and other the families today. I know Craig well as well as the many others who have reached out to us. Like all Deputies in the House, we know families in our own areas.

I cannot pre-empt the outcomes of the HSE drug group but having engaged with the Department of Health, I know that everybody across the national system and in the HSE is working as quickly and thoroughly as possible to advance the process involved. Nobody is trying to delay this and everyone is acutely aware of how important the timelines are for individuals and families. In all contributions, there has been a strong and shared understanding that while progress has been made, there is an awful lot more work to do. It is important that we recognise that.

The national rare disease strategy 2025-30 provides a clear structure and patient-centred framework for change. As we speak today, patients, advocates, clinicians and Department officials are meeting to further review the strategic implementation plan. This is to ensure that commitments in the strategy translate into practical actions with timelines and accountability. We have made progress in screening and diagnosis, including the expansion of the newborn screening programme to include more rare diseases. This step will make a real difference for children and families by enabling earlier intervention.

Work will continue to further expand our newborn screening programme. In this regard, the National Screening Advisory Committee, NSAC, has accepted advice from its newborn screening subgroup on the grouping of similar conditions into a singular health technology assessment, HTA, process. The aim of grouping conditions is to expedite the review process timeline. As things stand, and dependent on the findings of the HTA, this creates a pathway to significantly expand the national newborn blood spot screening programme before the conclusion of the national rare disease strategy in 2030.

We are strengthening our approach to genetics and genomics, including through the delivery of the national genomics test directory for rare and inherited diseases. This will help to ensure patients receive the right test in the right place at the right time.

We are seeing progress on care co-ordination, with the introduction of dedicated care co-ordinators and continuing development of integrated care pathways. This is in recognition that, for patients, co-ordination is not an administrative detail but a fundamental part of their experience of care.

We are taking steps to improve access to medicines, including through the new framework arrangements, the commitment to an early access scheme for rare diseases and the move towards timely reimbursement decisions. We are also looking critically at our existing systems. The decision to undertake an end-to-end review of the medicines approval and reimbursement process reflects the recognition that we must continue to improve how we deliver for patients, particularly where delays and uncertainties have real impacts on the lives of our citizens.

We are seeing encouraging examples of progress on individual conditions. A number of decisions were taken recently whereby we showed that when we work together constructively, we can move forward and do so at pace. That kind of collaboration really matters and we must continue to build on it.

At the same time, we must be honest that despite all the progress we are making, families are still experiencing many of the challenges Deputies have raised. For too many people, care is still fragmented, diagnosis is taking too long, and access to services and support can be difficult. For families waiting for treatment, the timelines feel far too long. That reality must continue to guide our work. The true measure of progress is not what we can point to in a policy document but, rather, what people experience in their daily lives. Do they receive answers more quickly, is their care more co-ordinated, does the system feel easier to navigate and do they feel supported, not just clinically but as individuals and families? These are elements we must improve.

I return briefly to the central theme that has run through this debate, namely, the importance of patient partnership. It is not an optional element of the policy; it is absolutely fundamental to it. People living with rare diseases and their families bring expertise that no system can replicate. Their voices must continue to shape how we design services, prioritise investment and measure progress. That is why patient involvement is embedded in the national rare diseases strategy. That commitment must now be fully carried through into the implementation of the policy.

We are at a point of real opportunity. We have a national strategy, we are putting structures in place and we have momentum. Internationally, rare diseases are now recognised as a global health priority and there is increased alignment across Europe on the need for more co-ordinated approaches to research, diagnosis, care and access to treatment. The task ahead is clear. We must continue to implement the rare diseases strategy with a focus and urgency to reduce delays in diagnosis, improve co-ordination of care, strengthen access to medicines and treatments in a fair, transparent and timely way, and ensure patients' voices remain at the very centre of everything we do.

No one should have to navigate these complexities alone. Nobody should have to fight so hard to be heard, understood and to have access to the care they need. Our role, collectively and individually, is to build a system that responds with compassion, clarity and co-ordination. We have made progress. There is more to do but we are moving in the right direction. Working together, in government and right across the House, together with the stakeholders, patients and their families, we can continue to make real progress.

Deputy Michael Collins: On a point of order, will the Minister of State give us some direction on the situation regarding Skyclarys?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, that is not allowed.

Deputy Michael Collins: That is all I am asking. The Minister of State might respond briefly in the 30 seconds remaining to him.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has not raised a point of order.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is a very important issue. People are dying.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Minister of State wishes to use the time remaining to respond to the Deputy, he may do so.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I appreciate the importance of this issue but I do not want to mislead the House. There is movement on it. We are pushing it with seriousness at our end. There is a lot of complexity involved but we are working seriously on the issue. I cannot give the Deputy dates but I can guarantee that everything that can be done on the Government's part is being done. We all know families and individuals affected by this. We are bound to ensure we remove any obstacles on our side. That is being done in a very serious way.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Postal Services

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The issue I raise has been raised by other Deputies in the Chamber. It is something that is happening across Dublin. I was in the Chair last week when colleagues asked about the closure of the sorting office on Griffith Avenue. The response from the Government was, I understand, the one it received from An Post. Before the Minister of State reads out the response he has been given, I ask him to recall why he got involved in politics and the passion he has for his area.

Within two weeks of starting a petition on the proposed relocation of the sorting office in Harmonstown, I had collected 2,000 signatures from the people I represent. More than 300 people contacted my office by telephone after I dropped leaflets in Harmonstown, Artane and the other affected areas. I have asked the Minister of State to think back to why he became involved in politics. As public representatives, we need information to represent the public successfully. I have been asking An Post what alternative arrangements will be implemented for the elderly and for people with mobility issues and other disabilities to enable them to collect their packages. Currently, if people are not home when an attempt is made to deliver, their package will go to the sorting office for storage until they collect it.

An Post has said people will be able to go to the other post offices. However, we have seen the issues arising from the increasing numbers of parcel deliveries. Anyone who works Monday to Friday will miss their parcel. My understanding of what is currently proposed is that people in the Harmonstown area will have to go to Finglas to collect their parcels. That is a problem when traffic is already bad enough, we are looking to decarbonise our energy system and we are examining the idea of a 15-minute city. Some 2,000 people responded to my petition. That includes only the people I could reach. This is the community that I represent having its say. The sorting office is already up for sale. All we are asking for, as set out in my petition, is that An Post guarantee the community that there will be enough locations from which to collect their parcels. An Post has told us that local collection will remain in the area but there is no detail on that. It is not good enough. How can a community be okay with losing a vital amenity when the detail of what will replace it has not been given?

An Post is owned by the people. Since the foundation of the State, it is has been one of the best-run public services. I know a lot of the workers, who are brilliant. They not only do their job; they have a chat with the people who come to collect their parcel. The sorting office is a

community asset. I am not asking the Minister of State to collapse An Post and set it right as to its operational needs. The engineers and others working there, when discussing their plans for the day, are trying to react to the changes in how the postal service is being used. What I am asking is that the Minister of State seek a clear answer from An Post as to where the people I represent will collect their post when the sorting office in Harmonstown is gone. They need that answer before the office, which is already up for sale, is relocated. The community needs to know what will replace that service, upon which they rely. I spoke to many people on the doorsteps who were visibly upset about this. The office has been there since they bought their home. It is not acceptable for An Post to say this is an operational matter.

It has been done in other areas across the country and has been shown to fail. I would love an answer as to how they will get back to the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): An Post is a commercial semi-State company with a mandate to act commercially. As such, day-to-day operational matters such as decisions in relation to the size, distribution and future of the network are matters for the board and the management of the company. They are not matters in respect of which either the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, or the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, have a statutory function. The Ministers are well aware of the impact that decisions relating to changes in An Post operations have on communities and individuals in both rural and urban Ireland. As noted, this is a matter for the company. It would be inappropriate for the Government, as a shareholder, to comment on or prejudice decisions which are for the board and management of An Post to consider.

That said, this is an operational matter. Officials have been engaging with the company. An Post has advised in the case of Harmonstown, which the Deputy referred to, that the move is very much in the future and that there is much to be considered in the interim, including the facilities in the local area to be utilised in respect of undelivered mail. An Post has advised that it is in consultation with its staff and their unions on the details of the move. An Post notes that it is consolidating its national network of local sorting offices, which are also known as delivery sorting units, DSU. The company advises that it needs larger and purpose-fitted premises to manage increased parcel volumes. It also advises that as part of a city-wide plan over this year and next, it is relocating a number of its delivery offices to the new city delivery hubs. Among these will be the An Post delivery offices in Harmonstown, Dublin 5, and Griffith Avenue, Whitehall, Dublin 9, moving to a new north Dublin delivery hub. An Post states that the proposed move is scheduled for the second quarter of next year and that there is much to be considered before then. An Post states that its delivery office in Finglas, Dublin 11, will also be sharing the new facility which is being completed and purpose fitted at the North City Business Park in Dublin 11. An Post remains in consultation with its staff and unions on the details of the above moves.

An Post further advises that it will facilitate the collection of missed mail in local post offices and parcel collection pick up at the post point outlets. An Post states that the move will have little day-to-day impact on local customers because the same postal workers will be delivering on the same local routes as before. An Post advises that it needs much larger premises and-or repurposed facilities to manage increased parcel volumes and to meet the future needs of the city and the changing needs of customers. An Post notes these new buildings also represent an

improvement in working conditions for staff and make huge inroads in terms of sustainability around heating, lighting and the day-to-day operations of buildings like the new delivery hub.

An Post advises that it is also hiring 300 additional postmen and postwomen across the country, some of whom will be working in this area, to manage the massive growth in volume. The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post. The post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide a nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and to enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working to deliver on this and an enhanced amount of €15 million per annum has been allocated for supporting the network, subject to all legal requirements being satisfied.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I appreciate the response. As I said, An Post is a semi-State company. This is one of the most frustrating things that has been done. I know it has been done across the globe. When it happens, a Minister can offload the issue to the regulator. That is done with the HSE and the NTA. I would love if that could be revoked in order that we could actually elect people who can make decisions rather than having unelected officials in every Department making them.

