



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 1 Iúil 2026

Wednesday, 1 July 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss plastic and reconstructive surgery services in Roscommon University Hospital.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss longer opening hours of the X-ray department at weekends in the minor injury clinic in Louth County Hospital.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss actions to reduce the risk to children who require MRI scans under anaesthetic.

Deputy Seán Kyne - To discuss the protection of historical and generational rights to seaweed on the west coast.

Deputies Gary Gannon, Daniel Ennis - To discuss the procedures governing planning application decisions in Dublin 7.

Deputy Sorca Clarke - To discuss staffing allocation at a Gaelscoil in Mullingar.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the decline in Garda roads policing unit numbers.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the number of schools in Cork currently at stage 2A for a prolonged period of time who desperately need new accommodation

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss plans to review the current age limits for school bus drivers.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the failure to provide necessary supports for children with additional needs in the summer programme.

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

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the reimbursement of a drug and implementation of the drug reimbursement system.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the introduction of a farm succession scheme.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the building project proposed for the amalgamation of Shanbally and Ringaskiddy National Schools, County Cork.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss supports for households affected by the ending of the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme.

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

The matters raised by Deputies Erin McGreehan, Martin Daly, Gary Gannon and Daniel Ennis, Seán Kyne, Colm Burke, Maurice Quinlivan, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Séamus McGrath and Thomas Gould have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Hospital Services

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is great to have the Minister in the House this morning. I very much welcome the opportunity to have a discussion of a practical nature that will solve this issue and have really positive impacts on patients, staff and the wider health service across the north east.

The minor injury unit in Louth County Hospital, Dundalk, is one of the best services in the country. It serves the people of Louth well and we are immensely proud of it and grateful for it. I have spent many a Saturday there when my sons have been injured. We are very grateful that we do not have to go to Drogheda. Day after day, patients receive excellent care from dedicated doctors, nurses, radiographers, administrative staff and support staff. They are professional, effective and really efficient. I want to recognise all of them in this House. The unit's reputation is such that people regularly travel there from well beyond Louth. There were lots of Dublin accents to be heard in the accident and emergency department when I was there last Saturday. They did not even know that Louth was playing on Sunday. It was all about Dublin. People are travelling from north Dublin to County Louth because our minor injuries clinic is so good. As the Minister will know, the unit opens from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week. It provides a really vital alternative to a really busy emergency department for patients with fractures, sprains, burns, wounds and other minor injuries. It is exactly the type of service we should continue to invest in. It has the same goal as many of us, which is to deliver the right care in the right place at the right time.

There is one significant limitation, however. That is why I am speaking here this morning. It is slowing down or delaying some of the excellent work that is being carried out. At weekends, the X-ray department only operates from 12 noon until 8 p.m. As a result, people

who attend in the morning can face unnecessary delays while waiting for imaging. Those delays inevitably increase waiting times, creating frustration, and place additional pressure on staff who are doing everything possible with the resources available to them. This lack of service before 12 noon has a negative knock-on effect. This is not a resourcing issue. I hope it can be looked at and addressed.

We all know that weekends are a really busy time for injuries units as a result of sporting events and family activities. Every patient who can successfully be treated in Dundalk is one less patient for another hospital to treat. Extending X-ray availability across the entire opening hours of the minor injuries unit seven days a week would improve patient flow, reduce waiting times, enhance the patient experience and further reduce the pressure on the emergency department in Drogheda. For that reason, I ask the Minister to examine the recruitment of an additional radiographer to allow full radiography cover throughout the unit's opening hours every day of the week. This is not about creating a new service. It is about strengthening and extending a service we already have. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Minister. I hope her response will be positive.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Deputy McGreehan for the opportunity to discuss this very practical issue, which is of huge importance to the people of Louth and wider north-east region.

As she stated, minor injury units are a really practical response to an identified need to deal with small injuries away from hospital settings. This is a key part of Sláintecare. As the Deputy also stated, these units are particularly busy at weekends when kids are playing sport and so much activity is taking place. That is even more the case during the summer when people are out and about and getting injured as a result of being involved in sporting or other activities.

The development of injury units is a key part of our hospital avoidance strategy. They provide a safe, convenient way for non-life threatening injuries such as broken bones, sprains, burns and all of those things that just happen as part of life to be treated. Crucially, they deliver the same level of care in respect of those conditions as emergency departments, but much closer to home and with much shorter waiting times. We cannot encourage people enough to attend injury units. Nationally, we have seen a great increase in attendances at injury units, reflecting, I hope, the high public confidence and the convenience of local access. Last year, for example, there were 222,000 attendances at injury units. That was a 5% increase over 2024.

As the Deputy knows, the minor injury unit at Louth County Hospital in Dundalk provides treatment for patients aged five years and older in respect of suspected fractures, sprains, minor burns, wounds and other injuries that do not require treatment at an emergency department. It is open from 9 a.m. seven days a week, including on bank holidays, with the last patient seen at 8 p.m. It is one of the busiest units in the country. It is the fifth busiest of the 14 units nationally.

The most important thing for the Deputy is increasing capacity at the unit at weekends. She is completely right, because that is exactly when it is needed. I have discussed this matter with the HSE and been informed that the minor injury unit has access to two digital X-ray machines, which is fine, and that radiology services are available 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Friday. At weekends, however, those services are only available from midday to 8 p.m. The plan is to extend weekend availability. There is a plan to recruit additional resources to do precisely that.

I expect that the resources to extend the radiology services to a fully operational model will be put in place during quarter 3 of this year, which is not that far away.

I am glad to have this opportunity to discuss the matter with Deputy McGreehan and to outline the very real plan for the extension of this excellent injury unit.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is very rare one gets a really positive response like that in the House. This is great news for everyone in the entire north east. As I said, the minor injury clinic in Dundalk is an incredible resource for all families and people who live in the area. This is really positive news which shows that the work of the staff in Louth County Hospital in Dundalk has been seen to be successful. The HSE and the Minister are going to invest in that success in order to make sure that the clinic can maintain and expand its excellent services at weekends. I very much appreciate the Minister's work in this area and thank her for it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am delighted. I again thank Deputy McGreehan for raising this matter. Deputy Paula Butterly also raised it with me but in a different way. I just want to compliment the region in general and the hospital management in Louth, particularly Priya Madhu, who is the hospital manager there and who has done so much. Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, which the minor injury unit supports, has done phenomenal work. There are zero people on trolleys there today. For the past ten days, the hospital has been completely within the green threshold in that regard. As a representative for County Louth for so long, the Deputy knows how that was very much not the case a year and a half ago or two years ago and that the emergency department in the hospital was really challenged. There were no people on trolleys in the hospital yesterday. I checked that at 8 a.m. this morning, and it is only just after 9 a.m. now. There were also no people on trolleys on Saturday. As indicated, all week long, the hospital has been within the green threshold, which is the accepted safe level.

We have given Drogheda hospital additional resources for a virtual ward that has 12 beds. I am pleased to say that Drogheda hospital is using that ward. There were eight people on the virtual ward yesterday. The figure for the ward has been in and around that each day. They could put a few more on because there are 12 beds on the ward. The point is that the hospital is using the resources it has been given intelligently, well and in a way that serves the people Deputy McGreehan represents in County Louth. I am so pleased to champion, highlight and promote what Priya Madhu and her team have done. It is absolutely fantastic. The Deputy is aware what has happened is a turnaround for both the hospital for the people she represents. We are so pleased to be able to do more to support that really excellent level of care. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

Hospital Services

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Let us keep the momentum going. An Teachta Martin Daly is next. His matter relates to plastic and reconstructive surgery services at Roscommon University Hospital.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister for being here. This is a success story that the Minister will be glad to hear about. The question is how we are going to support and expand the service that exists at Roscommon University Hospital. The reconfiguration of the hospital,

which caused huge controversy at the time, has turned out to be a great success, with many innovative departments and many new services for people, especially the elderly, being developed.

In the past 15 years, a plastic surgery unit that uses a see-and-treat model has been developed under Dr. Deirdre Jones, who is a plastic surgeon. In 2025, the unit received 8,000 GP referrals from Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, east Mayo, east Galway, Westmeath and Offaly. The unit developed a photographic referral system in order the GPs could take photographs of skin lesions include them with referral letters. That happened during Covid. Of the 8,000 referrals, 2,000 were able to be triaged and referred back to the relevant general practitioners for appropriate treatment without the need for the patients involved to be seen by the unit. Of the remaining 6,000 patients, 2,000 have had surgery. The unit is also involved in screening for, diagnosing and treating skin cancers. The 2,000 surgeries to which I refer were carried out by one plastic surgeon, one part-time plastic surgeon and eight advanced nurse practitioners working over different periods. This unit is hugely productive. It is located in an area where there is a high prevalence of skin cancer. The west of Ireland has one of the highest prevalences of skin cancer, not just in Ireland but internationally. There is no plastic surgeon from the tip of Malin Head in Donegal right down to Roscommon. We have patients travelling from Sligo, Donegal and the other areas to which I referred to this unit in Roscommon, which is providing an exemplary service. In addition, 10% of all cases of melanoma, which is a deadly skin cancer, are treated at the unit.

The problem for the unit is that it is treating approximately 50 patients per week. From a staff point of view, it has the capacity to treat 150 per week. This is really important, because those in the unit are constrained by the environment in which they are working. They are working out of two small treatment rooms and they have an area in which they assess patients. Will the Minister urge the HSE and the Department to consider the expansion of the physical infrastructure in which this unit operates in order that it can operate with maximum efficiency and to its maximum potential?

As already stated, this is a success story. It is a story of productivity. It is a story of Sláintecare. It is a story of a hospital which has reimaged itself but which needs ongoing support. The hospital also has a tremendous endoscopy unit, which serves the region, and has developed services for elderly patients. We know that the population is getting older and that, as a result, there will be a need for frailty clinics, falls clinics, memory clinics and a range of outpatient services. This really is something worth supporting. I urge the Minister and her Department to intervene with the HSE to support this unit in any way it can.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am so glad to have the opportunity to discuss this matter with the Deputy. I want to compliment the work of Dr. Deirdre Jones and that of the hospital manager, Marie Doorly, who has transformed Roscommon University Hospital into an enormously important part of the infrastructure of the north west. The hospital is doing great work, and we want to see it doing more great work.

Roscommon is a level 2 hospital. The Government is pleased to have been able to increase its budget by 63%, from €28 million in 2020 to €46 million in 2025. Staffing has grown by 31%. In-patient bed capacity has grown by 5%. As Deputy Daly is aware, what we are trying to do at the hospital is so much about day-case procedures. He referenced the endoscopy suite,

which I am going to go to see. I think that unit could run harder in the evenings and that we could do more there. Where we see really efficient practice is what we want to support.

As the Deputy stated, the clinic in question is run by Dr. Deirdre Jones. There is a lot of advanced nursing practitioner support within the clinic, which is a real example of what is good about and what is possible with Sláintecare. There is no reason for people from Roscommon to have to travel to Galway for this service when it can be and is being delivered so capably in Roscommon. The service is led by a consultant and provides day-case and outpatient care.

Of course, it has the ancillary benefit of reducing pressure on the acute hospital in Galway, which does not need to see these day case procedures that can be supported so well elsewhere.

What I really admire about this treatment process and the way the hospital is running it is that it is a direct access model. It is a "see and treat" service, which is fantastic for patients because they do not have to come back again and again. It also runs a skin cancer surveillance service under the national cancer control programme, which has been in operation for 15 years. It ensures that all patients who have had any sort of cancer diagnosis are kept actively under surveillance and monitored. In the past three years, it has introduced a photo triage element of the service, which is fantastic. It means that GPs can send in a GP referral as requested but also include a photo, so they are getting ahead of the question all the time. The clinical nurse manager reviews that in conjunction with the consultant. It is a really streamlined pathway to the correct model of care. In many cases, the patient may not need an appointment and the GP is advised as such. Therefore, it is a very efficient, productive and caring model, where patients are prioritised on the basis of clinical need.

Roscommon hospital has excised twice as many skin cancers - 1,200 in 2024 - as benign lesions, and has also treated 10% of Ireland's melanoma patients. That is quite an output for the work in a model 2 hospital. We will continue to invest in the plastic services, and the opportunities for expansion of the services can be reviewed. I happen to be in Roscommon in July, and I might drop in and have a look.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer, which I appreciate. The important thing is the innovation that has happened at this particular unit in terms of the "see and treat" model, where patients are referred for photo triage before they attend. The service is led by a consultant but delivered by specialist advanced nurse practitioners, ANPs, in dermatology, who are trained in the screening and diagnosis of skin cancers and other skin lesions. These may not turn out to be skin cancers but it is important that this work is done. We need to support the advanced nurse practitioner model in this unit and develop it further. It needs more physical capacity. I have spoken to the HSE. I spoke to Mr. McCallion last week after the health committee meeting, and he said the HSE is going to look into that. It is worth supporting.

The whole issue about Roscommon is that the public in the west, in particular in Roscommon and east Galway, were promised that with the reconfiguration of Roscommon University Hospital, it would be supported in all its endeavours to provide appropriate services, such as day services. It is important that we keep an eye on the replacement acute psychiatric unit, the car parking services and the outpatients unit, which does not have disabled toilet facilities or a ramp for disabled patients to use. We need to develop the endoscopy service. If the Minister can expand that, we would be delighted and would support her in that.

There are so many good things happening in Roscommon University Hospital but it takes commitment. For example, Roscommon University Hospital was promised a neurological rehab unit in 2015, with an attached budget of €8 million. That was taken off the capital plan twice, and only after an intervention by me and my office has it been placed back on the plan. There is a dearth of neurological rehabilitation places in the west of Ireland. I urge the Minister to support Roscommon University Hospital in every way she can. This is an exemplar for the reconfiguration of that hospital.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I had the opportunity to see that for myself when Marie Doorly came to our regional meeting for the north west and presented on behalf of Roscommon hospital. It was clear to me. I have huge respect for Roscommon hospital and the role it is playing in the health architecture in the north west. As the Deputy knows, the local injury unit is highly regarded, with people coming from all over the north west - from Mayo and elsewhere - to that unit as an alternative to going to Castlebar. I am pleased to say there will be another injury unit in Ballina, which hopefully will take the pressure off Roscommon somewhat, because it has been filling that role. I know what it is doing in terms of endoscopy and helping with stepdown beds for the other hospitals to ensure the appropriate flow.

What the Deputy is talking about is the excellent "see and treat" model of care, delivered away from acute hospitals in an excellent model 2 hospital for the people of Roscommon and beyond. It is an exemplar of Sláintecare. I compliment Marie Doorly, Dr. Deirdre Jones and all of the people working there who have delivered this. I will do anything I can to support that kind of committed Sláintecare focus they have had.

Planning Issues

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for joining us. Let me be clear. I am not looking for the State to intervene when it comes to planning decisions. That is not our purpose in coming in here today. However, we are conscious that the senior members of Government have made observations publicly on issues in Dublin city centre, most pointedly the dereliction and vacancy. Deputy Ennis and I want to bring forward some very significant anomalies and contradictions in planning, particularly in the Dublin 7 area, that have an impact on local businesses.