I was in the Chair when the reply was given. I am not having a go at the Minister of State. I welcome the work he has done. I know he is covering for the Minister and is reading out the response that An Post supplied. The other two responses that An Post gave were nearly identical. The only thing that has changed is that the timeline has shifted from very much in the future, which was given to another Deputy in my constituency three weeks ago, to quarter 2 of next year.

The Government cannot keep saying it has no statutory function, even though I accept that is the current legal position. However, a shareholder does have influence. Every shareholder has influence and the Government of Ireland should have influence over An Post. The idea that the company is a semi-State body but yet the State has zero influence on it makes no sense. Talk to my constituents before their services are uprooted. I hope the Minister of State will relay this to the Minister and that he, in turn, will relay it to An Post.

An Post needs to speak to my constituents. I simply do not accept that a semi-State company cannot communicate with the service users of our national postal service. The people I represent are not asking for this not to be done; they are asking for the basic respect of being told the plan as to where they will collect their post, before the move is made as opposed to afterwards. I will continue to pursue this matter. The petition is still open and more people are signing it every day, because this was thrown at this community. We and the people of north Dublin need to know what is going to happen. I appreciate the Minister of State's engagement so far.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The point the Deputy makes is one that is being made about urban and rural Ireland by people across the country. An Post has been a very trusted brand over many years. As with everything, life evolves. There is a big challenge for An Post in the context of how the traditional mail delivery service has moved on in terms of the amount of mail being posted, but there has also been a huge uptick in parcel deliveries. It is very important

that An Post is properly structured, not just in urban areas but also right across the country, because it is a huge brand that we have trust in. In order to ensure its future, very difficult decisions will have to be made.

The Deputy made a fundamental point about the collection of undelivered parcels and so forth. There is the An Post network and then there are the post points which are dotted across the cities and urban and rural Ireland. These have to be a hugely integral part of how An Post delivers it services into the future.

I am deviating slightly from the note I have been given, but I believe that An Post will have to evolve into the Ireland of 2026 and beyond as we go forward. With the network, brand and trust that An Post has, we need to ensure that is reachable for all urban and rural communities. An Post is expanding its operations and is recruiting over 300 postal staff. That is great to see, and it is hugely important that our semi-State company makes the right decisions in order to ensure that we deliver for the citizens of Ireland over the next number of years.

Water Services

Deputy Joe Neville: I take this opportunity to voice my frustration and that of thousands of people who live in north Kildare in the context of dealing with the semi-State body that is Uisce Éireann. Across the north of the county, from Leixlip all the way to Johnstownbridge and down to Naas, we regularly come across issues with Uisce Éireann. I want to deal with specific issues. We have issues in Leixlip where we get a consistent water burst near the Intel plant. Not a month goes by without a pipe bursting. Typically, it happens at around 6 p.m. on Fridays or at weekends. This means that we can be without water for 12 or 14 hours at a time and are reliant on contractors.

Second, there are the low water levels at the reservoir in Allenwood. This affects Carbury, Kilmeage, Prosperous and all the other places in the area. Up to 15,000 people at time can be impacted.

Third, I want to speak specifically about the issues in Celbridge. There has been low water pressure in the town for a number of years. Work is ongoing at Hazelhatch to alleviate the problem, which is a positive. At the same time, however, two huge construction projects are under way in Celbridge.

I will speak specifically to the second of these. As Fine Gael's spokesperson on infrastructure and delivery and as vice chairman of the Oireachtas infrastructure committee, I welcome any water infrastructure upgrades that are happening for houses in my constituency. I am, however, frustrated by the speed at which those upgrades and infrastructure in general are being delivered and rolled out. I specifically refer to the towns of Prosperous and Staplestown in this regard, where Councillors Brendan Wyse and William Durkan are consistently raising this matter at council level. They are highlighting the impact that water levels are having and are not getting the answers they require from Uisce Éireann.

As a result of low water levels at Allenwood reservoir, 15,000 people, typically the most vulnerable, are regularly impacted. We need a simple, clear explanation as to the cause of the recurring low water levels and outages at the reservoir, an explanation as to why residents frequently receive inadequate advance notice, clarification on whether current and projected

housing development has outpaced existing water infrastructure capacity and, most of all, details of any short-, medium- or long-term infrastructure works or investment plans to resolve these issues. We want to develop and to build, but we want to ensure that we have the water infrastructure in place for the houses that are built. Information on contingency planning for future supplies is required.

As I said, there are two water projects in train in Celbridge. People cannot get in and out of the town as a result of issues we are having with traffic. That is simply not good enough. The second of these projects relates to a new development of houses, which I obviously welcome, but the plan has been implemented in the wrong way at the wrong place, which means that the pipes are running down towards the main entrance into Celbridge. A public meeting was held. I was one of the only politicians present. We were informed as to what the impact would be. In the interim, we have had to change it a number of times with Uisce Éireann. That was not because Uisce Éireann came to us, it was because we went to Uisce Éireann.

As already stated, in Leixlip, every six weeks without fail we have a burst along the main line, which many Deputies here will know, between Carton and Intel. This does not happen by accident. It happens because the water pressure comes. These bursts happen regularly. The matter needs to be resolved. This is something I highlighted when I was a councillor. It embarrasses me to raise it here as a TD. The people of Leixlip have been let down. They are frustrated. This not only impacts Leixlip, it also impacts Celbridge and Maynooth. That is why I raised both matters today in the form of a Topical Issue relating to Uisce Éireann.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am answering the issue on behalf of the Minister, James Browne, who sends his apologies as he cannot be here.

As the Deputy knows, Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services and planning. Neither I nor the Minister have operational functions in respect of the matter. However, we have made inquiries with Uisce Éireann and have been informed that it is committed to solving and replacing the necessary section of the Maynooth-Leixlip mains water network and has a project in place to do so. Design challenges have arisen in the context of reinforcing the existing pipe and routing a replacement, all while maintaining the required capacity to meet demand on the network. Solutions are being investigated. In the interim, immediate steps have been taken to respond to bursts in the area and to manage supply interruptions as quickly as possible, such as ramping up out-of-hours repair crews and gearing up local stores to ensure urgent availability of materials required. Uisce Éireann is also working with businesses in the area to encourage and ensure on-site storage is in place to limit supply interruptions.

Uisce Éireann acknowledges that a long-term solution is required. It is in the process of designing one. In County Kildare, there is a proposed investment of over €170 million in capital projects including the Celbridge and Maynooth leakage reduction programmes and Crodaun wastewater network upgrade that will address some of the most urgent infrastructure deficits, meet environmental obligations and support capacity for housing.

It is important to note that Uisce Éireann is dealing with a legacy of underinvestment in water services and infrastructure across Ireland. The scale of the remedial work necessary in our water and wastewater systems will take a number of years and investment cycles to resolve.

Uisce Éireann has delivered significant improvements in the provision of water services. Hundreds of water and wastewater treatment plants have been upgraded, thousands of kilometres of new or rehabilitated water mains have been installed, the national leakage rate has been reduced and the overall quality of drinking water remains very high. As part of its future investment plans, Uisce Éireann has brought together the water for growth programme, which is a comprehensive view of water supply and resilience projects in the eastern region, including parts of Kildare. This programme includes some 30 water projects at an estimated investment of €500 million in treatment plant upgrades, new trunk mains and strategic reservoirs to strengthen supply and support growth across the region.

I know this is a matter in respect of which Deputy Neville has been advocating for some time, but Uisce Éireann is engaging in respect of some of the fundamental issues. I accept that more work needs to be done. Uisce Éireann assures us that it is meeting the many challenges that exist in the area to which the Deputy referred head-on as best it can. I will refer to that aspect in my closing remarks.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for State. Unfortunately, I have heard a lot of that before - not from the Minister of State but from Uisce Éireann - during my time as a councillor and since I was elected as a TD. I raised this matter on Questions on Policy or Legislation with the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, on 30 April. That was three days after the pipe burst on 27 April. The kids at Confey Community College were here and, like many of their counterparts in the other schools in Leixlip, they were sent home. Last week, on 9 June, we had another outage. The water goes off a 6 p.m. and does not come back on until 3 a.m. It is gone all evening and most of the night. Children cannot be bathed. Elderly people do not have access to water.

That is the reality of life in Leixlip. People can, within reason, estimate that every five or six weeks the water is going to go. We have Intel in Leixlip. The company employs 5,000 people. We know that we can build infrastructure. Infrastructure has been developed. One of the most technologically advanced semiconductor plants in the world is located there, but we have a pipe that bloody bursts every month, which leaves people without water. Breweries in the area are impacted. Other businesses and coffee shops cannot open as a result of the same issue. All we need to do is fix a pipe.

As stated, I raised this matter when I was a councillor. I am raising it again as a TD. I do not want to be coming in here every month or six weeks to raise the same issue. This is about the basics. It is about people being able to have a shower. It is about being able to drink water. It is about the elderly people knowing that they can use their toilets. To be frank, it is not good enough. What Uisce Éireann said in the reply is simply not good enough. It has not been good enough for the past couple of years since it made the same reply to me when I was a councillor. Unfortunately, I will have to keep raising this matter until it is resolved. I do not want to hear excuses or about the plans, ideas, concepts or struggles Uisce Éireann is having because, frankly, its delivery in north Kildare across all areas has not been good enough. It needs to do much better.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I hear loud and clear the frustration in the Deputy's voice in relation to this issue. The points he made are very relevant. Water is a basic requirement for everyday living. The Deputy referred to children, adults and the elderly. Water is a

fundamental aspect of everyday living. The Deputy also spoke about businesses and the frustration people have when the water is cut off. The challenge we have is when there is a commitment given that it will be back by 9 a.m. but does not come back until 2 p.m. the following day for whatever reason.

People's livelihoods are being put at risk. The Deputy spoke about cafes and other businesses. I hear the frustration, and I know the first port of call for people is their local TD or councillor to ask what they are going to do about it. What the Deputy said about Leixlip in testimony to the fact that, as he outlined, what is happening is simply not good enough. I will take back what I have heard to the Department and to Uisce Éireann and, in the strongest possible terms, ask them to respond. While the Dáil is the forum in which to raise important issues such as those outlined by the Deputy, we still have to get responses from the statutory bodies. I will communicate the Deputy's frustration to the Minister, in the first instance, and to Uisce Éireann, which I will ask for an update. I do not just mean seeking a response that will come back in a week or ten days; I mean real action on what needs to be done in Leixlip. I assure the Deputy that we will relay what he said to those to whom I refer.

Water Supply

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State for taking Topical Issues again - two days in a row. I must be following him around. It is appreciated. I wish to raise a matter today, similar to the previous speaker, around the growing concerns for families in Lusk, in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West. Repeated water outages have taken place for the past couple of weeks affecting two estates, in particular Kelly Park and Dun Emer.

From the outset, I want to be clear. I am not denying that maintenance and upgrade work to our infrastructure is not essential. Some of these pipes are 50 or 60 years old, so the fact that they are being done is to be welcomed. We all want reliable and resilient water infrastructure and investment in that infrastructure is welcome.

However, serious questions must be asked as to how these works are being scheduled and the impact they are having on local families, childcare providers and businesses. Councillor Mark Boland and I have been inundated by a number of businesses in Lusk over the past couple of weeks, including two early years education providers. Between them, they provide care for up to 100 families. Under the Tusla regulations, these providers must have access to running water in order to operate safely and legally. They are full-day services so they cannot use just what they have in the tank. It is not that they are early childhood care and education, ECCE, or national childcare scheme, NCS, services. When the water supply is interrupted, they simply cannot open their doors.

The consequences are significant. Parents are left scrambling at short notice to find alternative childcare arrangements. Many have no choice but to take annual leave from work. Others lose a day's wages. Meanwhile, they continue to pay their regular childcare fees and taxes that fund Government subsidies to support these providers. They are forced to pay a third time when they are looking for alternative childcare. This is not a minor inconvenience; it places real financial pressure on working families who are already dealing with the rising cost of living.

My question is straightforward. Why are these planned outages repeatedly taking place during normal working hours on weekdays? If they are scheduled and planned works, surely every effort should be made to minimise disruption to families and businesses. Have any alternatives been considered? Can these works be scheduled in the evenings, overnight and at weekends when the impact on early education and school-age childcare providers, schools, businesses and working parents would be substantially reduced?

The people of Lusk understand the need for infrastructure works. What we are asking for is consideration, communication and common sense in regard to how these works are carried out. Therefore, I am calling on Uisce Éireann and the Minister of State to review the schedule around planned water outages and engage directly with affected communities to ensure that essential works can proceed while minimising disruption to families, childcare providers and local businesses.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. These are operational matters for Uisce Éireann but we have been making inquiries in relation to the issues the Deputy raised. I have been informed that works in Lusk have been undertaken between the junction to Hand's Lane and Minister's Road, along Minister's Road and Barrack Lane to the junction at Treen Hill and then Kelly Park. This is a targeted programme of works to strengthen the local water network at Kelly Park and Dun Emer in Lusk to replace old and fragile water mains. These works include laying new water service connections from the public water main in the road to customers' property boundaries and connecting it to the customers' water supply. The project began back in March and work is expected to be completed this summer.

Uisce Éireann tells us that very effort has been made to minimise disruption to residents and businesses during these works. Planned supply interruptions have been short in duration. However, the discovery of an undocumented branch off the water main led to unexpected interruptions. Further investigations are now required to map older sections of the network so that redundant sections of pipes can be closed off completely. Customers have been notified about this unavoidable disruption, which is essential to help Uisce Éireann to complete this important work to provide a more reliable and resilient water supply in the area.

A contractor liaison officer is now in regular contact with the early years services, including visiting the business on Monday in advance of a planned interruption today, Thursday. An Uisce Éireann area inspector has also been in contact with the business and understands that limited storage is available on site. Uisce Éireann is offering the crèche owner the services of its first fix free scheme to establish if there is any leakage on the premises which may be affecting its storage capacity.

The Kelly Park and Dun Emer areas are residential areas and it would not be possible to schedule future outages in the evenings or overnight. There are three more outages required to close out the project and Uisce Éireann is working to put in place a detailed programme which can then be communicated to key stakeholders to give more advance notice than normal.

In regard to the correspondence we had on getting this question, the most frustrating piece is that where there are works going on, the communities do not know in advance. It can lead to huge frustration. I will take that back as well. There is no way that I can come in here and defend the lack of communication, which is basic. I will ask Uisce Éireann to look at other

areas that could be looked at in respect of minimising the disruption, particularly to young people and young families.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State. I have seen the reference to undocumented branches. If pipes were put in 50 or 60 years ago, the mapping may not have been as good as it is today. I accept and understand that. I welcome that Uisce Éireann is engaging with the businesses but if it could speak to the two crèche owners in particular, it would certainly alleviate some of the frustrations felt by the residents in the local area. I get that there is no ideal solution here but, as the Minister of State mentioned, what families are looking for is to minimise the disruption as much as possible, to alleviate the stress on working families and for Uisce Éireann to engage with the local communities and crèches as much as possible.

Before I finish up, I wish to welcome my former French teacher, Mr. Robin Gallagher, to the Gallery, and my ex-colleague in St. Joseph's Secondary School, the German teacher, Ms Anita Irwin, who is a big supporter of Europe Day every year. Like myself, she is probably looking forward to the EU Presidency.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: It is great to see Deputies welcoming their former teachers to the Gallery. They are very welcome and I hope they are enjoying their trip to Leinster House today.

The investment is being put in to upgrade the pipe network. A lot of investigation has gone into the pipe network in this area, which is 50, 60 or possibly more years old. In a lot of the upgrading, particularly in urban Ireland, when Uisce Éireann digs down, it finds there are offshoots here and there. Then it finds that is where the leak is and why there was no water pressure.

There has been unscheduled work here. As I understand it, Uisce Éireann had communicated what it was doing and the timeframe it was doing it in. Now with the extra unscheduled work, there are more difficulties but I will relay back to it what the Deputy has asked with regard to the crèche owners in particular. I will ensure there is full engagement with all the community. While Uisce Éireann is doing a major job in the area, it is important it would engage with all the businesses and householders in terms of leak reduction or anything else. Uisce Éireann is on site now and it should be using that time, fundamentally, to make sure the right things are done and we do not have to go back to it in the future. There was an added piece here and not just the original piece. However, families have had to make decisions on whether to take time off or take annual leave to take care of their children. That is hugely frustrating and it is not acceptable. As a matter of policy, Uisce Éireann, where disruptions are taking place, should always consider childcare facilities and schools to make sure they are communicated with in timely manner.

Water Supply

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I realise this is the third Topical Issue out of five relating to Irish Water. I cannot say I am surprised, although they are different issues.

5 o'clock

I feel obliged to come here this evening to relay the concerns of the residents of Courtbrack, outside Blarney. There is an issue happening with their water supply for some time. I have all of the emails here from Irish Water. There are pages and pages of them and it thanks me for my representation and hopes it has provided clarity and answered all the queries of the residents. Nothing could be further from the truth . Somewhere, buried beneath all of those pages, there are little bits of information. The reality here is people want to know when they will have a safe drinking water supply at home.

I know the Minister of State will be familiar with Courtbrack. People are spending €400,000 and €500,000 on new houses. They do not really have broadband. It is improving but it is still behind where it should be. You cannot get a phone signal except via the Internet, so it is a chicken-and-egg situation. There is light at the end of the tunnel with that because they have been told broadband will be provided by a certain period of time. They have absolutely no faith whatsoever in the service provision from Irish Water or when they will have a safe drinking water supply. They have been on a boil water notice for some time. I know the Minister of State will tell me in his response that it predates Irish Water and it inherited this. The key question I have is why in Christ's name did Irish Water take charge of this when it knew - I have it here in the various emails - the water plant was problematic? It is said it is below par and the conditions they would set. I do not understand why they would take charge of it and not compel the developer at the time to stump up before they took charge of it to improve the facility that was there. That is one thing I would like answered. I know the Minister of State probably does not have that answer.

I know the Minister of State has responsibility for special education and, God love him, he is in here answering questions about water. I know the statutory responsibility for the provision of water, be it operational, infrastructure or servicing, lies with Uisce Éireann and not with the Minister himself. I am not the first person to come in here cribbing about the quality of water or the conduct of Irish Water but there is a statutory obligation on it to provide water. If it is not meeting its statutory obligations, it is incumbent on the Minister to intervene.

That is not just in the case of Courtbrack - it is in dozens and dozens of locations across the country. I do not want to be parochial about it but in my own constituency, the wastewater situation in Carrignavar sees raw sewage seeping into the river. It is three times overloaded. We were told it would be seven to ten years, at best, before it gets an upgrade. There are big HGV lorries and tankers going through a new housing estate in Whitechurch just to service the existing requirement. Guess what? We will zone more land in the next development plan for more houses without having an adequate water supply in Whitechurch. Knockraha is an old chestnut of mine and is in my parish. I am totally despondent at this stage because it is happening for 15 years. Raw sewage is being pumped into a nearby landowner's field. Whether Irish Water likes it or not, it has a statutory responsibility. It is failing to adhere to that. If the State does not do it, I encourage people up and down the country to meet Irish Water in the courts and make sure it is responsible for enforcing that statutory obligation it has. I am sorry for the rant since the Minister of State has responsibility for special education but I get that he gets this frustration as well and not just from my part of the country.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. Three out of five of the Topical Issues have been about Irish Water. I know the Deputy has been talking about Courtbrack and other communities in his constituency for quite some time. In the correspondence we had in the past

half hour or so, it covered three constituencies in Kildare, Dublin and Cork, so we can see the frustration of Members about Irish Water, the challenges that are being faced and how we will overcome them. Fundamentally, the availability of water and wastewater treatment plants is one of the most important resources we have to be able to develop further into the future. Over many decades, we have seen as a country the challenges with economic prosperity, but this is one of the key things. I am deviating from the question I was asked but I see the frustration of Members here today and the frustration of Members from across the country. I could turn back and talk about a number of communities I represent and the frustrations I have with it.