I want to focus on two businesses in particular, the Cowtown Market and the Stay With Us café in Dublin 7. Before they opened, their locations were the site of dumping and antisocial behaviour. They were places where the aesthetic quality left a lot to be desired. These businesses then invested in their community. One built a little café with wooden seats, where every morning in Phibsborough, you will see people going in, bringing their dogs and sitting there. It is a lovely little space, and it absolutely adds to the community. The Cowtown Café, just off Stoneybatter, also took a place that was previously the site of dumping and antisocial behaviour, and invested in it. It now has little café stalls and saunas there.

Inexplicably, Dublin City Council has told them that they have to remove the infrastructure they have built, which has added to the community. I am dealing with issues in Dublin 7 where there is an absence of enforcement at very significant conservation buildings, yet these two businesses have been told they are outside the planning. As they have not met planning

standards, the whole business has to go, rather than Dublin City Council simply working with them to help them get to the right side of planning. I am raising this to the Chamber with Deputy Ennis not because we want the Minister of State to intervene but to raise the issue and see what we can do to work better.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: To follow on from Deputy Gary Gannon, the Cowtown Market is a space that is so much more than an outdoor food market. It is a space that was once a derelict site. We have seen serious levels of antisocial behaviour at that end of Prussia Street and the Stoneybatter area. It opened since Covid and has been thriving ever since. It creates local employment and has strengthened relationships with the local pub, the City Arms, and other local businesses like Tesco and the shops across the way. It has really brought life and vitality to that area.

Dublin City Council wants to return that to a derelict site. It is a complete contradiction. It contradicts some of the work that Dublin City Council is trying to do around the city centre with regard to meanwhile use and everything else. Not only has this business strengthened local businesses but it has strengthened local community networks. It is complementing an already amazing community spirit in Stoneybatter.

The Stay With Us café is a small local independent café that is not only very important and a community hub for the local community in Phibsborough but because there is also an emergency homeless hostel next door to it, it is a hub for the people living there.

Both spaces are at risk of being lost. We are crying out for derelict spaces to be turned into community hubs. We are not asking the Minister of State to intervene. We are asking him to open up a dialogue with Dublin City Council, as we have also done. Again, these spaces are not only very important to local independent businesses but they are vital community hubs. We cannot lose them because they will fall back into dereliction, and we know what that dereliction brings. We are doing everything in our power to save these spaces. We are asking the same of the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I congratulate Deputy Ennis on his recent election. What a day for his family, friends and supporters. It is an incredible achievement. It is great to see the two constituency TDs from the same party working so closely together. It is not that common, by the way. I am grateful that they have raised this issue.

I appreciate that there is a sense of vibrancy in Stoneybatter.

I am familiar with it. There are some great food locations and cafes, so I understand where the Deputies are coming from with this.

The response that I am going to read out was drafted not knowing what angle the Deputies were coming from, but I might come back to it in the supplementary response.

This gives me an opportunity to update Members on the current procedures governing planning application decisions in general, noting the restrictions on my ability to comment on individual planning decisions. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for

Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne. I wish to explain at the outset that the role of Minister in relation to the planning system is primarily to provide a policy and legislative framework for the planning authorities, An Coimisiún Pleanála and the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, in performing their statutory planning functions.

Under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall not exercise any power or control in relation to any particular case with which a planning authority or An Coimisiún Pleanála is or may be concerned. This means that the Minister is explicitly prevented from intervening in such cases, which is of utmost importance to maintain the independence of the planning authority or commission. In fairness, Deputy Gannon already alluded to how he was aware of that.

All development proposals require planning permission, unless they are specifically exempted under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, or the supplementary Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended. Where any person is unsure if planning permission is required, they may seek a declaration from the relevant planning authority under section 5 of the 2000 Act as to whether their case "is or is not development or is or is not exempted development" within the meaning of the Act.

When a person submits a planning application under section 34 of the 2000 Act, irrespective of whether the proposed development is located in an urban or rural location in any county, the relevant planning authority, in making its decision, shall have regard to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area. It is a matter for the relevant planning authority to consider each application on a case-by-case basis and to decide, in accordance with the provisions contained in the legislation, whether to grant the permission, subject to or without conditions, or to refuse permission.

Where an individual has participated in the planning process or is directly affected by a planning decision of a planning authority, they may lodge an appeal to the commission in accordance with section 37 of the 2000 Act. Furthermore, any person who has participated in the appeals process, or shows that they have sufficient interest, may seek a judicial review of the relevant decision of the commission. In addition to the appeals process, if any person has a planning issue that is systemic in nature, they can refer the matter to the OPR or a referral may be made to the Office of the Ombudsman if the issue relates to an individual matter, such as the way a local authority has carried out its administrative functions.

The response goes on in the same vein. I take the Deputies' point, and they will understand how limited the Department and, by extension, the Minister and I as a Minister of State in that Department are in relation to commenting on individual cases. The Deputies made a point about the standard application of enforcement across the city. That should be same when it comes to dereliction. I know that there are beautiful Georgian buildings on that side of the city and that Deputy Gannon has been raising the issue of dereliction for a long time. He may perceive that there has been a lack of attention to that issue and all of sudden there is attention on this particular issue that the Deputies are referring to. I take the Deputies' point and I might come back to it in my supplementary response.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for his response and his understanding of the situation. There is a frustration. We spend so much time talking vacancy and dereliction

in Dublin Central that the potential for losing two businesses that have added to the vibrancy and improved the aesthetic quality is grating to the point that it is nonsensical.

For a small independent cafe like Stay With Us, if it is to make an appeal to An Coimisiún Pleanála, that is going to cost over €4,000. It is a small independent cafe that is being held to the same appeals standard as a large company. It just does not make sense. As a community that is trying desperately to add to its area, support our local independent businesses, and engage with the parts of the community that are really investing in improving Stoneybatter and Phibsborough, it is so frustrating that Dublin City Council can just tell people to take something down and then it is gone. We know what comes afterwards.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I thank the Minister of State. Consistency is key, and that is what is letting us down with our local authority in this instance. Communities do not expect every planning application to succeed, but they do expect consistency in how planning is enforced. We are not asking for weaker planning rules, but for a planning system that is proportionate, consistent and capable of recognising the wider public good when local people invest in their communities and turn once-derelict sites that were not only eyesores, but causing antisocial behaviour and other nefarious activities, into thriving local community hubs. It is hard to take.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Just to respond in general without commenting on specifics, we have to take a balanced view of this. There may be a business within an area, whether it is a cafe, a commercial enterprise or shop of some sort, that will have gone through the step-by-step planning process and been successful in getting its planning application approved. There may be a sense of unfairness if others do not go through that same process, if the Deputies know where I am coming from.

That said, in my limited experience of Stoneybatter, it is obvious to someone like me that it is starting to rejuvenate itself in many ways. The Deputies live there and are aware of this day to day. There is a real sense of entrepreneurship and a growing association with it becoming a really good place to eat, with a lot of restaurants and cafes popping up. It is fair to say that there is an onus on the planning authority to take into consideration the direction of travel when an area within a city like Dublin is starting to reimagine or rejuvenate itself. Other than that, I cannot say much more, but I take the Deputies' point.

We have a lot of work to do, certainly within my Department and section in terms of heritage funding, to ensure that we invest in the incredible built heritage in that part of the city. They are throughout the city, but particularly in that part of city there are some absolute gems that we have not invested in for far too long or perhaps paid enough attention to from an enforcement point of view to ensure that the owners of those properties are bringing them back to life and protecting them.

That onus is on us, but there is also an onus on us to ensure that where rejuvenation is happening naturally, we support it rather than being a hindrance to it.

Seaweed Harvesting

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this Topical Issue for debate this morning, and I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to the Chamber. As

he knows, I raised this matter in the Upper House on 18 March, and due to its importance for coastal communities, I wanted it to be the first issue that I raised as part of a debate in this House.

This is, as the Minister of State knows, a classic big guy versus small guy issue. As it stands, small harvesters are providing seaweed product to big and smaller processors. Smaller processors are on record as saying that they are quite happy with the *status quo*, but bigger players want to control the licensing.

In March, the Minister of State indicated that the marine planning policy statement, MPPS, was being finalised and was expected to be brought before the Government in April gone by. What is the status of the MPPS? What is it proposing regarding seaweed rights?

In September 2023, the then Minister of State with responsibility for local government and planning, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, stated in the House:

... there also exists the right of individuals to harvest wild seaweed, namely those who hold appurtenant rights and profit-a-prendre rights. Their rights to harvest wild seaweed may be related to a property known as a folio or appurtenant right or built up through harvesting from the same area over a period of time known as a profit-a-prendre rights. The process of registering seaweed harvesting rights on a property folio is matter for the Property Registration Authority of Ireland [Tailte Éireann].

Advice provided by the Attorney General's Office in 2018 to my Department was that these rights were to be respected.

There is a cost and a burden on harvesters to register those rights. What thoughts does the Minister of State have in relation to a simpler, less costly procedure to allow harvesters to once and for all register their traditional or generational rights that are handed down but are not on existing folios? Something simpler than engaging with solicitors and going through Tailte Éireann is in order.

Tá sé ráite ag an Aire Stáit go gcaithfidh cearta na mbainteoirí a chaomhnú agus a chosaint. Dúirt na hiarAirí Stáit ag an am, an Teachta O'Donnell agus iarTheachta English, go gcaithfí na cearta sna fóiliúna agus na cearta traidisiúnta eile a chaomhnú agus go bhfuil ról ag Tailte Éireann maidir le cearta feamainne atá leagtha síos ó ghlúin go glúin ach nach bhfuil scríofa ar fóiliúna a chlárú. Ach tá costais ag baint leis seo. An bhfuil aon bhealach go bhféadfaí é sin a dhéanamh trí phróiseas níos simplí agus ar chostas íseal? Céard iad smaointe an Aire Stáit air seo?

Tá ról ag Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, agus tá a chuid oifigigh den tuairim nach bhfuil ceadúnas ag teastáil le haghaidh bailiú nó baint méid beag feamainne ar bhonn neamhthráchtála le haghaidh úsáid phearsanta. De réir MARA, má tá daoine ag baint agus ag bailiú feamainne le haghaidh úsáid tráchtála, nó méid mór le haghaidh úsáid phearsanta, ní mór dóibh iarratas a dhéanamh ar cheadúnas úsáide ó MARA. Tá na rudaí seo fiorthábhachtach. Níl sé soiléir céard atá ag teastáil ó bhainteoirí feamainne. This is an issue that has been going on for many years. While there was some certainty provided in the Attorney General's advice back in 2018, there are still licence applications being lodged that I presume are not being dealt with by MARA. MARA is a new agency and it has a role in deciding on those licences, but it is important that there be clear direction from the Department in relation to this. Is there a

simpler process whereby, once and for all, we can deal with the generational rights of seaweed harvesters to control their product and rights?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy for his question. I know of his particular interest in this area. I have met with him and some seaweed harvesters. Indeed, he and I have discussed this in the Seanad previously. I thank him for his advocacy on behalf of those people who are particularly impacted by this and I congratulate him again on his successful election back to this House, where I have no doubt he will make a significant impact as he has in the past, not least on this issue.

Ireland's first non-statutory MPPS for all marine planning aspects was published in November 2019, pending the introduction of the national marine planning framework and the enactment of the Maritime Area Planning, MAP, Act 2021. In 2019, the MPPS outlined existing components of the marine planning system and its future vision. It set out the high-level priorities of the enactment of the marine planning system in Ireland. Ireland's national marine planning framework, NMPF, was subsequently adopted in May 2021. The NMPF brings together all marine-based human activities for the first time, outlining the Government's vision, objectives and marine planning policy for each marine activity. All public bodies and consenting authorities are required to have regard to it in exercising their statutory functions. This is intended to ensure that consistency, precautionary and evidence-based decision-making across all Departments and agencies. The objectives of the NMPF in relation to seaweed harvesting are: to support the sustainable harvesting of seaweed, having regard to the important economic and social contribution it makes to coastal communities; develop and maintain a fit-for-purpose regulatory framework that supports sustainable harvesting, ensures that key seaweed species that support multiple vital ecosystems are safeguarded and respects existing formal and informal rights to harvest - I think this last is the nub of where the Deputy is coming from - and support ongoing research to build on available data to support sustainable seaweed harvesting.

The Deputy has asked for my view on that, which I have made known to the officials. It is that where people have rights that are established, either by way of documented evidence on folios and other means or through a significant tradition that can be verified insofar as possible, their rights should be respected. We see this from an historical perspective. Coming from a small farm in the west, I am very conscious of parcels of land not always being documented in a manner that would be sufficient to address the ownership or the title deeds, etc. We have to find a methodology of addressing that. Our officials are working on that.

The enactment of the MAP Act in 2021 subsequently provided a statutory framework for marine planning policy statements, and following a consultation on a draft statutory MPPS in 2025, that policy statement is currently being finalised and is expected to be brought before the Government in the coming weeks. We had intended and hoped it would be ready for April but it has lagged a little bit.

I am aware of the complexities involved in relation to traditional seaweed harvesting, having met and engaged with representatives of the industry, as I did with the Deputy. The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority has also engaged with representatives of the industry and is engaging with the Department in relation to the existing regulatory framework, because that

has to be clarified to some extent. In that context, it is important to note that, since the establishment of MARA, applicants may apply to the regulator for a licence to harvest seaweed in accordance with Schedule 7 of the 2021 Act, which provides for maritime usage that may be undertaken pursuant to the granting of a licence. MARA shall, before granting a licence, have regard to any environmental impacts arising, and any Government policies that may affect or relate to the functions of MARA. That is a critical component of this discussion. I would also note that departmental officials are examining the regulatory framework to ensure that it is appropriate to adequately safeguard holders of traditional seaweed harvesting rights.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. I welcome the fact that he expects the MPPS to be brought to the Government in the coming weeks. May I assume, therefore, that MARA is not granting licences pending the MPPS? Is that in abeyance? Is there a formal process? Is it involving itself in consultation on the best way forward in relation to the harvesting of seaweed and the licensing thereof? It is a relatively new agency. It is an issue that no licences have been granted for a number of years.

The Minister of State has said that departmental officials were working on a simplification or a process to allow this. Have we any timelines in mind for that? The most important thing is that there would be a simpler process before any licences would be granted by MARA. It is key that MARA would not grant licences until we have a clearer system, the MPPS and a policy from the Department and that MARA was aware of this. I hope that MARA is sitting on these licence applications and is either rejecting them because of lack of a policy, or else just not dealing with them, and that the Minister of State would be given time to ensure that the traditional rights of seaweed harvesters were protected via whatever process or simplification could be done. It is important - the Minister of State has an opportunity in this - to ensure that this issue is put to bed once and for all, that these traditional rights would be registered in some fashion at no great cost to the harvesters themselves, and that these rights could be handed down to the next generation.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I want to make the Deputy aware that MARA has a statutory function. It is an independent regulatory authority. I would not be in a position, nor would the law permit me, to influence the work it does. In the adjudication of any licence application, it will have to follow the legislation as it stands and would not be minded to consider what we might be discussing in this House or what any future proposal might be. However, as I indicated to the Deputy, we want to bring forward proposals that would, insofar as possible, provide support to those traditional harvesters in recognition of the rights that have been established over a prolonged period of time. I want officials to pursue it insofar as is legally possible so that we can provide assurances, give recognition of those rights even in circumstances where documented rights are not established on folios, etc., and find a registration process that would comply with the law. In line with the law since MARA's statutory establishment, applicants may apply to the regulator for a licence to harvest seaweed in accordance with Schedule 7 of the 2021 Act, which provides for maritime usage that may be undertaken pursuant to the granting of a licence.