Irish Water is the statutory body. It has taken charge of this plant. As I understand it, the plant was taken over in January of this year and it was not fit for purpose. It was one of those developer-provided pieces of infrastructure going back a number of years. It is important that we understand the challenges that are there. They are on a boil water notice and the information I have is that, since taking over the operation, Uisce Éireann has been carrying out technical and detailed operational assessments of the plant to determine the works required to ensure a safe and secure water supply to enable the boil water notice to be lifted. Uisce Éireann has now completed the initial scoping work and the first phase of remedial works has now commenced on site. These works are focused on upgrading and improving the existing plant. Uisce Éireann expects to have greater clarity on timelines as these works progress. Once the outcome of this first phase of the remedial works is fully assessed, the impact will inform the need for any subsequent phases of work, if required, which will ultimately guide the approach to resolving the issues at the plant.

Given the importance of protecting public health, this process must be thorough and evidence-based. In parallel to these shorter-term improvement works, Uisce Éireann is also progressing the assessment of a longer term rationalisation option. This would provide a more permanent solution but is subject to all necessary planning, environmental and regulatory consenting processes. If the short-term works successfully address the issues at the plant, the need for this longer term project will be reviewed. The boil water notice remains in place and will continue until such time as it is safe to lift, based on the outcomes of the ongoing works. The assessment that Uisce Éireann is doing should be completed in a timely fashion so that we can move forward with confidence that the boil water notice can be lifted. There is a bigger issue with it as well. Even if the short-term issues are resolved, Uisce Éireann should not forget about the long-term issues either. I will relay the Deputy's frustration to both the Department and Uisce Éireann again and ask them to complete the remedial work in as short a timeframe as possible.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State. That is more or less the same answer I got in all of these emails so it is not surprising. The Minister of State knows the score and I know the score. Most people here know the standard of responses we get from Irish Water. I do not think it is too much to ask on behalf of residents, especially if the Minister will make representations on this and I will talk to him myself about it, what specific remedial works are being referenced? The Minister of State read in the answer that Irish Water will carry out remedial works. Tell us what they are. Will it screen the water? Will it add more chemicals? Will it fix pipes? Will it lay new pipes? Is there a problem with manganese, like there is in other parts of the city? Tell us what specific interventions it is making because I received that broad strokes answer of it doing remedial works and scoping. but it is not telling

us the fine detail of what it is doing, bit by bit. Irish Water is saying there are remedial works currently under way. Tell us when they will be done. When will we have a timeline for when that initial phase will be done? From what Irish Water is saying, it will see how successful the short-term interventions are. Depending on the degree of success, it might do another longer term intervention. Tell us what that is as well. Tell us what the criteria is. Tell us the standard. Tell us what the threshold is for making that decision.

Most fundamentally, Courtbrack is a lovely rural village to live. A lot of people have moved out there from the city in particular. They spent a lot of money on their houses. I have already outlined the deficit in services, but at the same time it is not too much to ask that the residents get direct updates from Irish Water. They are coming to representatives like me to get updates or they are approaching fellas as they see them who are doing these remedial works and they are getting little tidbits information when they need something. If you are without water for the best part of a year, the very least that Irish Water should be doing for those people is giving them clear information.

My final point is about the statutory requirement. This is happening in hundreds of locations across the country.

Whether they like it or not, or whether they were handed a mess or not, they have a statutory obligation and a need to come clean with that and to give people what they are entitled to, which is safe drinking water.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. He has heard all the official answers in relation to what is being done. What he needs to do is to have clear sight of what that is, what that means in simple English, what screening and what work is going on, what levels they have to reach, and what stage they are at. I will endeavour to get sight of the remedial works Uisce Éireann is doing and also what they are considering in the long term. Whatever about the remedial works that are to be done here, the long-term issues have to be put out as well for Courtbrack and all those communities. Irish Water is engaging now with the Courtbrack community and it should not be allowed take its sight off it. It should complete the work it is doing on the remedial work in getting the water fit to lift the boiled-water notice and then on top of that to come back and say what the project will be over the next while. It should not just long-finger it but make sure what it is in the short-term. The least we want is to have the water systems fit for purpose. I will endeavour to ask both the Department and Uisce Éireann for concise, direct and informative information in relation to what they are doing in Courtbrack, what the timelines are on it and when they hope they can reach those targets and timelines. I will endeavour to get that information for the Deputy from the Department and Uisce Éireann and forward it to him.

Child Poverty

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue. It relates to the national child poverty target. Social Justice Ireland tells us that there are 211,150 children at risk of poverty. Crucially, this figure does not take account of the household spend on accommodation. Two adults working on a low income or the minimum wage do not earn enough to live decently, and neither can they bring their kids up on that

money. The MESL report, which was out this morning, tells us that older children, aged 12 and older, in households headed by single adults have the greatest risk of deep income inadequacy if they are dependent on social welfare. This has been true consistently and we have heard it consistently. Single-adult households make up over half of the deep inadequacy cases. Households with one older child of 12 and over account for 94% of those cases. I do not need to tell the Minister of State that kids are expensive; we know this. People who are living in poverty or at risk of poverty are doing their best to try to manage but it is getting impossible for them. We know that the Department of Social Protection and the child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach have chosen a figure to measure that does not include accommodation costs. When we compare poverty rates among renters without housing supports, before the impact of housing costs on their disposable income is taken into account, 20.5% are at risk of poverty. After housing costs, this becomes 42.6%. That is more than double. Even more worryingly, the 22% of supported renters in poverty jumps to 58% once housing costs are accounted for.

The Minister of State and I both know that direct cash transfers in the form of additional child benefit, or whatever way the Government wants to dress it up, have been recommended by the ESRI and others as the most effective way to reduce child poverty. Plain and simple, the Government did not commit enough money to the issue of child poverty to make serious progress towards its target. For years the targets have been set and we know they have been missed. The truth about child poverty exists in those homes where parents are earning but they are paying extortionate childcare rates, for really massive rents or their mortgage has increased, or they are forking out for devices, which are going far ahead of free school books. They are paying energy bills that are among the highest in Europe. I am interested to know what progress is being made to reach the Government's target, but I am also interested to know if it is interested in what the real picture is. The real picture exists when you take into account accommodation costs. If you do not take accommodation costs into account you are missing the picture and therefore will always miss the target. If you are not measuring it properly you will not be able to resolve it.

We know from the MESL report that home energy costs have risen by 24.9% in the last year and doubled since 2020. Home heating oil, included in the rural MESL basket, has risen by 72.4% in the last year. That is 186.8% compared to 2020. These are all really serious factors which are impacting. The Children's Rights Alliance tells us that between 24 and 25 there has been an increase in the proportion of individuals living in consistent poverty and experiencing food deprivation.

There is an awful lot of talk about a social media ban for children under 16 years of age and I am very concerned that this is acting as a distraction from what is really happening. There are kids who will fall through the cracks because the Government's target is based on figures that are not real figures because they do not take accommodation into account.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: To take the last point first before I go into it. Not to take it in isolation, that is a completely separate issue. Reducing child poverty is a key aspect of Government policy. The Government has been working on this and understands it. In September 2025, the Government agreed a new target to reduce the child consistent poverty rate to 3% or less by 2030. While an ambitious target, in setting this rate, the Government was clear that no level of child poverty is acceptable, and this is reflected in the programme for

Government. The Department of the Taoiseach's child poverty and well-being programme office continues to lead and drive this important work and break down silos across Government. It has developed a dashboard of indicators to complement this target and to measure child poverty across health, housing, education, early learning and other indicators.

As a developed economy, poverty in Ireland is measured on a relative rather than an absolute basis. A risk of poverty is assessed by comparing a person's income to the average income in society. As a relatively high-income country, this means that some households assessed as experiencing poverty in Ireland might not be considered so in other EU countries. Nevertheless, as we are committed to reducing poverty, it is important to retain this approach. Moreover, the consistent poverty measure that we use is unique to Ireland and captures those both at risk of relative poverty and who self-report deprivation.

The Government was pleased to see a reduction in the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, 2025 rate of child consistent poverty, from 8.5% in 2024 to 7.8% in 2025. This reduction reflects the impact of Government measures to date. The SILC data has a time lag and is based on income from 2024. It therefore does not yet reflect the 2025 budget and the very significant budget 2026 measures. Despite this, we fully recognise that much more needs to be done to reduce child poverty and to deliver on our target by the end of 2030. This requires sustained cross-government investment and commitment over many years. Budget 2026 reflected this commitment, with €320 million allocated to the Department to address child poverty. Significant measures included record increases in the child support payment, higher working family payment thresholds, broader access to the fuel allowance and the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, and an expansion of the hot school meals programme. These build on important programmes already under way that work to reduce child poverty, such as free schoolbooks, free GP visit cards and early childhood supports. While existing targeted income supports, including the child support payment and the working family payment, are effective at tackling child poverty, the Department of Social Protection is exploring reforms to both the working age and the child income supports. A public consultation on this concluded recently.

Reflecting the need for a multidimensional approach, work continues right across Government in other key areas such as housing, employment, childcare, education and health to address child poverty. The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030 outlines many of these actions, with the aim of achieving our target by the end of the decade.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not want to seem ungrateful for the Minister of State's reply but he has said things like, as a relatively high-income country, some households assessed as experiencing poverty in Ireland might not be considered so in other EU countries. They are not paying rent or buying groceries in any other EU country, are they? They are doing all that there. If they are in relative poverty, they are in relative poverty. There is no point telling them they would be well-off if they were living in Spain. They do not live there; they live here. As I said, I do not want to seem ungrateful for the reply but I personally would have been embarrassed to read that out.

The Minister of State referenced the SILC data and the time lag. That is important because these findings are based on incomes in 2024. We all know what happened in 2024. There was an election and, in the run-in to that election, there were energy supports and all sorts of other

things. That is all gone now. When the SILC data catches up, it will reflect the fact that energy supports have been withdrawn and that people in this State are paying some of the highest energy prices in Europe. Moreover, families who are living in poverty are more likely to be on pay-as-you-go meters. I am sure the Minister of State sees this in his constituency office just as I do in mine. Those people are paying even higher rates. It is very expensive to be poor in this State.

The SILC data also does not include accommodation costs. That is huge. There are people on ordinary wages who work really hard. If we are making comparisons with other EU countries, in any other EU country, they would be able to expect to go on a holiday or to have a few bob on a Friday night. All of that is gone. They are just paying their rent. Their kids are paying the price for the Government's failure to act on child poverty.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The CSO surveys are hugely important as a basis on which to measure poverty. The investment the Government has made over the past number of budgets, not just those for 2024 and 2025 but also for 2026, and the social protection measures we have put in place, show that not just the Department of Social Protection but all Government Departments are very conscious of child poverty. We are very conscious of the long-term impacts on those children. We are trying to give them the best possible opportunity. You only get one childhood. My Department and Departments right across Government, particularly the Department of Social Protection, are making sure that we are investing as much as possible into capturing the reasons for child poverty. We are investing to make sure we are giving children the best possible opportunities.

The CSO documentation and the data we get through the survey on income and living conditions are hugely important in framing Government policy. This is driven from the Department of the Taoiseach to ensure we are doing everything that can be done across Government to tackle child poverty. I assure all Deputies in the House that we understand. We know that, when you meet parents and families who are experiencing child poverty, you can have all the statistics in the world but you need to be able to point to something that can get them from where they are to where they would like to be or to at least give them a roadmap. Everyone wants the best for their families. This is something that every one of us experiences. The Government is working extremely hard to tackle child poverty. We have seen reductions in the indicators over the last number of years.

Report of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters: Motion

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I move:

> That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters entitled "Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities", copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 25th March, 2026.

I welcome the opportunity to move this motion and to present the committee's report on inclusive education for persons with disabilities. I acknowledge the disabled learners, families, educators, representative organisations, service providers and other experts, especially Corpus Christi Primary School in my own constituency of Limerick city and St. James's Primary

School in Dublin, who contributed to the committee's work. Their input was invaluable. Their lived experience, expertise and insights were central to the development of the report and its recommendations.

While reading the report, I encourage the Minister of State and his officials to look especially at the Sky is the Limit programme operating in Corpus Christi Primary School in Moyross in my constituency of Limerick city. The school both presented before the committee and hosted members of the committee at the school on the importance of this inclusive education project. The project aims to provide psychological support to members of the school community and the surrounding community, recognising that education does not end at the school gate. The programme embeds counselling, therapy and family support services within the school environment, thus allowing pupils and parents to access help that would otherwise be difficult for them to navigate. It is a model that could be looked at as part of needed changes to how we deal with the issue of special education. We cannot rinse and repeat the same tired and outdated approach to special educational needs. We need to do much better.

The community of Moyross has faced many challenges over the years, from organised crime and drug dealing to violent feuds and deprivation. The work community members have done, particularly in partnership with the local school, has turned the area into a thriving community with one of the best primary schools in Limerick, if not the best. I mention this just to highlight how important inclusive education is not just for children but for their teachers, their family members and the wider community.

On the report itself, the Joint Committee on Disability Matters undertook a comprehensive examination of inclusive education for persons with disabilities through a programme of public meetings, engagements with stakeholders and consideration of written submissions. The committee's work was guided by Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination on the basis of equal opportunity. The committee considers inclusive education to be a fundamental rights issue. Inclusive education is not solely about where a child is educated. It is about ensuring that all learners can participate, communicate, belong and achieve their full potential within the education system.

The committee's 33 recommendations provide a practical roadmap towards a more inclusive education system. The committee heard that significant progress has been made in recent years through investment in special educational supports, special classes and additional teaching resources. However, witnesses also identified significant barriers that continue to impede the full realisation of inclusive education.

A recurring theme throughout the committee's engagement was the need to strengthen Ireland's legislative and policy framework so that it more fully reflects the principles and requirements of Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The committee therefore recommends that legislation, policy and practice be reviewed and strengthened to support a rights-based approach to inclusive education to advance Ireland's obligations under the convention.

Witnesses emphasised that inclusive education is not solely about access to supports and services. It is also about ensuring that learners experience belonging, participation, dignity and respect within their schools and education communities. The committee heard that many

families continue to experience difficulties accessing educational supports and services. Witnesses highlighted the importance of ensuring that supports are responsive to the needs of learners and are available in a timely and equitable manner. The committee recommends that access to supports become increasingly responsive to the needs of learners and less dependent on diagnostic labels alone.

The committee also heard significant evidence regarding workforce shortages across educational psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and other specialist services. Witnesses highlighted the impact these shortages can have on participation, communication, educational attainment and well-being. The committee, therefore, recommends the development of a national workforce plan to address staffing shortages and improve access to specialist supports.

The committee heard strong evidence regarding the importance of communication rights and access to appropriate communication supports. Particular attention was drawn to the experience of deaf learners, the implementation of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 and the importance of ensuring access to Irish Sign Language and other communication supports, including augmentative and alternative communications. The committee recommends strengthening the implementation of communication rights and improved access to the supports necessary to enable learners to participate fully in education.

The committee also heard evidence regarding the importance of learner voice and participation in decision making. The committee emphasised that disabled learners should be supported to participate in decisions affecting their education and that their views should be taken into account in education planning and policy development.

Witnesses highlighted the benefit of inclusive education practices and school environments that are designed to accommodate diverse learners from the outset. The committee, therefore, recommended the further embedding of universal design for learning principles across teacher education, continued professional development and classroom practice. The committee heard evidence regarding the value of multidisciplinary working and the importance of closer collaboration between education, health and disability services. The committee recommended the expansion of initiatives, such as the in-school therapy support demonstration project and strengthened inter-agency co-ordination to support learners and families.

The committee also examined transitions between early years settings, primary education, post-primary education and further and higher education which were identified as particular points of vulnerability for learners with disabilities. The committee recommended improving planning, co-ordination and continuity of support during these transitions. The committee considered barriers experienced by disabled learners in further and higher education and recommended continued action to improve accessibility, participation and support across all stages of the education system. Evidence received by the committee highlighted concerns regarding the use of reduced timetables and the impact that such arrangements can have on educational participation. The committee recommended that reduced timetables should be used only in exceptional circumstances for the shortest possible period and subject to appropriate safeguards and oversight.

The committee also heard evidence regarding the need for stronger data collection and monitoring and accountability mechanisms to support evidence-based policymaking and

measures progressing towards inclusion. The committee recommended improved collection and publication of data to support planning, transparency and accountability across the education system. A consistent message throughout the committee's work was that disabled people and their representative organisations must be involved in the development of policies that affect their lives. The committee, therefore, emphasised the importance of consultation and coproduction with disabled learners, families and disabled organisations in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the principle of "nothing about us, without us". The committee recognises that achieving inclusive education will require sustained implementation, co-ordination and accountability across government. The report, therefore, recommends a co-ordinated approach to implementation and involving the education, health and disability sectors. Progress will depend, not only education policy, but also on disability services, health support, transport, workforce planning and broader societal inclusion. The committee believes that the implementation of these recommendations will support the development of an education system in which all learners, regardless of their disability, are able to participate fully, achieve their potential and enjoy equal opportunities throughout their educational journey.

I look forward to other Members' contributions. I will come back in at the end of the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I express my gratitude to everyone and thank all the members of the joint committee for their work in preparing this report. I know full well the work that they are engaging with. As I was the chair of the committee in the previous Dáil term, I am aware of the work, effort and preparation involved. I have watched a number of the committee's meetings over the past year or so. The dedication, commitment and the depth of knowledge within the committee is a joy to behold. The seriousness that members take their role as advocates in the committee for disability matters is hugely important. I congratulate each and every one of them for their input into it. It is one of the most important committees in the Houses of Oireachtas because one fifth of us now according to the various censuses have a disability of one type or another.

The committee is led by Mairead who had a huge influence. There is a great team on the disability committee. I thank them all for that. There are a number of issues that were raised in the report on inclusive education. In his opening remarks, the Chairman mentioned a school in his constituency in Limerick. If there is proper investment in education for people with additional needs or disabilities, they can flourish in all those settings. It is about how we pathway that to grow. Since my appointment to this role, I have taken on this role extremely seriously and I have worked with all stakeholders to ensure that we have the best possible education system.

A number of the points were made in the report regarding the transitions in education. In any child's life who has a disability when they enter preschool, go from preschool to primary school, then go to primary to post-primary and then onto adulthood, those key points are hugely important. In my engagement, not just as chair of the committee, but as a public representative for a number of years, families have been in contact with me. They are the key points or the key difficult moments in family's lives. It is important that we have the right resources in place there. Over the past week or so, I am pleased that we have secured additional funding, particularly on special schools, and there will be extra resources given to special schools to

guide the students and their families as to what the future looks like when they leave the special school, whether it is into supported employment, day services or beyond. They are a hugely important piece in it.

If we compare September 2025 and September 2026, we will have close to 1,000 extra special classes opened across the country at primary and post-primary level. These classes did not just come about. A lot of work done by the Department, Deputy McEntee in her time in the Department, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, myself and the school communities over the past 12 months to bring this to fruition. With the engagement that the committee has had with school authorities and school communities, it is important to note that there is a huge openness across primary and post-primary schools to engage with specialised education and to improve and make sure that we have more inclusivity and classes within that. That is a work that is being done. We have also introduced the new inclusive special classes at post-primary and primary, which have been welcomed by the school communities. We have to embed them and ensure that we are doing the right thing.

The one thing that I constantly I push is that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an overarching document with overarching reach. The optional protocol was one the issues that we addressed in our committee and to ensure it was signed during the term of the previous Government, which it was finally. It is only as good as how the Republic of Ireland will interpret that and ensure that we have the supports in place to ensure that every child matters and that every child that goes through education who has special educational needs has the best possible outcomes within the education system. I passionately believe that if we invest properly in special education, we will improve the life cycle of the individuals who has special educational needs and their families. We will also improve a variety of issues societally.. That is fundamental. As a country, we have invested hugely in education over the past 100 or so years, which has served us well. We have to ensure that we continue the level of engagement and support across the special education system to ensure that the best possible outcomes for children with disabilities.