Before granting any licence, MARA shall, of course, have regard to any environmental impacts arising. As I said, MARA is within its rights. MARA has a large volume of applications relating to matters right across its remit, whether it be in respect of offshore

renewables, Irish Water applications or seaweed harvesting. There is a large volume of work has yet to be concluded.

Hospital Services

Deputy Colm Burke: Concerns have been raised in Cork regarding access for children to MRI scans in circumstances where a general anaesthetic is required. My understanding is that there were outside people coming in to do this work. That all stopped last year. The waiting list has grown substantially and, as a result, there is a concern. Eight consultants signed a letter advising of their concerns. The question now is how we are going to resolve this issue.

Planning was granted for a new paediatric unit at Cork University Hospital, CUH, in 2022. Work on that project has not commenced. Access to certain procedures for children is being restricted as a result. My understanding is that people from outside were being employed to do some of the work involved but that this has stopped.

The other issue that is of concern relates to the outpatient unit that is due to open at Curraheen and whether there will be sufficient staff to operate it. What happened in this instance was that external firms were brought in to do the work. That has stopped, but no additional staff have been taken on to do the work that was being done previously. I have no problem with work being stopped in circumstances where outside contractors were doing it. However, I do have a concern about waiting lists growing substantially.

There is also a question in relation to paediatric services in Cork. There is now major concern about how long a child will have to wait if they need an MRI scan in circumstances where he or she needs a general anaesthetic in order for the scan to take place. The letter to which I refer states that the waiting time could be as long as four years. That is really not acceptable at this stage. What can be done to make sure that there is not an unreasonable waiting time when it comes to getting access to these scans and to resolve the other issues the consultants involved have raised? I hope those issues can be resolved by the HSE, the management at the hospital and the people working at the coalface, namely the consultants, general doctors and nurses. That needs to be looked at. When will action be taken on this matter?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I appreciate the Deputy raising this matter. I feel as though I may be operating in something of a vacuum here. I might follow up with the Deputy in order to discover who exactly are the people who signed that letter. It is not a letter I have seen. It may have been sent to my Department, but I have not seen it yet. I certainly want to discover who they are and see the issue they are raising. Due to the fact that I am operating in a bit of a vacuum, I have to rely on information on what is happening at the same time.

As the Deputy knows, we ceased third-party insourcing as of yesterday, 30 June. He stated three times an external group of people were coming in to CUH to do some diagnostic work, which is exactly what we were seeing with third-party insourcing. I can fairly infer that what the Deputy is describing may be a consequence of the ending of third-party insourcing of the kind that those on the health committee found so problematic. I do not know if it is the case that this was a third-party insourcing arrangement that has ceased. The Deputy is not sure. We can follow up and check the names.

Deputy Colm Burke: I will reply to the Minister in my next contribution.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Sure. What I would point out is that the south west has a more than ample number of ample staff at the moment. It has recruited 617 people this year alone, which is a nearly quarter of all the people who have been hired by the HSE this year. The HSE has recruited 2,700 people overall. As stated, 617 of them have been appointed in the south west, which is one of six regions. Those in the south west have dramatically increased their recruitment. They are still very high when it comes to agency staff and overtime, which means that there has been no lack of people available to work in the south west.

As already stated, third-party insourcing ceased yesterday. I am not suggesting that this is directly related, because I do not have that information. However, some of that third-party insourcing in CUH related directly to diagnostics. The letter to which the Deputy referred relates to a diagnostic concern. That must be sorted out because the people who must not be prejudiced by what is happening in this regard are children who are awaiting diagnostic scans.

The issue around the letter and the timing of everything certainly raises more questions for me to interrogate and investigate. As I said, the south west has recruited many more people than other regions. Dublin Mid-Leinster has recruited about 300 people, so the south west is well advanced in terms of its recruitment and the availability of people to do this work. We must figure out exactly what has happened and how that may be managed, but this does raise quite a number of new questions for me to investigate.

The Deputy asked about developments relating to paediatric care at the hospital. The Government has invested significantly in paediatric care in CUH. Phase 1 of the paediatric department has been operational since 2017. Phase 2 will focus on the paediatric inpatient unit and will deliver 82 much-needed new and replacement inpatient paediatric beds. We continue to invest in and support that. It is very important that we get to the bottom of the situation relating to MRI scans.

Deputy Colm Burke: My understanding is that the eight consultants signed the letter. It was sent to the head of the HSE. They expressed serious concerns to the effect about delays and about the consequences of those delays. The headline of the article I read, and in respect of which I did some further checking, was "Doctors at Cork hospital call for 'immediate action' to mitigate risk of 'preventable paediatric deaths'". A headline like that will cause serious alarm for parents of children who are waiting.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I could not agree more.

Deputy Colm Burke: I raised this matter in order that assurances can be provided and that people can get access to care in a timely manner.

A question still arises as to why, previously, there was outsourcing or there were people coming in to do this work privately. That practice has now stopped. The argument being put forward by the consultants is that no additional staff have been taken on to deal with the vacuum that has been created and that, as a result, the list is going to grow and people are going to be waiting longer.

In relation to MRIs, where a concern is expressed by a GP or a medical consultant in relation to a child's health, if there is any delay, there may not be any going back because the treatment was not provided in a timely manner. Eight people at senior level would not sign such a letter unless there are genuine concerns about the waiting time. Whatever the issue is when it comes to providing care for children, it needs to be resolved. I fully understand that we are putting a huge amount of money into the new national children's hospital, and rightly so, but it is important that areas outside of Dublin are not left in limbo as regards people getting access to the care that is required. As a result, I ask that this issue be looked at. The Minister may not have all the answers this morning, but she might come back to me on the matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I certainly will, and I could not agree with the Deputy more regarding the importance of resolving and identifying the issue and of making sure that children are getting the diagnostic scans they need. I could also not agree more with him regarding the importance of investing in paediatric care outside of Dublin. That is very important, and it is important to articulate it here this morning. I am in agreement with the Deputy in every possible way in relation to this matter.

10 o'clock

I just want to figure out exactly what is going on and how this has come to be.

I should have said earlier that there are 269 children currently waiting for an MRI under general anaesthesia at CUH. Having an MRI under general anaesthesia requires a nurse and an anaesthetist as well as a radiologist. It is a more complicated team. I am aware that the south west has recruited ahead of everyone else. If there is a challenge in terms of where the resources are, it is one we have to figure out. Certainly, that area has recruited more than anybody else, so there should not be this issue. It may be that deployment is more the issue than availability. It is for me to figure that out and to get back to the Deputy. He is correct to raise the issue here today because we do not want children discriminated against in this way.

CUH has invested in a Smileyscope distraction system, which works to develop children's tolerance - where possible; it is not always possible - of MRI without anaesthetic. Instead of sedating children, two play therapists distract and keep them occupied during the MRI. We do not want to have to sedate children where it is possible to avoid it. Eight children have successfully completed the MRI through that approach without the need for general anaesthetic.

I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue for children's care, including as it relates to resource deployment. I assure him that I will figure out what is going on and get back to him on it.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister.

Cost of Living: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. The Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment has tabled an amendment to Deputy Tóibín's motion, as have Sinn Féin Members.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move:

That Dáil Eireann:

notes that:

— Ireland is an outlier regarding the spiralling cost of living, and a Eurostat report this week showed we are the most expensive country for housing, health, energy and alcohol, overall prices are 36 per cent above the European Union average, with health costs in Ireland being 85 per cent higher than the European average;

— a study by Barnardos found that more than one-third of households went into arrears on energy bills in the last 12 months, with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities showing half a million people are behind on gas and electricity payments, and electricity prices are to rise from next week by 8 per cent, while gas goes up by 7.7 per cent;

— rents are also at record levels, as are evictions, in the wake of the Government's rent reforms, and a two-bed accommodation in Dublin is now almost €2,700 a month, while nationwide it is €2,176, which means it costs approximately €30,000 a year to rent here;

— the cost-of-living crisis is now mainstream, and families with two incomes are finding it hard to cope, with very little left over for emergencies;

— in the past five years grocery bills increased by 40 per cent, and that adds up to approximately €3,000 extra a year, for the same goods;

— since 2021, energy costs are up 57 per cent, diesel is up 60 per cent, a pint of stout is up 28 per cent, beef cuts for home-cooked stew are up 50 per cent, butter has risen 42 per cent, chicken breasts that were €5 in 2022 are now €12.98, steak has doubled in that time and eggs have gone up 35 per cent;

— this year, the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that Irish households pay around €360 more per year than the western European average for electricity, and it identified Ireland as a significant "cost growth outlier", as overall consumer prices have risen by 24 per cent over the past four years; and

— families across the country are working hard, yet barely keeping their heads above water;

recognises that:

— the Government has implemented measures that add to inflation and household bills;

— the Government refuses to halt the punitive increases in carbon tax and the M50 tolls;

— the Government collected €1.17 billion in carbon tax last year, the highest ever;

— carbon tax was supposed to be ringfenced for climate projects, but Aontú parliamentary questions found that a quarter of a billion euro of carbon tax revenue, nearly one fifth of it, went back into the State coffers in three years;

— 39 per cent of the carbon tax either was directed to other non-climate projects, or went back to the Exchequer, proving it is not needed for its stated purpose;

- the National Oil Reserves Agency levy for the climate action fund found that €278 million, 70 per cent of it, was left sitting in the Government's bank account from 2020 to 2024;
- the Government took in €4.3 billion in fuel taxes last year alone;
- the Government seeks to increase diesel prices by 32 cents, and petrol by 27 cents, a litre on the 1st August;
- Irene Tinagli, Italian MEP, Economist and Chair of the European Parliament's Special Committee on the Housing Crisis, categorised Ireland's housing crisis as the "most severe and complicated in Europe";
- this year, the Government removed the rent cap for new builds and new tenancies for the objective of making the housing market more lucrative to investors, and the move failed to increase supply, but it resulted in increased rents and record evictions;
- the M50 has paid for itself 30 times over, yet toll fees were still increased this year, as it has taken in over €2.2 billion in revenue since 2008, and is now a tax on work;
- there is no reprieve for burdened customers with the ESB, as despite the semi-State company making supernormal profits of €650 million last year, half a million people are in energy arrears;
- the Deposit Re-turn Scheme was introduced in 2024, adding 25 cent and 15 cent per can and bottle onto consumers' shopping bills upfront at the till, and it is an amount in excess of most other European countries who have the same scheme;
- the scheme has put extra costs on the taxpayer since its inception, such as the half a million-euro cost of cleaning up Dublin from the scavenging it has caused, while the introduction of bottle holders around the bins to try and stop it cost €155,000 before being scrapped;
- the Government's waste is at levels never seen before, including the Iarnród Éireann €50 million Information Technology system failure that was written off, the recent €127,000 Health Service Executive (HSE) Kerry bike shed, following on from the infamous €336,000 Oireachtas bike shed, and another cost overrun is the National Children's Hospital that has seen its original estimate of €650 million increase to €2.24 billion and counting for the hospital, with no opening date;
- there is the €10 million being spent on Dublin City Council's Wood Quay offices, which are planned to be bulldozed in three years' time;
- the Metrolink, that started in the mid-2000s, should have cost €2 billion but is projected to cost €15.8 billion, and Ireland is the world leader when it comes to squandering public money, bad budgeting and bad planning;
- Government spending overruns have averaged €5 billion each year since 2023, and the International Federation of Accountants has strongly criticised the State for year-to-year budgeting, using unrealistic forecasts, and ignoring these overruns; and

— health accounts for more than 40 per cent of total current spending overruns, and capital infrastructure overruns hit €1.6 billion in one year; and

calls on the Government to:

— cancel the planned increase in fuel taxes on diesel of 32 cents, petrol of 27 cents, and green diesel of 2.4 cents per litre;

— remove the Value-Added Tax (VAT) from construction for a three-year period, as removing VAT from construction would reduce the average price of a house by an estimated €50,000 per house, and this is also a market activation initiative, as it would improve viability;

— reduce profits at semi-State ESB to zero, allow it to wash its face, cover its costs and invest, as this would save every household €300;

— reform the Deposit Re-turn Scheme, as the not-for-profit company running it has €103 million in unredeemed deposits in its accounts;

— bring in a solar panel grant scheme that is accessible for all, increase the grants for solar panels to 50 per cent for low-income families, and reduce it on a sliding scale to the current grant level for high income families;

— reintroduce the rent caps for new build and new tenancies, as rent caps should be set at the rate of inflation or 2 per cent;

— scrap the M50 toll;

— end increases in carbon tax;

— publish the profits in the grocery sector, as mandating the biggest supermarkets to publish their profits would not interfere with the market, but would bring transparency to the industry and benefit customer choice;

— introduce a "heads will roll" clause for senior civil servants, if they spend money in an irresponsible fashion, as there has to be a cost to their careers, up to and including losing their job;

— appoint a Minister of State in the Department of the Taoiseach, whose responsibility is to make sure, in real time, that capital projects are not overrunning in cost;

— audit non-governmental organisations that are being funded by the State, to ascertain if they are providing a benefit for citizens, and cut Government funding to those who are not providing a benefit for citizens;

— end the €5 billion of Government budget spending overruns;

— reduce the processing time for International Protection Accommodation Services applications, to reduce accommodation costs;

— introduce a 2-year recruitment moratorium in administration within the HSE, to rebalance staff numbers towards the front line;

- introduce output payments within the HSE, to ensure that the health service gets paid for the consultations, treatments, engagements and operations that are delivered to patients, as this would save money, incentivise hospitals to reduce the length of hospital waiting lists and reorientate staff numbers towards the front line; and
- increase the price of electricity to new data centres, as this would reduce household electricity prices.

Today, we in Aontú are using our Private Members' time to try to ease the burden on families throughout the country and make life affordable for them again. The primary aim of our motion is to stop the Government from increasing the price of petrol by 27 cent and the price of diesel by 32 cent between now and 1 December. Incredibly, it is the Government's plan to increase the price of petrol and diesel five times before the end of the year. It is a startling plan for any government to implement in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, when so many families are to the pin of their collar. One of those increases will be a carbon tax increase, which will likely be imposed after the budget. Aontú's motion seeks to stop the Government from increasing carbon tax. It is absolutely incredible that any government would raise fuel prices by so much during a cost-of-living crisis.

Much of the increased prices we pay in this country are as a result of Government actions. The Government is an architect of the cost-of-living crisis. It is implementing measures that are adding to inflation and household bills. I will give examples. The Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Independents Government collected €1.17 billion in carbon tax last year, which is the highest ever, in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. This tax, which is now the biggest fuel tax in the country, hardly existed five years ago. The Government took €4.3 billion in fuel taxes alone last year. It is eye-watering stuff. The citizens of this country are being shaken down by way of these taxes.