Over the past five or six weeks, in five locations across the country, we met the principals of the special schools. We sat down with them for four or five hours on a Friday to see what the challenges are for them in their school communities, including what they, their teams, their leadership, teachers and SNAs face on a daily basis and to feed that back to ensure that we are doing the right thing. One of the big issues they were looking at was career guidance. What we have done is ensure that hours are provided across the special schools to support students and their families into the future.

We also worked extremely hard in relation the SNA workforce development plan, the workforce redeployment plan and the circular which will replace the 2014 circular. The 2026 circular has been brought out. It gives certainty to many thousands. This year alone, over 26,000 SNAs will be employed in the education system. That number will increase over the coming years. We are listening carefully to what is being said.

I was delighted to meet members of the committee in Liskennett recently. Everybody who was at the centre in Liskennett was really impressed with the service provided there and the ongoing work being done by St. Joseph's Foundation in Charleville. I congratulate the Joint Committee on Disability Matters on visiting the site to see the work being done at first hand. The service in question works with 80 schools across the region. It provides therapy sessions

to special classes and special schools. It is an integral part of those classes and schools in the context of the wider community. On one of the days I was there, people had travelled from as far north as Ennistymon in County Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and beyond to get an hour or less of equine therapy. Such therapy is of huge benefit to the children. You could not but be impressed by the work ethic of the teams at Liskennett and by the services they provide for the children involved. It supplements and supports special classes and inclusive education.

We are starting inclusive special classes this year. Other countries tell us that they do not have special schools but that they have very inclusive models. Not every child, because of their needs, can meet the strict criteria. We have to have special schools, special classes and integrated classes across the system. Some practitioners in education have been extremely capable in pushing the boat out and challenging me and other policymakers as to the best next steps for education and how we can be more inclusive. We have been engaging thoroughly since I took up this role, for example, with the National Council for Special Education, and the work it does. Over the past number of years we have increased the number of special educational needs organisers, SENOs, from 60 to 120. There are now more SENOs who liaise with families to ensure that they make the best possible informed decisions for their children. Last year, we had the 51 recommendations regarding the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSEN, Act. The latter was developed over 20 years ago and was reviewed in the context of how we make sure that we have the best possible education system and the next steps. I was Chair of the education committee 20 years ago when people were talking about mainstreaming and the challenges involved Education has evolved enormously in those 20 years for the better. We must now look at the next 20 years in the context of what is the right thing to do with the review of the EPSEN Act. The Government is holding a forum on special education and ensuring that the various stakeholders are talking about the next steps. We all have to understand that our schools are our future. It is important to ensure that we are engaging.

In every role across the education system, we see great practice. I could not but have been impressed by what has been done at Maynooth Community College. It reached out and set up a sports day for every special class in Leinster. Students in special classes in post-primary schools across Leinster were all invited to take part. I was there on the morning of the launch. No matter the challenges, you would have to be extremely impressed by the co-ordination involved, by the people in Maynooth Community College who were driving it in the first instance, by their understanding of the concept in having the special classes involved in their own day - all other students have their sports days - and by their energy, commitment and dedication. Those are some of the great practices.

When I was first appointed, people said we should look at best practice across different countries. We have a lot of very good practice in our education system, however. The challenge is to ensure that we replicate that best practice across the country. The committee's report speaks to the many challenges and issues we have to face up to across education, including teacher training, reduced timetables and exclusion, which is important at school level. I spoke about transition and inclusion. The Chair raised the issue of sign languages and co-ordination. We are best able to implement policy by collecting data and ensuring that we have the relevant data across the education system. Governance is also important.

I cannot but congratulate the committee unreservedly on its work. I appeal to all the members of the committee to continue with that work. If we continue to invest in specialised education as we are - one third of the budget is being spent on specialised education - in the years head we will see great benefits for the children, their families and wider society. I am delighted to accept this report. I encourage the committee to continue its work. It is hugely important.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I also add my congratulations and thanks to the committee. It is a great committee and does fantastic work. I call Deputy Toole.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I thank Deputy Quinlivan for chairing our committee so ably and for tolerating a lot of toing and froing and time overruns, but the purpose and spirit committee members brought to the task at hand is manifest in the report. I urge all Members of both Houses and officials in all Departments to pay special attention to it.

The report runs to 42 pages. Pages 9 to 11 are the key pages because they contain the 33 recommendations. None of our work would have been possible without the submissions, in-person attendance and work of the secretariat in the background, keeping us on the straight and narrow and providing research and guidance. We had contributions from special needs assistants, personal assistants, teachers, allied healthcare professionals, service providers at the coalface and the National Council of Special Education.

I appreciate that whole school communities have had quite a lot of turmoil and policy change to grapple with in recent years. They have risen to the challenge wholeheartedly and are producing fantastic results for our children and for our future, while trying to manage change in policy with finite resource and oft times very scarce resources. That places immense stress on the system.

They are then trying to co-ordinate communication with parents, linking in with the health sector, and linking in with all the different service providers that may be appropriate along the way. What has become evident, and it is manifest in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, is that the focus now has to be needs based and on the needs of the child, and not necessarily set in concrete in a diagnostic process. We are moving towards a change in that area. I am quite an impatient person so I suppose I am always thinking of what actions can we actually implement. We are part of a five-year cycle and I hope the recommendations in the report do not take the full term to achieve implementation. I will give an example of where action has come about quite quickly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, referred to it. I visited St. Bernadette's in Letterkenny on Monday. My niece is on the staff there. Mr. Haran, the principal there, welcomed the recent funding for that transition piece from primary to secondary, and secondary to tertiary or to service provision. That is most welcome. The Minister of State is hitting the ground running so more would be most welcome.

The objective of Article 24 and the right that underpins all this is that all learners with disabilities can access an inclusive, high-quality education system with the appropriate supports, with reasonable accommodation, and without discrimination. The results in the report will address all that in succession. It is fair to say at this stage that national policy has

evolved considerably. I cast my mind back to the time when I was a child and my mother was a primary school teacher in County Meath. When the bell rang, as kids all we wanted to do was get out, get into the car and go home. We did not quite understand why mam might have been the extra hour or even the extra hour and a half or two hours after school. What she was actually doing at that time was *ad hoc* support and assistance to children in her care who needed it. Cross check that with the current situation with the EPSEN Act, the review thereof and the recommendations, and things are moving in the right direction.

Again I refer to my impatience. What I would like to see, and I think the signs are good, is that the education, health and disability supports that are currently fragmented across regions and perhaps across schools and between individual children, will all move to a point where we have inter-agency co-ordination and we have joined-up working. That is essential. There is a task force within the Department of the Taoiseach. There is the Minister of State's Department of Education and Youth. We have the Department of Children, Equality and Disability. It is about more of those links.

I am being cheeky now but the Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters is here. I am jumping ahead but I would like to see more attendances at our committee meetings, either in public or in private session, so we are very much aware of what the different groups are doing and that we are all on the same page, so we can deliver outcomes for children as quickly as possible. I will refer to some of the points that witnesses have emphasised. The key starting point is that children's ability to learn and engage meaningfully in school is linked to emotional regulation, psychological safety, and access to timely therapeutic supports. The Minister of State referred to the Liskennett centre and the fantastic work being done there through the medium of equine assisted therapy. This is the type of approach that helps with regulation and helps with the release of oxytocin, which biochemically helps bring about calmness. When we have calmness and regulation, the channels open up for learning. The good work at Liskennett is being replicated at Clonalvy in County Meath with Joy Murray and at Stewarts Care in Kilcloon through Terri Brosnan and her team there. We wish to see more of that. I appreciate that officials are looking for an evidence base but I would like to flag something with the Minister of State that I noticed on social media, which is the Department of agriculture funded equine therapy and programmes that are available around the country for the children of farming communities who have additional needs. If the Department of agriculture can do it, perhaps we could see more of that provided through the Minister of State's Department. I am very happy to work with him on that.

Well-being supports are well proven to help sustain inclusion for students with complex needs. As referred to on page 25 of the report, there is a requirement for holistic, multidisciplinary, social and emotional supports. We had a fantastic visit to the Corpus Christi school in Limerick where we met with the team there. We had the team from St. James's primary school in to visit us. I have been to St. Bernadette's. We also have St. Mary's in County Meath. This is not to take away for one minute from the work that is being done in special classes. I would also like to commend the library services through the local authorities, in particular Meath County Council. Through the healthy Meath programme, it has have embraced well-being classes and story massage through Una Curran, who has also done this online with other local authorities. If colleagues would like information to that effect, I can pass on her details. There is a whole area referenced in the report on art and music therapy. I will bring one book to the attention of Members. The question arises of the evidence base and

whether there is there an evidence base for all these integrated therapies. There is indeed and there is an excellent book called *Art Cure: the Science of How the Arts Transform our Health*. It is also very beneficial to elder care. I just wanted to flag that.

In the area of recruitment, I commend the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, and the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, on the move towards the increased college places for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and students of psychology, and for the reforms that are coming in the area of education. These are most welcome. I will give a particular mention to Dunboyne College of Further Education, which is now linking in with Enable Ireland and with the HSE primary care teams.

To conclude, I would highly recommend all Members to please read the report. We refer to the area of personalised budgets and personal assistants minimally in the report but that is an area for future development. It underlies all our work on the committee. I will finish with a quotation from Dr. Margaret Mead, the famous American anthropologist. She had fantastic observations of the social norms of her day but they are very relevant at this point in time. The Minister of State made a similar comment this afternoon. Dr. Mead said, "The solution to adult problems tomorrow depends in large measure upon the way our children grow up today."

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also commend Deputy Quinlivan, as committee Chair, the clerk to the committee and the committee secretariat who have done a huge amount of work.

I would like to tackle one of the issues Deputy Toole brought up. It is absolutely spurious to believe that anyone would have gone over time at the Joint Committee on Disability Matters and I would just like that recorded. I cannot imagine who she meant-----

Deputy Gillian Toole: I am looking at you.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----and neither can the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: No. Certainly not.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When we are talking about inclusive education we need to make sure that this is part of wider inclusivity. Deputy Quinlivan, two other members of the committee and I were lucky enough to be at the 19th Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the 20th year of the UNCRPD. We dealt with a huge range of issues. It was everything from autism services for adults, to participation in sport right through to the role and impact of conflict on those with disabilities. I commend ambassador and permanent representative, Mr. Fergal Mythen, and the mission to the UN, whose guests we were, on what was a very worthwhile enterprise. We were doing this in the United Nations in New York when the regime in America is obviously putting extreme pressure on the United Nations and the whole idea of multilateralism and international law.

6 o'clock

On some level it nearly makes it more important at this point in time.

The ethos across the board was about inclusivity and ensuring that those with disabilities could participate fully in every aspect of society. It was about mainstreaming, which is about supports and ensuring, as much possible when talking about education, that people with disabilities can play a full part in mainstream education if that suits. I understand that will be different for every person.

On universal design, whether we are talking about course content, capital projects and settings like this, it is about ensuring as much as possible that we facilitate as many as possible. We are talking about those with mobility issues, those who Deputy Quinlivan spoke about who have issues with hearing, those who have vision-related issues and those who are neurodivergent. We already know that this particular Chamber would suit almost none of them but that is what we need to be about. It is about universal design, mainstreaming and reasonable accommodation. In fairness, that means it has to be reasonable. While we will not always be able to facilitate everyone, the plan should be to facilitate as many as possible and then, if we need bespoke solutions for those with more challenging needs, we should be able to provide them.

I do not think I could continue on mentioning the NOW Group, that the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy O'Reilly, a number of others and I were lucky enough to meet earlier. It is a social enterprise group that is based in Dublin, Belfast and throughout. I think it has a place in the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's constituency. It was really worthwhile. No more than a lot of the interactions that the disability matters committee has had, we listened to people talking about their lived experience. We also dealt with the cost-of-living issue at the disability matters committee this week. I do not think I need to go into the absolute need for a cost-of-living payment and ensuring that it is for everybody, and not just those who are getting social protection payments based on their disability at present.

We met representatives from the Irish Wheelchair Association, Rehab and AsIAm. Conor Lynott and Áine Dunne, in particular, spoke about their cases in relation to housing but no more than the young people from the NOW Group, they spoke about getting jobs, and how we do not allow for all those transitions, be they the transitions from early childcare through to primary, post-primary and tertiary education, as well as the transition into work. There are those who are worried about losing their payments and those who are worried about losing a medical card, even if it is a number of years later. We could be talking about people who have significant health needs.

We also spoke about the issues that this State has to get better at in respect of facilitating the connection between industry, enterprise and these young people, who will be able to provide a real benefit to the economy and to these companies. In fairness, there was talk about how many companies are worried, have an element of trepidation and are unaware of the schemes that exist such as the wage subsidy scheme or the work and access programme. What also was pointed out to us is that those schemes are not fit for purpose. We must have a more comprehensive and holistic look at how we deal with disability.

When we talk about inclusive education, we all know the issues that exist. We could literally spend our entire time here talking about the issues facing those who are waiting for an assessment of need. We could talk about those who, even if they have an assessment, cannot get the necessary therapies. For all of the improvements there have been with regard to workforce planning, we know that we need the back-up of assistive technology.

When I am in these circumstances, I find it hard not to use the example that I know the best, which is our Turlough. I am sure that all the Members have heard me speak about him before. He is 17 and is autistic. He attends Ó Fiaich Institute of Further Education. He attended St. Joseph's National School before that and as I have said previously, he has been facilitated no end. I often talk about speech and language therapy, SLT, and what I will say is that he, his family and the school all would have been better off had those therapies happened within a school setting and had we been involved. It would have been even better if we had assistive technology rather than photocopies - and I am not taking away from the quality of the SLT that was provided - but from the State's point of view, it is about getting the best bang for buck. It is also about getting the best bang for buck from Turlough's point of view - who is the person who definitely needs it - as well as ensuring that I and my wife, who does all the heavy lifting in relation to most of this, would also get the best benefit out of it. Children of his age have no issue or rather probably too many issues in relation to using screens but we can all see how it would work if we were talking about assistive technology and apps that back up best practice and which would also benefit teaching staff and SNAs.

Being from Limerick, Deputy Quinlivan could not but speak about the Corpus Christi Primary School. I also have to mention it. I was really taken with the principal, Tiernan O'Neill, and his staff. In fairness, I see it as nothing but an outlier school in relation to being at the absolute centre of the Moyross community but even beyond that, through fundraising it ensured that it had the supports that were required within that school setting. These are for all children and that is the idea of mainstreaming because we are talking about counselling and psychological services, along with SLT, OT and all those requirements that are needed.

We often speak about early intervention without actually delivering it. In a lot of cases, if we could give most children that early intervention, it would probably reduce those situations and circumstances that arise. From the State's point of view, that would be easier, quicker, faster and cheaper. From a budgetary point of view, it is an absolute win-win. It is about ensuring that we can deliver this. The report also deals with the reality of the fact that we do not have enough OTs, SLTs, or psychologists and while we need to do those pieces of work, there is far more that we need to do.

Deputy Toole spoke about how a lot of parents come to us and their issues are generally related to school, including reduced timetables. Some schools can be better than others depending on a number of factors. If there are staff changes and a particular SNA, teacher or SET leaves, it can change the dynamic within a school. Meltdowns can be very difficult to deal with but if strategies are employed, they can be reduced and are generally avoidable. I can speak from my own experience in this regard.

Along with Liskennett and equine therapy, I could not but mention Louth Disability Cycling Club. I also have to mention that Louth County Council and the HSE are coming on board to make it into something that is sustainable because that is beneficial to those people with disabilities who engage with it and their families.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is well up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I commend Deputy Quinlivan and the committee on producing a very good report. I have not read it all yet, but I have read a fair bit of it and it seems like an important piece of work. Well done to them all. I am not a member of the committee but it is an important issue.

I have a particular reason I want to raise a specific issue with the Minister of State in relation to people's access to education and special needs assistance and I will get to it in a minute.

The starting point of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the fact that equal access to education is a right for children regardless of disability or additional needs was brought into very sharp focus recently with the Government's move to reduce the number of special needs assistants in many schools and the explosion of anger from school communities that caused. The Government has responded to that explosion, but it highlights something that is terribly important, which is the need to listen to those who are impacted by our decisions and by whether the systems we have and the resources we allocate are adequate to actually ensure the quality we profess to try to achieve in terms of delivering equal access to education. What we learnt from school communities, parents, teachers and SNAs during the recent events is that the role of the SNA had massively evolved from when the 2014 circular, for example, was originally done up; that a sort of minimalist approach to the special needs resources that were needed for children was not adequate; that there had to be recognition of that evolution of the role of the SNA in providing social support, communication support and emotional support to children; and that a minimalist approach which led people to think they could reduce SNA support on spurious grounds failed to take on board the actual needs of children and the views and opinions of the SNAs, the parents and the school communities. It was a matter of listening to those directly affected. A "nothing about us without us" approach is terribly important in this regard.

It is in that context that I want to highlight to the Minister of State - I do not know whether he got an email about this - the situation, which may be impacting more broadly than the particular example I have come across, of the allocation of SNAs to children under IPAS, which is a different system. The Government, in the context of the recent protests and so on, promised that there would be no reductions in SNA supports for schools in September, but that has not come to pass in the case of the provision of SNAs for children from IPAS accommodation. They are in the same schools as other children, but it is a different system for allocating special needs supports. I was not aware of that, but this is where you learn from people on the front line, in this case from Holy Family National School, in Monkstown Farm, in my area. The way SNAs are allocated is that for every 15 IPAS students the school has you get a half-time SNA, half a post, for 16 hours. If, however, the number of IPAS students drops below that number, you lose that. That is what has happened to Holy Family National School. This happens even if the number drops only temporarily. In the case of the Holy Family, the school informs me and has informed the Department that the number has briefly dropped below the threshold of 15 but that it will go back up above the threshold in September. In the meantime, however, the school has had the half an SNA post withdrawn and it simply cannot cope with the impact of that. It does seem crazy to have a cliff edge of that sort. If you have 15 students, you get half an SNA post, but if you have 14, you get none, so you just go over a cliff. Then the school has to pick up the slack, and that will impact everything else in the school. An injury to one is literally an injury to all, and that is not fair. I ask, on behalf of Holy Family National School, all the children involved - the IPAS children and all the other children - and the teachers

who will be impacted as a result of that, for that to be addressed and for the schools, please, to be heard.

It does speak more generally to something I think Simon Lewis said to me about the approach we have to have in ensuring inclusivity and in giving the necessary supports and resources to avoid a penny-pinching or box-ticking model that can end up not really doing justice to the actual human lived reality of children with disabilities or special needs. The way he put it, in literally one sentence, was that we have to trust schools, that we should just trust schools. There are so many buzzwords in all these documents, but I think that is what is referred to when we talk about rights-based and needs-based provision - that it is the actual needs that have to determine things, rather than ticking boxes or rationing resources, which is so often the case. That, I think, was at the back of the recent debacle in terms of the withdrawal of special needs supports for so many schools, causing panic and alarm in school communities across the country. We must recognise those on the front line: the parents, the teachers, the SNAs, the children themselves, the school communities. They can tell us what the needs are. They are the experts. They should be believed; they should not be distrusted. It should not be thought that they are trying to rip the Department off of resources. Their words should be accepted. That is not to say that very occasionally people might not look for things they do not need. By and large, however, people do not look for things they do not need, and there should not be an attitude at Department level that people are looking for things they do not deserve. It is when that attitude of gatekeeping comes in that we get problems.

In my last minute and a half I wish to mention a couple of things. When will the pilot project on providing therapies in schools be expanded to all schools? From what I hear, it is a storming success, and how could it not be? How could providing OTs, speech and language therapists and psychologists in schools not be a good thing? We do not really need to pilot any more. It is working. Let us just do it and roll it out and have a plan to get all these speech and language therapists, psychologists and-----

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In the new school year.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Excellent.

Can we also, then, have psychology departments in post-primary schools? That would be the next thing, something that has happened in many other schools. We know mental health issues are huge in terms of special needs, neurodivergence and so on but also just generally for young people. There should be, as there are in many other countries, psychology departments in every single school. That should be an aspiration for us in every school.