Carbon tax was supposed to be ring-fenced for climate change projects. However, replies to parliamentary questions from Aontú show that in a three-year period, €250 million of carbon tax revenue, or nearly a fifth of the total, went back into the State's coffers. Over those three years, that amount of carbon tax money was directed to non-climate projects or went back to the Exchequer because it was not needed for the stated purpose.

The National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy is another example of the Government assaulting consumers. Aontú has found out that €278 million, or 70% of the total revenue from the levy, was simply left sitting in a Government bank account between 2020 and 2024. The Government was collecting hundreds of millions of euro from hard-pressed consumers in this country for four years and simply could not find anything to do with the money. It is an incredible admission.

The M50 toll is another tax on workers. The bridges cost €53 million to build and the Government has collected billions of euro in tolls from drivers. The M50 has paid for itself 30 times over, yet the Government seeks to increase toll fees year on year.

Before the current excise cuts, the Government was collecting 60% of the price of petrol and diesel by way of taxes. It was collecting more in taxes than the total cost of drilling for that oil, extracting it and pumping it to the surface, taking it from the North Sea to a refinery, refining it and then taking it on a ship to Ireland, transporting it to a petrol station and selling it to consumers. All of that cost less than the Government was extracting by way of taxes on

that fuel. We have a rip-off model in terms of the Government's approach to this issue, and it is wrong. The plan announced yesterday is simply to return to that rip-off model in the form of high levels of fuel taxes. The Government is tax-gouging families throughout the country, especially those in poverty and in energy arrears.

In relation to electric vehicles, EVs, the ESB, a semi-State company, is hiking up the price of charging at public charging spots. The figures are eye-watering. It will cost 73 cent per kWh to charge an EV in a public space, while drivers can charge their vehicle overnight for 7 cent per kWh. It will cost one tenth of the price to charge an EV at home. The Government says these taxes are designed to move people away from carbon usage and into sustainable types of transport systems. In this case, however, the ESB is incentivising petrol and diesel as fuel sources for travel. It is incredible.

Ireland is an outlier in terms of the spiralling cost of living. This week's Eurostat report showed we are the most expensive country for housing, health and energy in the EU. That damning finding is worth repeating: Ireland the most expensive country in the EU for housing, health and energy. Overall prices here are now 36% higher than the EU average. Health costs are 85% more than the European average. Indeed, Ireland now has the second most expensive electricity market on the planet for domestic users. The Government is achieving world records for all the wrong reasons in terms of the price of electricity. Barnardos has found that one third of Irish households went into arrears on energy bills in the past 12 months. That is astounding. According to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, 500,000 Irish households are in arrears on gas and electricity bills.

What is the answer from the Government? It is to put electricity prices up today. A total of 1 million householders will pay €300 more on their annual electricity bills because of today's rise. The Government might say that ESB, including its Electric Ireland division, is a semi-State body. However, semi-State organisations operate on the basis of Government policy. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, this semi-State body is putting up the price of electricity today. The Nevin Economic Research Institute has stated that the average household in Ireland is paying €360 more for electricity than householders in other western European countries. That is because of the Government. The ESB is a semi-State body that operates on the basis of Government policy. Last year, it made €650 million in profits.

Can the Minister of State see the disconnect here? A semi-State body operating under Government policy made a profit of €650 million during a cost-of-living crisis that has seen 500,000 families go into arrears on their electricity bills. Does he not understand how morally wrong it is for a Government to operate on that basis? The situation is getting worse. Despite the extent of arrears, the electricity companies are raising their prices today. Tone-deaf semi-State bodies, blind to the hardship of customers, are operating on the basis of Government policy. The ESB is making a €300 profit per household, which is roughly the same as the difference between average electricity prices in Ireland and those in the rest of Europe.

The whole electricity market is a mess. The grid is creaking and unable to deal with the levels of renewables coming online at the moment. The data centres the Government is incentivising are sucking up all available electricity. We have bottlenecks, constraints and dispatch down notices, which mean we are now actually paying for wind farms in Ireland to switch off electricity output.

It is mind-bending stuff. We are paying for electricity companies not to produce electricity at certain times of day every single day.

Grocery bills are up 40%. It adds approximately €3,000 extra per family per year for exactly the same goods they were purchasing ten years ago. Families are paying, for example, 50% more for beef cuts, butter has risen by 42%, chicken breasts, which were €5 in 2022, are now €12.98, the price of steak has doubled and eggs have gone up 35%. This might seem small beer to Ministers on big wages but for many families struggling to provide nutrition for the children, this is a major mountain they have to climb daily.

The Government is simply adding to that. All of this cost-of-living crisis is happening at a time when the Government is incinerating money. This is the key point, in that we in Aontú have been very careful to show where the Government is wasting money and where money can be saved to pay for a reduction in certain taxes to make life easier for people. We have seen an incredible waste of money recently with the Re-turn scheme, which added 25 cent and 15 cent to cans and bottles. That is now leading to a €500,000 cost annually for clean-up in Dublin as a result of the scavenging from bins it is causing. Iarnród Éireann incinerated €50 million of taxpayers' money on an IT system that failed to work.

In the second part of my contribution, I will list all of the places where this Government is wasting money, where that money can be saved and where there is a facility to then reduce the price of energy for hard-pressed customers. There is absolutely no way this Government should proceed with five petrol and diesel price increases before the end of the year.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am the Chairperson of the budgetary oversight committee. We have had many witnesses in over the past number of months. Yesterday, we had witnesses in who agreed with exactly what I and Independent Ireland have been saying. The Department of Finance does not talk to the Department of enterprise. The Department of Finance is responsible for divvying out the moneys but they all work separately. When it hands out bits and pieces, which it says is targeted, it does not cover everyone. The conclusion in our meeting yesterday, which was very good and informative, was if you keep doing the same thing over and over and there is no change, it is a sign of madness. The Government has got to learn from the sign of madness. It is doing the same thing over and over and getting the same result - vulnerable people suffer and the Government does not make change.

We have been talking about the carbon tax and protests. Five years ago in November 2021, I brought a truck up here when truckers were protesting about fuel costs. That was five years ago yet a few months ago not only truckers but farmers, businesses and homeowners all protested and the Government still has not listened. That is after five years. The Government has got it wrong. What does it pay its Departments for, if they do not know how to react to problems? The Government is reactive, not proactive. That is its biggest problem.

I have stood at Limerick Junction and at the Tipperary and Charleville shows - I stand at shows every year meeting people. Of all the shows I have gone to, I have never seen as many people coming to me with their concerns. They were all Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael all their lives. It is not only young people coming to me but it is all age groups, even people who have retired. I was at a mass at the graves of deceased family members. The last man who came up to me as I was leaving was in his eighties. He said, "Richard, what are they doing up there?" If the Government has lost all those people who stood beside it all the years and they can see

the Government is getting it wrong, why can it not? They see their children and grandchildren suffering because of the people they put in here and now they are embarrassed because the Government is not learning. Why is it not learning? Why is it targeting the most vulnerable people in this country?

The Government made €1.7 billion extra this year in fossil fuel taxes. The vehicles in this country are mostly from between 2010 and 2018. People are lucky to keep the vehicles they have on the road but the Government has no problem bringing in inferior food from other countries and wants the quality to stay the same here. This is what the Government has done in this country - it has forgotten the very people who put them here and put their trust in them and it is taxing them out of existence.

The most badly off people are the squeezed middle, the working people, people who get up every morning and go to bed late at night. The Government does not look after them. It penalises them for working rather than giving them some bit of a reward. The harder they work, the more they are penalised by the Government. If two people in a household work, they are penalised twice as much as are their children. That is what this Government has stood for. The people are changing in Ireland and it is now showing on the ground. I thank them for that.

Deputy Michael Collins: When we discuss the cost-of-living crisis, we need to move beyond the headlines and focus on the reality facing households. The Government points to falling inflation rates as evidence the crisis is easing but inflation measures the speed at which prices are rising. It does not mean prices are returning to previous levels. According to analysis of CSO data, the reality is that overall consumer prices are approximately 24% higher than they were five years ago. Families carry the cumulative impact of five years of rising costs. The increases have been most severe in the areas people cannot avoid. Electricity prices are up 62% since 2021, natural gas prices have more than doubled and home heating fuels have increased by over 60%. They are not luxury expenses; they are basic necessities of life. Food prices continue to increase year after year. Food inflation reached 5.1% in 2025 while the price of many everyday grocery items increased substantially. Families see these increases every week as they pay for their shopping. At the same time, the Government continues to speak about economic growth, strong tax revenues and budget surpluses. If the public finances are so healthy, why are so many working households struggling to get ahead? That is the question the Government cannot answer.

One area where relief can be provided immediately is through the abolition of the universal social charge. Independent Ireland has consistently argued that the USC has outlived whatever purpose it may once have served. Just last week, Councillor Danny Collins tabled a motion before Cork County Council calling for its abolition. His point was straightforward - the USC was introduced in 2011 as a temporary measure. Fifteen years later, workers continue to pay it despite repeated promises it would be reduced or abolished. The State collects between €4 billion and €5 billion every year through the USC. Meanwhile, families deal with rising housing costs, childcare and fuel costs and energy bills. Independent Ireland believes workers should keep more of the money they earn. That starts with the abolition of the USC. Independent Ireland believes in rewarding people who work but this Government and some in opposition believe in punishing those who work or create employment.

The same principle applies to carbon tax. For years, many of us warned carbon tax would increase the cost of everyday living. We were told we were wrong yet today we see the impact. Motorists pay approximately €1.85 per litre for petrol and €1.88 per litre for diesel. More than half what motorists pay at the pumps consists of tax, levies and charges. Taxes account for approximately 58% of the price of petrol and 52% of the price of diesel. That is why communities across Ireland witnessed fuel protests. Ordinary hardworking people took the streets because they believed Government policy was making life more expensive and they could not afford to continue. They were not asking for special treatment; they were asking for common sense.

Housing remains another major contributor to the cost-of-living crisis. The Government will point to more than 36,000 homes being completed in 2025. While that increase is welcome, affordability remains the real issue. Residential property prices have increased by 7.3% in the year to October 2025, with a median dwelling price reaching €381,000. For many young couples and single workers trying to purchase their first homes, those figures place home ownership further out of reach. The Government talks constantly about supply, but people judge housing policy by whether they can afford to buy a home or pay their rent.

Childcare is another example of the gap between promises and delivery. Families are repeatedly promised affordable childcare. Parents were told that costs would reduce significantly, yet many families continue to pay hundreds of euro every month simply to go to work. The aspiration was commendable; the delivery has been lacking.

I wish to address what has become one of the worst examples of public sector mismanagement in the history of the State, the national children's hospital. The Minister for Health recently stated on Gavan Reilly's programme that there should be between 500 and 600 workers on site at the project, but when she asked to see all these workers, she said, "They declined." You could not make it up. Let us consider that for a moment. This project began with an expected cost of less than €1 billion. It is now projected to cost well over €2 billion. It has become the most expensive hospital project in the history of the State and probably the world.

Electricity from Electric Ireland is going up by 8% today. We have not been able to bring the electricity companies to task in this country. They can just put up the electricity to any price. For those who have solar panels, and some are lucky enough to have them even though the grant is shockingly bad, tell me that what they are getting from Electric Ireland is not going to rise. Electric Ireland will put up the charge if we are using the electricity, therefore, but it will screw over the ordinary hard-working person who has put money into their home and put up solar panels. We are not fighting for renewables and to give people that opportunity or bonus by having renewables in their homes.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that the Government:

— remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and Gulf region;

— is acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of the recent increases in the cost of living, and is actively monitoring the current geopolitical situation and its impact on costs;

— affirms that affordability is a priority for this Government; and

— has taken action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy, by introducing one of the most comprehensive support packages in the European Union (EU); affirms that:

— the Government is deeply aware of the pressures placed on households and businesses by cost-of-living pressures;

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

— in recent months, the Government introduced a €750 million package of fuel supports, which is among the largest per capita of any EU state;

— these measures have been further extended until 1st September, 2026, at an estimated cost of €270 million;

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

— enhanced social protection payments have been introduced, including an increase to the fuel allowance rate, and an expansion of the eligibility rules;

— successive budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures;

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

— this action plan will be focused on short-, medium- and long-term measures, to support households and businesses to meet energy costs;

— the action plan will be built on four key pillars:

— addressing the price;

— sustainable demand and enhancing flexibility;

— addressing energy poverty and customer protections; and

— energy affordability for businesses;

— this will be a crucial element of the Government's work to improve competitiveness, complementing the current Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity;

— a range of protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills, including through the Department of Social Protection, who can provide support

through the Additional Needs Payment, to help households meet expenses, including those who face difficulties with fuel bills;

— a record capital budget of €640 million, including €558 million from carbon tax receipts, has been allocated to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, supporting 73,000 home energy upgrades to make homes warmer, healthier and more comfortable, with lower emissions and lower bills;

— the allocation also includes a record €340 million for the Warmer Homes Scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty and is targeting 11,500 upgrades this year;

— Ireland has legally binding targets for the collection and recycling of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles, and the Deposit Re-turn Scheme is ensuring we meet those targets;

— the fully refundable deposit amount balances affordability with incentivising consumers to return the empty container, and the return rate of nearly 77 per cent shows that this is working;

— under the EU accounting framework, reporting and disclosure obligations are determined primarily by the size of a company, with different requirements applying to micro-, small-, medium-sized and large undertakings, reflecting the principle that reporting obligations should be proportionate to the scale of the business, and is applied consistently across the EU;

— accordingly, grocery retailers are subject to the same accounting and disclosure requirements as other companies of a comparable size, and companies operating in Ireland, including those connected with other EU member states, are subject to harmonised reporting frameworks under EU law;

— any proposal to introduce additional reporting obligations, for a particular sector, would therefore need to be considered in the context of Ireland's obligations under the EU accounting framework, and the existing size-based system of corporate reporting;

— Budget 2026 reduced the VAT rate for the construction and supply of qualifying apartments and apartment blocks, from 13.5 per cent to 9 per cent, until the end of 2030, as part of a social policy to deliver higher density housing;

— a 0 per cent VAT rate may be applied to a maximum of seven of any of the categories included under Annex III of the EU VAT Directive, however, as Ireland already applies the 0 per cent rate to the maximum number of categories, there is no scope to expand this to the construction of new housing;

— the national housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*, contains a suite of measures to support domestic and international investment in the delivery of new rental properties, in particular, the supply of new apartments;

— the recently enacted Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026, provides improved security of tenure for tenants, while also encouraging more private investment in the rental market; and

— the Act, effective from 1st March, 2026, introduced a national system of rent control, with rent increases to be capped by inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index, and in times of high inflation, rent increases are capped at a maximum of 2 per cent; and

further notes that:

— the latest Eurostat report, comparing electricity prices across the EU, outlines that Ireland had the 5th highest for household electricity prices in the second half of 2025, when adjusted to take account of the 'Purchasing Power Standard', i.e., practical affordability, taking account of household income and so on;

— the most recent report from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities shows that 319,000 (14 per cent) of domestic electricity customers were in arrears in March, unchanged since December, and that a much lower 8 per cent (184,000) of domestic electricity customers were in arrears for over 90 days, approximately the same level as May 2025;