I agree with Deputy Toole's point about arts. When we talk about expanding the basic income for the arts scheme, we should develop a scheme to offer jobs to artists in every single school, whereby you get a decent, liveable income and you have time to practise your own art but also help bring art to children with special needs, disabilities and so on, and indeed to children generally in schools. That would be well worth investing in in every single school and would be an imperative to reach across the education system.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Congratulations to Deputy Quinlivan and everybody on the disability matters committee for this great document. I have read it. There is so much in it. It

must have been a huge amount of work. It is very thorough. My colleague Deputy Liam Quaide is not able to speak today but he would love to have been able to do so.

One of the things that struck me with this report is that in schools, education and in this place, we often silo things. The disability matters committee has done a wonderful report. We in the education and youth committee are down in committee room 4 most weeks, and we are looking at inclusive education. It is imperative that these two pieces of work meet each other and that we do not stay siloed. This is not about maths, Irish or English in school. It is serious and is about people's lives. I would love to see what comes out of our report and how they speak to one another. They are independent pieces of work but I have no doubt there will be so many things that are similar between them.

The only difference is that ours will be for primary and secondary school and will not examine third level. That is the missing conversation that never happens in here. What happens for young people who go on to third level, whether to an apprenticeship or college or to any institution or course? The Disability Federation of Ireland has said that 25% of adults with disabilities have now completed third level in comparison to 32% of the general population. We are still not on a par. We need to ensure that tertiary education is as available as primary and secondary. It is not so easy. That conversation definitely needs to happen. I would love to see the further and higher education committee, which I attend although I am not a member, looking at the situation as well.

On education and children with disabilities, not a day goes by that somebody does not contact my office about the state of things. I just got off the phone with a mother where the school clearly does not want the child to be there. Deputy Boyd Barrett said to trust the schools but in this scenario I do not. This poor child has been ostracised. I am obviously not going to name them. There are examples of poor practice around the country because of lack of leadership and lack of challenges. We need to make sure that if this is the situation, it is called out. For the most part, schools are doing absolutely excellently. However, not every school is suitable for every single child. If that is the case, how do we make sure a child does not continue in an education setting that ruins them as an individual?

Separate to this, when I was a school completion co-ordinator, we had the iScoil programme. It is not for children with disabilities but for children who left school and were not in school for six months at a time. They would come to us broken, thinking they were stupid and thinking they were not able to learn anything. The system broke them because it did not understand them as individuals and their needs and rights. When they would come to us, we would have to build their confidence so they would know they are not stupid, and there is a place for them in this world and for every single person. We need to challenge that in every aspect of our education system at primary, secondary and third level, so nobody feels they are not able to be valued and have a place in that.

The systems in this world have to fit around people. People do not have to be jammed into a system that is wrong for them. That is so important, particularly for people with disabilities who already face so many challenges in other aspects of their lives. Over the course of being a TD, I have been struck by the different types of challenges that people have when they have a disability. For example, on reading, there are reading classes that are being closed, or are not open or are full, because they are not being invested in. The vision is to be inclusive so that the local school will be the inclusive school and children will just go to their local school. That

is fantastic but in the meantime, until that is a reality, we need to be safeguarding those reading classes and making sure that children have access to that. There are children who are going on to second level who have not managed to access or get through the primary school curriculum. They are not able to read it because they have not been given the skills to do that. We are using programmes like Reading Recovery, which is being struck off in other countries, and we are investing a quarter of a million euro or more in it. We need to look at structured literacy and how that happens, and why it is effective in the long term for children.

While I am talking about books, I cannot ever forget about the young person who came to the education committee and told us that he got his Braille books the week before he was doing the leaving certificate, even though they were ordered in fourth year. I just cannot get over that. There is a system that shows an absolute breakdown for a child, that they would not have their books for the two years of studying the leaving certificate.

I have mentioned mild general learning disability schools so many times. I did not know they existed until I was a TD. Now I know. I have been at one and was at a beautiful graduation in Scoil Eoin in Crumlin last week. I was trying not to cry too much since it was not my children, but it was absolutely gorgeous. Those young people have left that school with their heads held so high, with absolute support, love and care. They are going to meet the world right where it is and will be able to do whatever they want in the future because of the care they got in that school. I know we want to have the local school being the inclusive school, but until that is an actual reality we cannot close those schools because those children will not get the same love and care in a school with 1,000 pupils. There is just no way they can. There is a balancing act. When we transition into the new system we would like to have, we need to make sure that until we are definitely able to deliver on that side, we do not put those children in jeopardy.

Today in the education committee the teacher and SNA unions were in. One of the challenges they have is the lack of time for planning. They do not just rock up on a Monday morning at 9 o'clock and decide what they are doing today. They have to have plans. That needs to be built in, particularly if they are supporting children with additional needs. It is about what needs to be done, when, what is the routine and who is doing what - all those things. That needs to be built in to the planning week, as does the overall view of how inclusive education is done in a school. It is the culture of a school and who manages it. When the principal is running around doing all the other things, who is the person who instils that culture in a school? The principal is that person but she or he cannot do everything. We need a way of making sure that culture is there in schools.

We also need to make sure for any school that is being opened, a special school or special class, that the training is there for those staff members. Teachers who are newly qualified or who are very long in the system are telling me time and again that they did learn anything about this in college, yet they are expected to go in and work with the child when they have no idea how to manage or do that. It is not good enough. We are failing the teacher or SNA and we are failing the child. We need to make sure that the training and CPD is there for the best chance for everybody in the situation.

I agree that it has to be rights-based and needs-based. It needs to be about fairness and equality, but also equity. We cannot give everybody the same because some people need more than others. There is a fine balance as to how we make sure that everybody gets exactly what

is appropriate to them to make sure they are on an equal footing with everybody else. When I was visiting a school a very long time ago, I saw a lovely picture of children looking over a wall. You just saw their faces across the wall, but on the other side you saw children of different heights. Some were standing on a higher or lower ladder or stool, but they all looked the same from the other side of the wall. It was showing what equity is. Equity is to give people what they need in order for them to be on an equal footing with everybody else. That is not only for primary and secondary school but also for third level. Early intervention classes set children up to succeed in primary school. We cannot see them closed until we have proper alternatives in our primary schools.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Members for their contributions. A number of issues were raised. It was remiss of me at the start not to talk about the education therapy services. We made a decision at Government back in March or April of 2025.

Some people said we would not be able to do it. This involves the whole of Government. It was a decision made at the Cabinet disability committee. The housing committee is the committee that meets the most, and the disability subcommittee is second.

A decision was taken to put therapies back into schools, starting with special schools and then rolling services out elsewhere. There are two elements to that. The first is recruitment. Thankfully we have had a successful recruitment process. Services will be clinically led by the NCSE and the structure is in place. Services are being rolled out in special schools.

The Department of further and higher education has examined expanding the amount of training and college places available for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, behavioural therapists and other therapists. We cannot manufacture therapists; we have to train them through the system. We are working extensively across Government. We have increased capacity in third level colleges to ensure that we have an adequate number of occupational and speech and language therapists.

The other piece is that heretofore no block release was available for occupational therapy, in particular, for special schools in Ireland. A number of occupational therapists were being trained in college and were then going to block release in the UK or other jurisdictions. We know when people go on block release we lose a certain percentage of them. From this year, that is being addressed in special schools. Block release is available for education therapy services. This is a great enabler and will be significant for students who are going to special schools. We have to continue to monitor and work on that. I can report to the House that is being done.

There was a pilot scheme in 2024. The new scheme includes 45 schools and is a permanent scheme to provide therapies. It will be rolled out to over 140 schools. Over the past five years we have added another 20 special schools across the system because we need to build capacity in terms of education therapy. It will be a great enabler for the system.

The teams working in special schools are superhuman beings and are doing an amazing job. We have to encourage and understand them. That is why I reached out to all the principals over the past number of weeks and met them face-to-face. We will continue to examine schools that

have embraced special classes, including inclusive special classes, with such great enthusiasm and excitement.

Across the Chamber I heard about the commitment and dedication to special education. I reflected on some of the reports we launched when I was chair of the committee. The level of commitment to special education and disability on the floor of the Dáil is a joy to behold. People are well informed and see the challenges. We are dealing with a system that is evolving and we have to ensure that we are equipping the system not just for the short term but for the next decade and beyond. We spoke about the workforce development plan over the next decade or so. We have to ensure that we are equipping it for the next decade and beyond. The decisions that we make today are for the betterment of society.

I thank Members for their contributions. I engaged with all of those who contributed as best I could individually and collectively. I thank the Committee on Disability Matters for the work it does. I ask that it continue the good work and I look forward to going before it again in the not too distant future. The committee visited Liskennett in Limerick. The committee is a powerful body and the more it is out in communities and groups the more informed the Oireachtas is, so keep up the good work.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister of State for his kind and supportive comments for the committee and its members. It is much appreciated. I thank all of the members of the committee who contributed to the report, turned up to meetings, read all of the submissions, made suggestions, changes and amendments and helped us to deliver what I believe is a good report. I hope it will be accepted. I want to I record my thanks to the committee secretariat, ably led by Mairead O'Donovan and supported by Ronan O'Connor and Tracey Driscoll, who did a fantastic job in delivering the report.

Inclusive education, as I said, is not simply about access to school places but also participation, belonging, communications, achievement and equal opportunities. Last week, as Deputy Ó Murchú said, members of the Committee on Disability Matters visited New York city to attend events around the application of the United Nations CRPD on its twentieth anniversary. The committee's recommendation provides a practical roadmap to advance inclusive education in Ireland, in line with Article 24 of the UN CRPD. I take this opportunity to thank ambassador Fergal Mythen and the team at Ireland's permanent mission to the UN for the fantastic support they gave the committee in terms of organising meetings and events and hosting meetings at the permanent mission across the road from the UN. The meetings were very useful and there were learning experiences for all of us.

I thank the members of the committee and committee secretariat for their work in developing the report and all of those who engaged with the committee throughout the process. The committee hopes that the recommendations contained in the report will assist in advancing an education system in which every learner is valued, supported and enabled to participate fully. I again thank everybody who contributed to the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.38 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 23 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.38 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 23 June 2026.