— the four biggest energy retailers have confirmed that hardship funds and focused measures are in place, for any customers in difficulty;

— switching energy supplier or plan could save the average electricity customer up to €500 annually;

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

— the Government remains committed to ensuring that low-income households benefit from Ireland's renewable energy transition, and will continue to explore how best to integrate solar and other technologies into our energy poverty retrofit programmes;

— carbon tax funds are allocated for expenditure on measures including the continuation of a national retrofitting programme, investment in community energy efficiency measures, and funding for greener farming practices, as part of Ireland's climate policy and our aim to reach net-zero by 2050;

— the temporary deferral of the 1st May carbon tax increase will result in lower carbon tax revenues of €22 million in 2026;

— neither the Government, nor the Minister for Transport, have a direct role in the setting of M50 toll rates, as these are instead governed by statutory byelaws, and are managed by Transport Infrastructure Ireland;

— additionally, toll revenues from the M50 are fully reinvested in the operation, maintenance, protection and renewal of the national road network, and abolishing the M50 toll would cost the €250 million in revenues that would instead have to be raised from general taxation;

— recruitment within the Health Service Executive is complex and has been devolved to regional structures, who are best placed to assess service needs and prioritise posts, and a recruitment pause would directly undermine this approach and could result in increased

reliance on agency staff, ultimately driving up costs rather than reducing them, and thereby restricting the funding for hiring more front-line staff;

— the Government is already progressing a significant reform programme, to link healthcare funding more directly to the level of activity delivered to patients through implementation of Activity Based Funding (ABF), which represents a fundamental shift in how hospital budgets are set;

— a structured implementation plan is in place, with shadow ABF processes being rolled out across 2026–2027, allowing funding models to be tested and refined before full implementation from 2028;

— achieving value for money must be sought at all stages of policy formation, and it is the responsibility of every Minister, public and civil servants within all Departments;

— earlier this year, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation published Circular 21/2026 Expenditure Control and Escalation Processes, this sets out the various phases of an expenditure control escalation process for use across Government, and the corrective steps that may be implemented where expenditure risks and overruns are identified, and this new escalation process will strengthen effective budget oversight through enhanced governance and a focus on value for money, ensuring that expenditure ceilings are credible and deliver effectively on Programme for Government commitments; and

— this builds on Value for Money Circular 18/2025, which highlighted the roles and responsibilities in the delivery of value for money, as well as the robust guidance, codes of practice, and circulars underpinned by legislation, and informed by best practice in the pursuit of value for money, and it is the responsibility of the Accounting Officer for each Department to ensure that they manage expenditure sustainably, and in accordance with this allocation."

I speak on behalf of the Government on this wide-ranging motion regarding the cost of living. I reiterate that the Government opposes this motion and puts forward its own countermotion. The proposed countermotion outlines and affirms that energy affordability is a priority of this Government and highlights the significant supports that have been provided by the Government to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy, including the introduction of one of the most comprehensive support packages in the EU. The conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine have caused significant disruption to global energy markets. The Government is also very aware and concerned about the pressures placed on households and businesses while high energy costs are rising due to the conflict. Providing supports to alleviate this pressure has and will continue to be a priority. We have taken action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy, such as the expanded fuel allowance, tax reductions on energy and significantly expanded retrofitting programmes.

On 12 April, the Government agreed a €500 million package of fuel supports. This is in addition to the initial €250 million in targeted supports announced in March. These packages are among the largest *per capita* interventions in any EU member state. Key measures introduced include a reduction in excise on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil, MGO. When taken with the reduction in the NORA levy, that means 32 cent off a litre of diesel, 27 cent off a litre of petrol and 7.4 cent off MGO. There is a deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax

scheduled for 1 May until the budget and an increase in the maximum repayment amount available under the diesel rebate scheme for qualifying road haulage and bus transport operators from 5.7 cent to 12 cent per litre for quarter 1 and quarter 2 of 2026. We have also developed a new €120 million road transporter support scheme, as well as supports for coach operators providing Local Link services. A €100 million fuel subsidy support scheme for farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers has also been opened. These measures were introduced on a temporary basis to provide some relief from fuel price inflation.

As stated at the time of the interventions in March and April, the Government reserves the right to review and alter the policy approach, as necessary. Accordingly, the Government has continued to actively monitor all relevant strands of information, including global energy market dynamics and domestic retail pricing trends. Following this review, the Government announced an updated approach on 30 June. This approach is informed by very significant reductions in crude oil prices, as well as retail fuel prices, over recent weeks. It is therefore appropriate to begin the process of reversing the temporary reductions in mineral oil tax. It is important to emphasise that there will be no cliff-edge effects for consumers; rather, the restoration of pre-March 2025 mineral oil tax rates will be done in a gradual and phased way.

The motion also calls for an end to increases in carbon tax. However, as Deputies will be aware, carbon tax is a core part of Ireland's climate policy and our aim to reach net zero by 2050. The need for society and the economy to decouple from fossil fuel dependence is even more apparent now given the volatility of international fuel markets. The best way of insulating our economy and society from fuel prices shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Carbon tax funds are allocated for expenditure on measures that will achieve this, including the continuation of a national retrofitting programme, investment in community energy efficiency measures and funding the greener farming practices. The benefit of carbon tax is obvious, with 2026 seeing a record capital budget of €640 million, including €558 million from carbon tax receipts, allocated to the SEAI residential and community energy grant schemes. This allocation will support 73,000 home energy upgrades to make homes warmer, healthier and more comfortable, with lower emissions and lower bills. The allocation also includes a record €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty and is targeting 11,500 upgrades this year. A total of 53% of the allocation for SEAI residential and community schemes in 2026 is for the warmer homes scheme.

It is important to note that the fuel supports announced this year build on the suite of measures to assist households with cost-of-living pressures announced as part of budget 2026. A total of €28.9 billion will be spent on social protection in 2026, including over €1.15 billion of new measures targeted to assist households. The measures contained in the budget are designed to support the most vulnerable in our society with the cost of living and there is a particular focus on tackling child poverty. The package includes the largest child support payment increase in the history of the State, with a weekly increase of €16 to €78 for children aged 12 and over, which is a 26% increase, and a weekly increase of €8 to €58 for children under 12 years, which is a 16% increase. This brings the total annual value of the child support payment to €3,016 for each child under the age of 12 and €4,056 for each child over 12.

Record increases were announced in respect of the carer's allowance income disregard, with an increase of €375 to €1,000 for a single person and an increase of €750 to €2,000 for a couple.

The income limit for carer's benefit will also increase by €375 to €1,000 per week. This change will take effect from this month. Also included in the budget package were across-the-board increases of €10 per week to maximum personal payment rates, benefiting people such as pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and lone parents, with proportionate increases for people receiving a reduced payment rate and qualified adults. These changes took effect from January.

The budget package also provided significant supports to help householders with the cost of heating and other energy bills. The fuel allowance increased by €5 to €38 per week and, for the first time, families receiving the working family payment now qualify for the fuel allowance. In addition, people moving from disability allowance or the blind pension to take up work will retain their fuel allowance for five years. The budget also included an extension of the 9% VAT rate that applies to gas and electricity. The wide array of measures clearly demonstrates the huge focus the Government has placed on assisting ordinary people and families with the cost of living.

In addition to the wide-ranging support already provided by the Government, we recognise that more needs to be done to help households and businesses that are under pressure as a result of increasing energy prices. The cross-government national energy affordability task force, NEAT, will play a key role in that regard. The task force is preparing an energy affordability action plan as well as co-ordinating the national response to the energy shock arising from the conflict in the Middle East. This structure will ensure a co-ordinated and coherent response to the energy crisis that is aligned with the programme for Government commitments and longer term action on energy affordability.

The report of the task force, which included measures for consideration in budget 2026 including those I mentioned earlier, was published last November. The task force is now working intensively on the preparation of an energy affordability action plan, which will be completed in quarter 3 of 2026. The action plan will examine cost drivers in the energy sector and identify short-, medium- and long-term measures to enhance the affordability of energy for households and businesses. The action plan will be built on four key pillars: addressing the price of energy, sustainable demand and enhancing flexibility, addressing energy poverty and customer protections, and energy affordability for businesses. Intensive work on the action plan by NEAT subgroups, for example those on energy demand and grid financing, assisted by external advisory support, will continue over the coming weeks.

This work will be supported by a process of engagement with relevant stakeholders. This will ensure that EAAP priorities are shaped by public and stakeholder input and remain responsive, inclusive and grounded in lived experience. A targeted stakeholder consultation has taken place on tackling energy poverty. This follows on from a recent meeting with representatives from the community and voluntary pillar such as Age Action Ireland, the National Women's Council of Ireland and the environmental pillar in respect of their proposals on energy poverty.

Consultation sessions with business groups and the Electricity Association of Ireland, EAI, and retail electricity suppliers have also been held. In addition, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has engaged with the four biggest energy retailers in recent months to ensure that hardship funds and focused measures are in place for any customers in difficulty. It is important to note that the Department of Social Protection can also provide support through the additional needs

payment to help households to meet expenses, including those who face difficulty with fuel bills.

The Government has introduced substantial support during this volatile period. Supports are timely and necessary and we will continue to monitor the situation closely. In the remaining minute I will add, because very little was alluded to on this in the initial contributions from the Opposition, that the key most fundamental way we can reduce energy prices for the people of Ireland is by ramping up renewable energy. It is as simple as this: the higher the proportion of our energy needs or fuel needs that are met by fossil fuels, then the higher our prices will be. It is simple maths. Our fuel and the cost of electricity, the cost of energy, is directly linked and tied to the cost of a barrel of crude oil. We have to step away from that. We have to ramp up solar and wind generation. However, we can only do that if people get behind it. The Deputies who are contributing and criticising the Government for energy prices are the same Deputies who will object to renewables and to solar and object to alternative forms of energy. It is a fact.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The data centres are doing that.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Opposition would prefer to lead us down a path that we cannot come back from and tie us into fossil fuels forever which is only going to continue to lead to increased energy prices.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I thank my colleagues in Aontú for their work on this motion and thank the Deputies for their contributions today. The fact is that the point raised by the Minister of State a few moments ago is actually untrue. This Government has a policy of increasing the number of data centres. For every new wind or solar development the vast majority of that additional capacity is going to data centres.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Says yer man with the laptop.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Let us not mislead the House here. It is important that we say that from the outset. The truth is that Ireland is an outlier in terms of the cost of living in the country at the moment. We are the most expensive country in Europe for housing, health, energy and alcohol. Is the Minister of State going to blame the Opposition for the disasters of health and the cost of housing? The Government has presided over this. It is time the Minister of State owned this. Overall prices are 36% higher in Ireland than in the rest of the European Union. Health costs are about 85% higher in Ireland than they are elsewhere in the European Union. One third of households went into arrears in the past 12 months. That equates to more than 300,000 people. Since 2021, energy is up 57%. During that time there has been an increase in renewables. Can the Minister of State explain that? Diesel is up 60%. Much of that increase is due to geopolitics but there is also the fact that the Government is gouging in terms of taxation, which accounts for the majority of what we pay at the pump. That is the truth. We are being overcharged. A significant amount of what we are being overcharged is as a result of Government policy on the high cost of energy. Built into the carbon tax is that very policy. The Government wants to increase the cost of fuel, increase the cost of diesel and petrol, irrespective of the cost at the pump. That is what the Government voted for. We in Aontú did

not. In 2021 we did not support the climate action Bill because we knew what it would lead to.

In relation to carbon tax, last year the Government collected €1.1 billion in carbon tax, the highest tax on record. This year the Government is on track to take in €200 million more in carbon tax, despite the fact that there has been a reduction in tax due based on the price increases that were due to take place. The Taoiseach constantly outlines that we need this tax for retrofitting and for climate measures. However, the numbers state that between 2020 and 2023 half a billion euro in carbon tax was unspent. It was returned to the Exchequer. Meanwhile, the Government is continually increasing the carbon tax, despite the fact it cannot be spent.

I have spoken to so many families who applied for and were approved for SEAI grants but because there is such a constraint in terms of labour, they are waiting for two or three years for that work to take place. A significant conversation needs to be had in relation to the constraints in terms of the labour force and the effect it is also having in terms of the development of homes.

The National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy is another tax on fuel and it goes into the climate action fund. Since 2020, the climate action fund has been in surplus by almost €300 million. Since the start of this crisis the Government has been misleading us all. It is time it was called out on this. When it was first announced, the Government rolled out a package. At first, it was a €500 million package, then it was a €700 million package. The cost of this was not cost in terms of income forgone. It was a hypothetical figure. All the additional costs being brought forward, the increases in carbon tax, were added to it. Then the Government went to the people and said we are great and wanted a clap on the back.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I acknowledge Aontú for tabling this motion in good faith. It names a crisis that is biting every man, woman and child in this country. Families with two incomes are working harder than their parents ever did and having less to show for it. Grocery bills are up 40%, energy bills are up nearly 60% and rent is at a level unthinkable ten years ago. The diagnosis, like much of this motion, is correct. However, the correct diagnosis followed by the wrong prescription does not cure the patient.

The hard truth this House must face is that the policies that brought us into this mess are the wrong ones to sort it out. For 15 years, we have been governed by an economic instinct that treats the citizen's wallet as the State's first resort and last reserve. Tax it, levy it, surcharge it, toll it and then families buckle under it. Government members will scratch their heads and wonder why. It offers a one-off cheque for Christmas and call it some sort of compensation. That is not compensation. It is a Government picking your pockets and handing you back the bus fare. That is what the Government has done on a regular basis.

Let me offer two solutions to get to the root of this symptom. The first is the universal social charge, USC, which was introduced in 2011 as an emergency measure, brought in from the wrecking and crashing of the economy by the Fianna Fáil Administration and sold to this country as temporary. Now, 15 years later, the emergency is well and truly over but the tax remains. It is the most cynical levy in our system because the tax credit cannot touch it. It is charged at almost the top gross income on the first euro. A worker earning €50,000 hands over more than €1,000 in USC alone. The self-employed, who are the drivers of our economy, who

take the risks, who create jobs and who, when something happens to them or they are sick, are not entitled to any social welfare, are taxed at a rate of 11% on top. Independent Ireland's answer is plain: abolish the USC. Do not tinker with a tax band or two, do not shave half a percent off a rate here and there and issue a press release. Abolish the universal social charge and let every worker in this country keep what they earn. That is a real payment structure relief - money in the pocket of every nurse, every electrician and every shop assistant every week of this year.

For those in this House who will ask how we will pay for that, I would say look at your own motions, the things that have been brought to this House: MetroLink, costing €15.8 billion; and a children's hospital that has quadrupled in cost to €5 billion in overruns since 2023. You do not fund a tax cut on the back of workers but by ending wasteful spending. Wasteful spending is something the Government is very good at doing.

The second solution is energy, and the Minister of State mentioned that himself. The contradiction he failed to mention is the Irish policy laid before us. We have some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. In 2021 the Government legislated for a ban on all new oil and gas exploration in our waters. It chose deliberately to keep the resources in the ground. We are aware that the Corrib gas field is running dry. By 2030, the Government's own figures have told us that the country will import over 90% of gas, almost all through pipelines from the United Kingdom. We are one of only a handful of EU states that has no gas storage of its own.

The Minister of State is talked about renewable energies and how important they are. Nobody on this side of the House, and certainly in Independent Ireland, objects to renewable energy but we realise the importance and the reality that we are going to be dependent on fossil fuels for another 20 to 40 years. We can face the facts and deal in reality, unlike the Government. The Government chose not to open or explore Barryroe, knowing there are hundreds of millions of barrels of oil there. It will not even allow the exploration of it and has chosen not to look at it. The Government intends to import energy from France and Spain. That is not renewable energy, which the Minister of State knows as well as I do. He is denying that. His environmental policy is dressed up as virtue. That is the reality of it. He can talk and virtue-signal about renewable energies all he wants, and nobody is objecting to that, but he has to realise there are other energies as well that we are heavily dependent on in this country. The Government has to lift the ban and look at our energy security. Energy security is national security.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "expenditure sustainably, and in accordance with this allocation":

"; and

calls on the Government to:

— recognise that increasing diesel by 34 cents and petrol by 29 cents a litre before the end of the year will put unjustifiable pressure on workers and families already struggling with the cost-of-living crisis;

- rule out any increase in excise duty prior to budget day and conditional on a review of the market conditions at that time; and
- introduce energy credits of €400 per household in direct response to the record number of households unable to pay their energy bills."

Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo ar an chostas maireachtála. Tá leasú curtha síos ag Sinn Féin ar an méid atá curtha chun tosaigh ag an Rialtas. Tá an Rialtas ag iarraidh orainn tacaíocht a thabhairt don mhéid atá curtha chun tosaigh aige, is é sin, go n-ardófar praghas an díosail 34 cent agus praghas an pheitрил 29 cent idir seo agus an Nollaig. Tá sé dodhéanta. Níl glacadh ag gnáthdhaoine na tíre leis seo mar tá a fhios acu go bhfuil brú millteanach orthu. Ba chóir don Rialtas faoiseamh a thabhairt do dhaoine atá ag streachailt amuigh ansin, in áit a bheith ag cur níos brú agus ualaigh ar a gcuid guaillí. Is é sin an rud atá ag tarlú inniu. Seasann Sinn Féin go huile is go hiomlán ina éadan sin. Níor chóir go mbeadh praghas an pheitрил agus díosail ag ardú le linn an tsamhraidh agus níor chóir go mbeadh sé ag dul suas an méid is atá an Rialtas ag iarraidh.

Today households across the State are hit with blow after blow. This has been a continuous situation for the past number of years with costs rising, whether in our supermarkets, for rents, for insurance or the costs of the basics, just to get by. Today is a dark day for people because over a million households will see their electricity rise. I heard the Minister of State say that his Minister sat down with the electricity companies and energy generators. What was the response? It was double-digit increases in gas and electricity, kicking in today. That is going to really hurt people.

Today is the day the European Commission decided that the Irish people should pay more tax. Every single person who now buys a product from outside the European Union will be hit by a €3 charge as of today, another ridiculous situation and disastrous policy introduced by the Commission, which our Government has refused to stand up against despite them now taking on the prestigious position of the EU Presidency.

Today is the day the Government has come forward with its amendment and asked us that we pat it on the back for the job it thinks it is doing. More importantly, the amendment asks us to support the idea that it would increase the price of diesel by 34 cent between now and Christmas and the price of petrol by 29 cent between now and Christmas. Are the Minister of State and the Cabinet Ministers who sat around the table yesterday morning and decided this was a good idea not listening to people? I ask that genuinely. Are they not talking to people in their own constituencies? Do they not hear the concerns of people who cannot pay their electricity bills and the concerns of those who work every hour that God sends them yet still find it tough to make ends meet at the end of the week? Do they not hear people talking about how the shopping trolley has got more expensive? How under God can they sit at a Cabinet table and decide to bring forward a proposal that will increase the price of diesel by 34 cent between now and Christmas? It is simply outrageous. It should not happen. It is absolutely tone deaf to the concerns, frustration and worries of the Irish people right across the State. That is why Sinn Féin has tabled an amendment to the amendment to demand that the Government does not proceed with these increases at the scale and timeframe it has proposed.

We do not have to be like this. Ireland does not have to be the country that has got the highest taxes on petrol and diesel across the European Union. Ireland does not have to be the

country that charges the highest electricity costs across the European Union. Ireland does not need to be the country where we charge some of the highest rents in the European Union. A different type of Ireland is possible. It requires a Government that listens, understand and takes action to meet the needs of ordinary people. A Government's responsibility at a time of pressure on its citizens is to lift the burden off them, not do what was decided yesterday at Cabinet, namely to place more burden on the shoulders of ordinary Irish people over the next four months when it will get away with it. It is simply wrong.

The Government is kicking the can down the road but the end result is the same. The end result we are being asked to support here is a 34 cent increase in diesel, pushing the price of diesel well beyond €2 and the price of petrol up another 29 cent. The Government is not even finished at that because it plans to increase it again next year and in the years after that. It is absolutely reckless and bound by this notion that if we increase the price of diesel and petrol, if we make it so hard and so expensive for people just to get into their cars and drive up that road, they might all go and buy an electric car. People in my constituency do not have the €40,000 or €50,000 to buy new electric cars. The Government needs to get real here. This cannot go ahead.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The cost-of-living crisis is hitting my constituency of Galway West incredibly hard. In this Chamber I have raised countless examples of families in Galway under unbearable pressure from the cost of living. Working people cannot make their wages stretch to cover soaring rents, crippling energy bills and the ever-increasing cost of their weekly shop. Crucially, rents are now up in Galway by 18%. That means that rents are rising more than four times faster than wages. This Government knows that this is completely and utterly unsustainable. Even the Taoiseach admitted that very few people can afford rents in Galway but still he refused to act. The Government votes against every single proposal we put forward to ease pressures on renters. If the Government were serious about tackling the cost-of-living crisis, it would ban rent increases effective immediately. It would end no-fault evictions and ramp up housing supply by actually building social and affordable homes.

No matter how many stories are raised in this Chamber of working people, struggling families and fractured communities in desperate need of help with the cost-of-living crisis, the Government fails to act. The Government should be listening to these families and communities who are the backbone of our economy. Instead, it takes its advice from a select few economists who pat it on the back and tell it that it has built a strong, booming economy that is performing very well for the wealthiest in our society.

Two weeks ago, some of our most senior economists sounded the alarm bells. The Central Bank published a quarterly bulletin. Its revised forecast shows that the cost-of-living crisis will go up even further than it expected this year. These forecasts show that prices are not just going up, they are going up faster than wages. The Central Bank is crystal clear. Under this Government, people are getting poorer. The Central Bank is telling us that real wages are dropping. That means people are going to struggle even more than they have been up to this point.

There is no point in everybody coming into this Chamber during the winter months to talk about this at a time when parents cannot put food on the table or heat their homes. When that happens, everybody cries out and says, "Oh my god. Isn't that terrible". We told the Minister

of State that this would happen. It is not only that we are telling him it is happening; statistics constantly show that people are falling into poverty because of the political choices being made.

This is on the Government. Rents and the housing crisis are getting worse. That is a direct result of the Government's policies as opposed to anybody else's. It is high time that the Government started listening to the other people in this Chamber, because what it is doing is terrible.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is not lost on the Irish people that the electricity credits were removed as soon as the general election was over. People received those credits as they prepared to vote. The cynicism behind what was done was off the scale. The Government only decided to reduce excise duty when there were strong protests across the State. The people I saw protesting in Donegal are the salt of the earth. They are responsible for delivering goods and producing food. To quote Leo Varadkar back in the day, they are the people who get up early in the morning and keep the country running. It was those people who were out protesting in desperation. Only after that did the Government introduce cuts to excise duty. It now proposes to increase excise duty again - to sneak it back in - while the Dáil is in recess. People who are trying to get by in this country face being charged €2 per litre for diesel and petrol. You can imagine what we will face in the winter if that is where the Government goes with this. I ask it to reflect very hard on what is proposed.

People who say that carbon tax should not be increased are attacked by the Government. The reality for those living in a place like Donegal is that, in the main, they do not have the option to drive electric vehicles. People are not choosing to purchase petrol and diesel. Those in a place like Donegal have to have it in order to get by, to get to college and to get to work in order to earn a living. People are being penalised for choices they are not in a position to make. People do not have the resources to retrofit their homes because the costs involved are huge. Older people in particular cannot afford it. That is why there is heavy reliance on home heating oil in places like Donegal. The Government should stop talking about this in a way that makes it seem that people are backward when they say that those who live in rural communities should be penalised for living there.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputies for bringing forward the motion. My constituents pay some of the highest energy costs in Europe. They would love to be able to re-register their households as data centres in order to avail of some of the Government's cheap electricity, but they cannot do so. As a result, they get screwed every single day of the week for the crime of wanting some hot water and a hot or warm home. People with disabilities feel that even more acutely.

Some 320,000 household accounts are in arrears with their electricity bills and 180,000 are in arrears with their gas bills. This is the inevitable consequence of the Government withdrawing energy credits, which were a little treat in the run-up to the election and which then disappeared very quickly. Those in arrears are having prepaid meters installed in their homes. The Minister of State should know, but I fear he does not, that prepaid meters have some of the highest rates for electricity. A data centre that is sucking the life out of the grid pays cheap electricity rates. However, a lone parent who lives in Balbriggan, Rush, Lusk, Skerries or anywhere else in my constituency and who gets behind with their bills is punished by being put on a higher rate of electricity. When they cannot pay, a buzzer starts to go off and

people know their energy is going to run out. They then have to go to the local Intreo office where they are told to fill out a form and wait. People are being cut off, but this is not recorded as their being disconnected. They do not have the energy to heat their homes. The Minister of State should reflect on the impact of the Government's policies on the people who are at the business end of them.

Deputy Mark Ward: The cost of living is one of the biggest issues that people raise in my constituency office. People are struggling to make ends meet. Workers are handing over more than half of their wages in rent. They can barely cover their bills, put diesel in their cars, food on the table or pay for childcare and ever-increasing insurance costs. The cost of fuel is crippling people as they go about their daily business. Sinn Féin has pushed every step of the way for the Government to do the right thing. While other parties, including the sponsors of the motion, were sleeping away last week, Sinn Féin, through Deputy Doherty, put forward amendments to the Finance Bill to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel at the pumps. We have also submitted an amendment to today's motion to improve it.

Last week, we had to listen to what I can only describe as a rant from Independent Ireland regarding Sinn Féin's policy on carbon tax. Independent Ireland was caught out in its misrepresentation. The Dáil record does not lie. Here are the facts. For those down the back who may be struggling with what I am going to say or who hear what they want to hear, carbon tax was brought in by Fianna Fáil in 2010. Sinn Féin opposed it. Some Independent Ireland Deputies were members of Fianna Fáil when it introduced the carbon tax in 2010. Sinn Féin opposed the carbon tax in 2012, 2013, 2019 and at every opportunity since. The climate action Bill had absolutely nothing to do with carbon tax. Carbon tax is not mentioned in the Bill. Independent Ireland and others having a different opinion about Sinn Féin on policy matters is great and is called having political differences and engaging in political discourse. I am happy to argue with them any day of the week, but they should not make things up because people will see through them.

Deputy Thomas Gould: People are struggling. Sometimes I ask myself whether the Government has any idea what is happening. The Minister of State is from west Cork. How do people who do not drive a car or van in west Cork get to work, school, college or hospital? People cannot depend on public transport.

The Government is behaving in a sneaky way. It will put up the price of diesel and petrol while the Government is on holidays. The Minister of State should stand up and be a man. If the Government is going to increase the price, it should increase it. The Government should come in here and do it rather than when its members are out sunning themselves. Why will the Government not accept that and stand over its decisions? Is it afraid of doing so?

The price of petrol and diesel will increase on 1 September. The Government will not even be here to stand over its decisions. Parents with children who are home from school cannot afford summer camps or the cost of extra food. People are struggling when they go to the shops. They wonder what they will feed their kids. This is the reality for families and ordinary working people. The Irish League of Credit Unions has said that one in five families will not be able to afford a holiday. How is it right that people can work all year and do everything right but cannot afford to take a trip? We are not talking about going to Dubai or America. One in five people cannot afford a short family holiday. People cannot afford to pay their

energy bills. They cannot afford diesel or petrol and are struggling to put food on their table. What is the Government doing? I do not know what it is doing, because it is letting people down.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Extending the temporary reduction in excise duty on petrol and diesel is welcome, but it needs to be extended until budget day and then reviewed. In my county of Meath, public transport options are limited and cars are necessity. For families, fuel is an unavoidable expense, whether for a car or to heat a home. Ordinary families are stretched to the limit with high mortgages and insurance costs. One in four households cannot pay gas bills. Some 308,000 people are arrears on their electricity bills. Grocery prices are at an all-time high.

A report from Barnardos last week found more than half of parents are worried that they do not have enough money to put fuel in their cars. Real people and families under real pressure. People with disabilities are choosing between heating and eating. Rents are at an all-time high. People are struggling right now. They cannot wait any longer. That is why Sinn Féin has called for an emergency budget to put €500 back in the pockets of workers, electricity credits worth €400, a €500 payment for people with disabilities and other measures.

11 o'clock

Going back to the Dáil record for March, Aontú, including Deputy Tóibín, and the Independents group did not cover themselves in glory when voting for the Government's shamefully inadequate measures that triggered the fuel protests. Sinn Féin stood almost alone. Only one left Independent, Deputy Charles Ward, stood with us in opposing those shamefully weak measures that directly led to fuel protests. In April, after weeks of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refusing to listen, ordinary people rose up in protest and took to the streets. They forced the Government to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel. They had to fight hard for the little relief they got. Workers have never worked so hard but they have so little. People need a break and they need it right now.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: One in seven households is in arrears on its electricity bills. Many have been in that position for months and cannot see any way out of it. Today, 1 July, bills are going up again. Electric Ireland, the State's largest energy provider, is putting up its prices, which means average households will pay an extra €138 on their bills. Some 1.1 million customers will be impacted. Everyone knows we have the highest electricity prices in Europe. We pay 40% more than the EU average and that amounts to around €480 per year for an average household. It is an incredibly large amount of money and we can see why people find it so difficult to make do. All the while, there are wind turbines all over the country being switched off at night or when there are constraints on the grid because the grid cannot take the electricity they would produce. This costs approximately €500 million per year and much of that is being paid by the very people who struggle to pay their bills. It is going onto individual homeowners' bills. It is a crazy situation.

I will tomorrow bring a Bill before the Dáil that will prevent that electricity wastage from happening. It would force the Minister to do something with that energy. It needs to be provided to households at low cost or to people at risk of energy poverty for free. It is being wasted otherwise and we are still paying for it. The UK is doing something in this regard and

I ask that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, look into it. It is really important that we address this issue and stop the wastage of renewable electricity.

We have heard a lot of discussion this morning about the high cost of petrol and diesel. Those prices are skyrocketing because of what is happening in Iran and what happened prior to that in Ukraine. We need to move people away from fossil fuel cars and towards electric vehicles. Many people are making that change. In 2025, there were record sales of electric cars in Ireland and the figures to date in 2026 seem to exceed that. That is a good news story. We are moving people towards a more sustainable and affordable means of transport. However, at the same time that the Government is encouraging people to move to electric vehicles, EVs, and has a target of 1 million EVs by 2030, the prices people pay for a fast-charging or public-charging system are skyrocketing to the point where it is more expensive than running a car on petrol or diesel. It makes no sense. Those public chargers are essentially unregulated. Ionity charges 85 cent per kilowatt hour for fast charging and the ESB has put up its prices to 72 cent. Many people are being locked out of electric car ownership because they live in apartments, do not have on-street parking or are renting. We have a two-tier system whereby many people are unable to avail of the benefits of electric vehicles. It makes no sense. I ask that the Government begin regulating these fast chargers. We cannot have a situation where they charge whatever they want and there is no indexing to domestic or business rates. It is an incredible system and disadvantages the people we need to get into electric vehicles. Will the Minister of State do that and ensure that there is no price-gouging at EV charging points? It seems to me that there is considerable price-gouging going on now because they know they can get away with it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the proposers of this motion for giving us the opportunity to raise important issues around the cost of living. The Social Democrats have said time and again that the Government needs to introduce, as an emergency measure, targeted energy credits. The Government seems to have no interest in doing that. It has no interest in the fact that people on low incomes across the country are struggling to pay their electricity bills and keep food on the table. Even before Iran was attacked, people on low incomes were feeling the pressure. To ignore that time and again and to pass a budget that took supports away and did not replace them with targeted measures for people who needed them most was nothing short of cruel.

When I think back over the past year, one of the memories that stands out is when I visited the Irish Wheelchair Association in Clontarf in my constituency and met with disabled people after the budget. They were horrified that the Government had decided to reduce their incomes by about €1,400. They were aghast and asked why they were being targeted with those cuts by the Government. Why was the Government being so cruel to people who were already struggling to heat their homes and get by day to day?

On top of the emergency measures, namely, the cost-of-disability payment and targeted energy credits, we need investment in permanent measures to bring down the cost of living. My colleague, Deputy Whitmore, spoke about that. It makes no sense that we live on a windy island on the edge of Europe yet are so far behind on wind energy and solar energy. We have put forward proposals to increase the grants for solar panels to help households permanently reduce their electricity bills. Those are the kinds of measure the Government could and should take, would have a long-term effect and would get us out of needing emergency supports. We

need emergency supports now because the Government has not done that but we also need to invest in permanently reducing households' energy bills. That has to be a key part of the conversation.

It is unbelievable that, after years of talking about the need to electrify and decarbonise, the Government cannot even get EV charging right. It is a basic bit of infrastructure and it is not regulated. There was news today of charges on the public network being more expensive than using petrol or diesel. We are in 2026. How is the Government not able to get something basic like that right? It has not been able to address EV charging for people who do not have driveways and only have on-street parking. Years later, it just has not got around to that.

That is before we talk about the inability to develop wind energy. There is no one from Fine Gael in the Chamber but it is 15 years since Fine Gael took office and we have no offshore wind energy in the country. We actually did have one wind farm when it took office. There is an incredible inability by the Government to deliver and to listen to people on lower incomes who are crying out and need support. Our continued reliance on fossil fuels means we are one of the most exposed in Europe, which means our electricity costs are highest and we are most exposed to shocks. There is no excuse for the inability to move towards renewable energy. That has to be the approach.

The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has examined the grants that the Government has given out and has shown it has pursued a two-tier strategy. It has given grants to households with means and locked out households that are just above the thresholds for full costs. The latter cannot avail of the grants because they do not have matching funds. These are low--to-middle-income households struggling with bills but unable to avail of retrofit grants or grants for moving to EVs because the Government has designed those grants in a way that is accessible to people on better incomes while those on squeezed incomes without extra money to match the grants are forgotten about.

They are faced with higher and higher prices. The Government has created a two-tier system. Of course, this is being driven by the Government's overall economic strategy. We have a two-tier economy. Some companies are able to afford high rents and high fees and to pay high wages but others are being squeezed out. Everybody else in the country is being squeezed out. They are not able to afford ever-increasing housing costs, an ever-increasing cost of living and ever-increasing electricity costs. The Government just forgets about them. The Government could and should be investing in renewables in a way that makes them accessible to low- to middle-income households. That would result in a permanent reduction in the cost of living and in the costs facing smaller businesses while also helping us to meet our climate targets so that we would not have to pay out billions of euro in fines in the coming years. That is the trajectory we are on at the moment and it needs to be reversed immediately.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister of State sits across from us practically every week to deal with motions from various Opposition groups so he will know only too well the challenges that families and small businesses across this country are encountering as a result of Ireland being simply unaffordable for far too many people in 2026. This is the umpteenth motion to be tabled in this House since the general election. We like to call this challenge a cost-of-living crisis but it is not a crisis because the word "crisis" suggests something temporary that will pass. This

is a permacrisis, for want of a better description. It is a structural problem in our economy that is affecting our society.

The reality is that, outside of thinking that throwing money at problems is a solution, the Government has no solution to the structural problems facing our economy and our society. For example, if the Government thinks that the structural problems in the hospitality sector can be addressed by throwing an inefficient and stupid tax cut at hospitality businesses, it has another thing coming. That simply will not work in the way we would all like to see. It makes no sense. In reality, it reflects a paucity of thinking at Government level, a lack of imagination and a tired managerialism at the heart of this Government. The Government has run out of ideas and has no mission or ambition to change this country for the better for the majority. It is simply picking winners.

Edgar Morgenroth said in the media yesterday that fiscal policy in this country is now run by lobbyists. We may regard ourselves as advocates of the people and - dare I say it - lobbyists for the people of this country but there are very few people in this House who are standing up for the taxpayer. The days when Fine Gael would have said it stood up for the taxpayer are gone because of stupid tax cuts like the one introduced yesterday, which makes no sense whatsoever and actually comes at the expense of working people.

Working people are paying for this because the resources available for some basic tax relief for working people last year was swallowed up by one of the stupidest in a long line of stupid tax cuts this Government has introduced since 2020. In fact, I will go as far back as 2016. The Government has wasted a boom, is reckless with the economy and is imprudent with the public finances. It is working people and people who depend on the State for their incomes who are being affected by this. Those chickens will come home to roost. The people who will pay are those who depend on the State for their income and working people, including public servants, who the Government has decided not to talk to about a successor to the current public sector pay deal, which ran out yesterday. That goes to show where this Government's priorities are.

I will make some basic points on the motion. There is much to be welcomed, although I would quibble with many aspects. There is no reference to the need to restructure our childcare and early years system to make sure that childcare is affordable for families. The motion leans extremely heavily on charges associated with fossil fuels. We are not going to make energy cheaper in this country if we continue to rely on fossil fuels and just keep chasing the price by reducing excise duty and carbon taxes. What we need is a radical approach, a revolution of renewables. That means doing the necessary on offshore wind, realising that moonshot moment the former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, spoke eloquently about a number of years ago before doing very little about it in reality. It means making sure that undertaking deep retrofits of our homes is not merely a pursuit for the middle class and the wealthy. We need to make sure that SEAI grants to retrofit our homes and introduce renewables are affordable and income-based. We need a fossil fuel-run car scrappage scheme to ensure the electric vehicle revolution we need. As others have said, we also need the reintroduction of targeted energy credits in the next budget to ensure that heating our homes and businesses is more affordable in the interim, as we make that move to renewables.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank Deputies Tóibín and Lawless and Aontú for bringing forward this very important motion. As every TD will tell the Minister of State, we are meeting

people across our constituencies who are doing everything society asks of them. They get up early in the morning, go to work, pay their taxes, raise their children and contribute to their communities. However, despite doing everything correctly, they are still struggling to make ends meet. These are families sitting around the kitchen table trying to work out which bill can wait until next week. They are the parents wondering how they will afford school uniforms in a few short weeks' time. They are the workers whose wages disappear within days of payday because the rent or the mortgage, the groceries and the electricity bill leave them with little or nothing to spare. These people are not looking for handouts. They are looking for fairness.

At the beginning of May, the Labour Party put practical and fully-costed proposals before this House and before the Government in the form of a mini budget. We proposed measures to help PAYE workers keep more of what they earn, targeted energy supports, a summer double social welfare payment, the restoration of the €100 cut to the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, additional support for families through child benefit, and a range of practical measures to ease the pressure on households. The Government voted down these proposals.

In recent months, we saw fuel protests across the country. These protests highlighted the very real financial pressure many people are under. I supported the measures brought forward by Government because those people needed relief. I voted for that package. Fuel is only one part of the cost-of-living crisis, however. There are thousands of people who will never organise a protest. There are families quietly struggling behind the front door of their home. If I am a mother or a father trying to find the money for school uniforms, I cannot park my worries on O'Connell Street and hope someone notices. If I am trying to keep up with the mortgage, the rent, childcare costs or the weekly grocery bill, I am fighting that battle around my own kitchen table. Those families deserve the same urgency.

If Government accepted that one group under financial pressure deserved immediate action, why did it reject the Labour Party's proposals to support the thousands of other workers, families, pensioners, carers and those living with disabilities who are under just as much pressure every single day? The Government cannot pick and choose whose cost-of-living crisis it responds to. Relief cannot depend on who is most visible. It must reach those who are doing everything right, working hard and paying their taxes, and yet are still wondering how they will get to the end of the month. The people of my constituency are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for fairness and practical action. The Labour Party has put practical solutions before this House. Families cannot wait until the next budget. They need action now.

I will touch on some of the stuff my colleague, Deputy Nash, has said. He has given these costed proposals to Government to implement for families across this country. He has spoken about the fact that we use the word "crisis", which makes it seem like this is a short-term issue. This has been a crisis in this country for many years now. Many families and individuals right across Ireland are genuinely struggling behind their own front door. During the week, we saw huge fanfare for the VAT rate being cut to 9%. My aunt has had a hair salon for the past 25 years.

On the face of it, the VAT cut is acceptable and seems workable but will the person get the cheaper cup of coffee or a cheaper haircut? They do not have any relief when they have to pay €1,000 for school uniforms and no relief when they have to pay €700 for an iPad that has really disregarded the free book scheme in this country. While the 9% VAT cut favours large business

and corporations, it does not favour hard-working families who are struggling behind their own front doors.

We speak about the retrofitting of homes. These retrofit grants are only applicable to the majority of people who have huge incomes in this country. Ordinary, hard-working people cannot afford to make up the extra funding needed for these retrofitting grants. There was huge fanfare for the EV scrappage scheme and the €8,000 people would get, but how are people supposed to pay €30,000 extra for the EV?

Deputy Brian Stanley: The cost of living is rising at an alarming rate right across the board. Middle- and low-income households cannot keep up, particularly households on below €75,000. Those on €50,000, €60,000 and €70,000 used to be counted as being well-off. They are not now. Rents, mortgages, electricity, gas, motor fuel, food, health insurance and much more have all increased, not by single figures, but by double-digit figures on every hike. Meanwhile, wages and incomes have increased by 1% or 2% or not at all.

In the case of housing, rents are skyrocketing due to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's decision to remove the rent pressure zones, however meek they were. A lot of us on this side of the House wanted them nailed down tighter. The fact is their removal means double-digit increases are happening. Rent for a two-bedroom unit in County Laois has gone up by 34% in one year. Mortgage repayments are now higher because the overall capital sum being borrowed to keep up with galloping house prices is increasing. In Laois, there has been an increase of 12%, 13% or 14% in one year.

Electricity and gas prices are increasing today by 8% on top of all the recent increases. Home heating oil is up 50% or 60%. Motor fuels have increased. We had better not forget about health insurance. Health insurance, which families, households and individuals are forced to get because we have not got Sláintecare yet, is going up two and three times a year. These are huge increases of 6%, 7%, 8% or 9% each time.

At the same time, public money is being wasted. State projects have cost overruns. That needs to be curtailed. I will always argue for projects but we have to get value for taxpayers' money. We have IT systems that do not work. Construction projects that finish at double their budgets. There are layers upon layers of management and bureaucracy in public bodies that should be rationalised and streamlined. All of this and much more needs to be history.

The Department of education has framework agreements for school projects, including school extensions. To provide an example, a two-classroom autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit with an all-timber outside finish cost €2.7 million. Another unit 30 or 40 miles away, which I can show the Minister of State and have brought to the attention of the Department today, cost €2.05 million. It is completed in brick, is a bigger unit and has the ancillary rooms and everything else in it. These framework agreements need to be re-examined. I hope that the Minister of State and the senior officials are listening to what I am saying because this is an important issue and I hope it is brought to the attention of the Department of education. These framework agreements need to be looked at.

There are a whole lot of measures that we need to take, but an immediate step would be to extend medical card cover until we get Sláintecare. Sláintecare, and the public health system it envisions, has to be prioritised. In the short term, we need to extend medical card cover to

ordinary workers and families who cannot go to doctors to get medical treatment because they cannot afford to. That will help all of those who do not have medical cards but cannot afford health insurance.

We need to bring in a windfall tax to be imposed on the large energy companies, including the wind farm owners where there are high profits, once profits go over a certain amount. That money should be used and ploughed into retrofitting for middle-income families who do not qualify for the free scheme and cannot afford to match the funding for the other schemes. There is an opportunity here. The people in the middle are caught. If someone is on social welfare, they rightly get the free scheme for fuel allowance. People under €75,000 are caught because they cannot afford the retrofitting or the electric car.

The minimum wage needs to be increased to a living wage. We need to reintroduce the rent caps for each county. We need to speed up the retrofitting of households, including with solar panels. We need to scrap the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, as it stands or else reform it. In my time here, I have heard and seen reports from it and it is a toothless tiger. It has turned out to be useless.

Last year, €9.5 billion in excess was given out but nothing happened for workers. Nothing happened to the taxation of middle-income workers, those people on between €20,000 and €70,000. They got zero. The Government should not forget about them this year. It should adjust the tax bands to favour those low- and middle-income workers and not miss the opportunity again.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The reason we have a cost-of-living crisis in this country and across the world for working people is because of the greed of billionaires, multimillionaires, warmongers and the governments that back them. The personal fortunes of Donald Trump and his mate, Elon Musk, sum it all up. This year, while ordinary people across the world are crushed with a cost-of-living crisis and some people are being bombed to bits by Musk and Trump's allies in Palestine, Iran or Lebanon, Musk's fortune has gone past \$1 trillion. It is massively increasing. He is the world's first trillionaire. As for Donald Trump's fortunes, shame on anybody who ever echoed a word of support or praise for this guy. Since he got into power, his personal fortune has nearly tripled from \$2.3 billion to \$6.5 billion by ripping off working class people in the United States with his mate Musk. The billionaires and the trillionaires. Then they start wars. They support a genocide, they bomb Iran, they bomb Lebanon, and the cost of living goes up for working people in this country because of these billionaires and trillionaires.

We have our own version of that in this country also benefiting from all of that. There are 11 billionaires in this country and the number is increasing. The Collison brothers, Denis O'Brien, John Dorrance and all these people have €46 billion in personal wealth. The richest 1% of Irish society have between them 35% of all the wealth, which adds up to about €400 billion. These people are creaming it. The more they charge in rents and the more they speculate on property affecting ordinary people affected by the housing crisis, the richer they get while ordinary people are crushed with the cost of living.

I cannot help pointing to the fact that while all of this is happening and ordinary people are being crushed by the cost of living, they want to double arms expenditure across Europe because Donald Trump has told them to do it, to the benefit of the international arms industry.

Money that should go into addressing the cost-of-living crisis and into housing, health and childcare is going to go into the pockets of the arms producers to make the billionaires and trillionaires even wealthier while ordinary people are bombed to bits, sent out to fight and crushed with the cost of living increases.

Contrast that with, for example, the postal worker who came in to see me the other day. The starting salary for a postal worker is €27,000 and the top of the scale is €41,000. He is in a housing assistant payment, HAP, tenancy with one bedroom but he has four children who have to come and stay with him, so they sleep on camping beds. Since An Post pays so poorly, they have not got enough postal workers, so he has to do a lot of overtime. However, if he gets too much overtime, he is going to go over the threshold for social housing and then he will not even be able to afford a home because there is absolutely no way he could afford private rents on his own salary.

It is the multimillionaires who are charging these rents that he cannot afford. What is the Government doing to assist or address that situation? Is it introducing wealth taxes? Is it stopping the speculation on land and property? No, it is rezoning land and making more property millionaires overnight. All this wealth is not a victimless crime. It is coming out of the pockets of people in unaffordable rents and unaffordable house prices. That is where they are making their fortunes, and we have a Government that is facilitating them in doing it while ordinary working people are being absolutely crushed.

Profits in this country have gone up by 400% since I came into the Dáil. Have workers' wages gone up by 400%? You must be joking. In real terms, workers are probably worse off because their pay increases have not kept up with inflation. Unless working people get organised, fight and take to the streets against the hikes in the cost of living and the unaffordable cost of housing and accommodation, and demand wealth taxes to redistribute wealth, we are not going to address the cost-of-living crisis in this country.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: This motion is timely because, with the massive increases for people running their homes and businesses, people who are working have never been at more of a disadvantage because of the high cost of going to work, childcare and fuel. What we need is a more targeted approach by the Government. It will never be more important or timely than in the upcoming budget to make sure that the supports that will be made available for energy and the general cost of living are targeted to help people who are really struggling.

From dealing with people every day, it seems to me that it mostly affects those who are working. Everybody can be struggling, but for the people who are going to work every day, who have the high cost of loans on cars and mortgage or rent payments, everything is piling up on top of them. It is the same for businesses. In County Kerry alone, the number of businesses that are closing weekly is frightening. These businesses are owned by people who have been in business for many years, who are very much valued in our communities and who create local employment, but they are closing their doors. It can be small shops, public houses or gift stores. These are people who were able to manage before, who are involved in different types of personal services, like hairdressers. We have to do something to arrest it.

I want to focus on one issue in particular, the high cost of energy. Why is it costing us so much to provide electricity to people's homes? When we look at the profits being made by the likes of the ESB, we have to look at what we are doing. That is why I welcome, for example,

what is being done regarding Shannon LNG. We should be doing more about providing our own energy, and doing more in a forward-thinking way to try to ensure that these types of measures will help us to reduce the cost of energy. When energy costs are higher, and we are all well aware of the statistics on exactly how much fuel and energy have gone up in price, we have to be forward thinking about how we are going to deal with that in the coming years.

The measures we take, such as those that were voted on in the House last night to support an LNG facility in this country, are very important. I believe we need to have more debates about this matter in the coming weeks in a pre-budget type of way. We have all met with the different groups and sectors that have come here over the last weeks and months to make pre-budget submissions. However, at the end of the day, the people that we always have to consider are people on low incomes, people who are working and people who are struggling. We have to try to help them in every way we can through targeted approaches.

We have to look at the bigger picture, like the high cost of fuel and the tax take on fuel. The figures are mind-boggling. Again, why is fuel more expensive here than in any other part of Europe or the world?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank Aontú for bringing forward this motion and giving me the chance to speak on it. I have spoken about the cost of living multiple times, including when speaking to my constituents. I have spoken 41 times in the Dáil and committees about plug-in solar, and I want to bring it up again. As we know, Ireland is one of the most data centre-dense countries. I brought in a Bill three weeks ago regarding the Electricity Regulation Act, and I look forward to working constructively with members of the Opposition and the Government on this. I believe we need to change how we are dealing with energy. It was one of the things I was elected to do, and I will continuously bang the drum of common-sense solutions.

Speaking of my constituents, I have continuously pushed for home heating oil to be addressed in the next budget because of the homes in my constituency that rely on it. They cannot switch, so they are completely exposed to the global oil price volatility

Regarding plug-in solar, this is something that we need to do. It is the quickest solution that I have seen. The UK has just done it. I want to explain that it is for everyone. It is for anyone in an apartment who does not have access to the roof. It is for anyone in a heritage building who cannot put solar panels on their property. It is for anyone who wants to buy a kit in their local supermarket for a fraction of the price of the initial investment because, with the current energy price, this will have a payback period of two years. If we allowed Fingal County Council and Dublin City Council to roll these out with a modest investment of €500 million, the payback period would be two years from that investment. If we allowed it in conjunction with batteries, it would be more. Those were calculations that I did on the back of an envelope, so the Minister of State will excuse me if my current calculation is wrong. The average savings in Germany and the UK are estimated at €260 to €300 a year, and the kits cost €500.

If the sun keeps shining the way it is, this will help those single mothers in my constituency who want to put money back in their pockets. It will help those children who have just moved out of their parents' home and bought an apartment, only to be told they cannot get solar panels because they do not have access to the roof. Some of the people who commented on my video said that a solar panel on a balcony could fall on your head. So could a flower pot, but a flower

pot is not going to save you €260 a year off your electricity bill, is it? Germany has 700,000 of these systems with zero reported incidents. The UK legalised it earlier in the year.

I want to acknowledge where there has been movement because progress has been made, and I give credit where credit is due. The ESB has responded and confirms that it wants to look at the 800 W system. It has committed to building a simplified online registration system and adopting the German safe standard. I thank the Department officials who have worked on this. Regarding the 2024 consultation with Electric Ireland, Bord Gáis, Energia, the Electricity Association of Ireland and ESB Networks, some of their consultation documents to the Department were very good, and I read every single one of them. The German standard needs to be adopted. The remaining question is: when? We need to change the ISO standard and bring this in immediately. If the worry is the danger, let us bring it in as a pilot scheme for new-build social and affordable housing and apartments delivered by local authorities and approved housing bodies, and allow people to save money immediately.

Again, the issue of home heating oil must be addressed in the budget.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the proposers of the motion. I am delighted to get the chance to talk about the cost of living. The increased cost of living is in everyone's mouth, and everyone is saying that their wages are being eroded by the cost of living. I believe the main driver is the cost of fuel and energy. For every litre that is purchased, more than half of the cost, approximately 95 cent, is going to the State coffers. There is room for manoeuvre. It is time to get rid of carbon tax, full stop. Fuel is dear enough.

I want to talk about rents. People are out of their minds about the cost of rent. In most cases, the Government is taking 52% in tax out of each person who is renting a property just to provide a roof over their head.

Businesses have to deal with the cost of electricity. I have stated in the House several times that there is no sign of a regulator.

Every day since Bord na Móna closed, the cost of electricity has gone up. People in Kerry are outraged at the amount of money they are paying for electricity. Especially businesses cannot keep going and with commercial rates on top of that, people are being driven out of their long-standing businesses that have been operating even in Killarney and in places like Castleisland, Currow and Cordal. In all of those places, shops that were there forever, going back ages, are closing. They are gone now and more of them are set to go because the rates have gone mad. The demands that people are getting for commercial rates are totally outrageous altogether.

I will say it again to the Government; it is taking in more and its expectations regarding the tax take have doubled over the last number of months. At the same time, it was so slow to react to the protestors and the people who were outraged that the prices at the pumps were going up each day. I told the Government that in this House on 24 March, when it offered 3 cent on green diesel and home heating to the people. It offered 3 cent and 2 cent per litre, when it was costing people 70 cent or 80 cent more per litre. At the same time, it was able to give €40 million to Ukraine and €125 million to Zelenskyy when he came here. The Government put the country down for the almost €2 billion that it borrowed for that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is where taxpayers' money is going, not back to taxpayers, who are giving the Government the money.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank all of the Deputies for raising these important matters and for giving all of us an opportunity on all sides of the House to discuss the pressures households are facing regarding the cost of living and the actions the Government is taking. It is fair to say that some people on the far side of the House have been positive in their commentary in highlighting some of the issues that are faced and providing some potential solutions. Most recently, Deputy Heneghan proposed a solution regarding plug-in solar panels. The Government needs to learn that when decisions are to be taken, if we take them more swiftly, the solution will then obviously be implemented more quickly. A lot of people did not acknowledge the real reason we have such a huge energy cost currently, which is the conflict in the Middle East. To be fair to Deputy Boyd Barrett, he acknowledged it and the impact that it is having on the cost of living, not just in Ireland but right throughout the globe, and how governments are responding to that issue.

One thing I will take issue with Deputy Boyd Barrett on is when he demonised people like the Collison brothers, who started off by winning the BT Young Scientist award and went on to be global players in the fintech place, creating thousands of jobs not just in Ireland but across the globe, and whose innovation in technology is supporting so many Irish SMEs in their ability to trade not just domestically but internationally. If we demonise people like that, who are creating opportunities and employment and paying corporation tax, which enables us to make decisions in relation to investing in services and social welfare, I really do wonder sometimes. We should be celebrating the success of people like that rather than demonising them on the floor of the Dáil.

Given all that is happening in the Middle East, the Government is continuing to monitor the situation and continues to provide the necessary supports to alleviate the pressure. In recent days, we witnessed more evidence of that when the Government extended the supports to ensure that the actions are there to help households and businesses with the cost of energy and fuel. Despite what people in the Opposition try to portray, this was always going to be the case. It is right and proper that the Government keeps a watchful eye over what is happening on the international market in terms of the cost of fuel and responds accordingly. People on the Opposition benches tried to build up fear by leaning into people's anxiety in relation to the excise reductions ending at the end of July. Deputy Nash mentioned how I have been in this House many times taking similar debates. During every debate, we reassure people that the supports will be monitored, evaluated and, if needed, extended, and that is just what is going to happen. We are acutely aware of the issues facing people. We also have to remember that the price of a barrel of oil is \$73 today and when the supports were introduced it was \$120, so it would be wrong if we did not keep this situation monitored.

The most recent supports are also coupled with supports the Government introduced in budget 2026 to help households with energy costs. These included an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity, saving households up to €100 per year; enhanced social protection payments, including an increase in the fuel allowance rate to €38 per week and an expansion in the eligibility rules, with 40,000 additional households qualifying for it

after the most recent budget; and a record allocation of €640 million for SEAI retrofit schemes, allowing us to target up to 73,000 home energy upgrades this year, including €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty.

I agree, however, with many of the speakers, who identified that budget 2027 needs to include taxation measures and supports for people working. We need to send a strong message out from Government that work is rewarded and recognise that people are making a contribution. That is something that we will see in budget 2007 when it is announced later this year.

On energy supplies and the increases in energy costs, I would strongly encourage people who are difficulty with the cost of energy to engage with their supplier. There is a commitment by all suppliers not to disconnect any customers and to engage with them. In addition, for people who are finding it hard, there is a means-tested payment, the additional needs payment, through the Department of Social Protection for people who cannot afford to pay their energy bills. It is important that all of us identify that this service is there for people who need it.

Many Deputies referred to the high price of energy for households. It is important to note that structural factors also impact on our energy prices. As a country, we are import-dependent for energy, making us particularly vulnerable to price volatility in the wholesale market. Our isolated island location, low levels of interconnection, widely dispersed low-density population and reliance on fossil fuels are also important price determinants.

Retail prices are also influenced by factors other than wholesale prices, including supplier hedging. This is the practice of purchasing energy in bulk ahead of time, protecting consumers from the day-to-day volatility of the energy markets but also having long-run effects on retail prices. This, as well as the current conflict, highlights why Ireland must reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels, accelerate the deployment of renewables and expand interconnection with trusted European partners. We are also working to ensure that households benefit directly from the renewable energy transition.

Retrofitting is one of the best measures a household can take to reduce its energy bills. For instance, a deep retrofit can reduce energy bills by up to €1,100 per year. That is a permanent saving. Applications for SEAI grants so far this year have doubled on last year.

When people say people are not availing of it, they have doubled in the past year. That is 55,000 applications processed to date in 2025. Since 2019, over 268,000 home energy upgrades have been completed, thanks to Government funding of €1.8 billion, including 36,300 fully funded under the warmer homes scheme. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has significantly expanded the retrofit measures, something a lot of Deputies called for earlier today, to ensure they are more accessible and affordable for households. Key measures include stand-alone window and door grants, increased heat-pump grants and increased cavity wall and attic insulation for first-time buyers and households eligible for the warmer homes scheme. In addition, a rooftop revolution is under way across Ireland. Over 112,000 homes have received solar PV grants since the scheme began. SEAI has received over 15,000 applicants for solar PV up to the end of April 2026, and that is a 72% increase on total applications since 2025. Again, people are responding to the supports being provided by the Government. The numbers simply do not lie.

I conclude by reiterating that the Government is aware that people are grappling with rising costs as the geopolitical situation continues to evolve. We will remain focused on ensuring Ireland's energy security remains robust while endeavouring to assist those experiencing real and immediate financial pressures. No Government throughout the world can fully insulate its citizens from the impact of the Middle East but we are doing better than most. We will continue to monitor the situation and to make the necessary interventions.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Aontú Private Members' motion is designed to reduce the cost of living for families. It is designed to reduce the pressure on families across the country. The Minister of State is right to some extent. There is no doubt that the wars in Ukraine and in Iran, for example, have increased the cost of living for families. However, this Government is the main architect of the rip-off Ireland that is hurting this country at the moment. The Government can list a range of different supports it is giving to families, such as child benefit and fuel supports, but most people would rather it stopped taking the money out of their pockets just to give it back to them in another support. That is the key issue here. The Minister of State mentioned supports for energy costs. The truth is that most of middle-Ireland is considered too rich by the Government for those supports but they are actually too poor still to pay for electricity and fuel. As a result, half a million of those families are currently in energy arrears.

We, too, want Ireland to decouple from fossil fuels. We want Ireland to become self-sufficient in terms of energy. Energy independence is as important as fuel independence. Being dependent on the Middle East and on Russia is a major exposure for this country. However, the way to do it is with a carrot rather than a stick. I am the chair of the Meath on Track campaign. We have been campaigning since 1994 for a rail line. The earliest possible time that will arrive is 2036, that is, if nothing stops it, and there is likely to be another slip in relation to that. We want to see solar panels put on the roofs and increased supports for retrofitting in this country. Most families would give their right hand to get out of fossil fuel dependence and to have the public transport solutions they need but the Government will not provide it for them.

This Government has also spoken about renewables. The biggest brake on renewables is this Government. We have been told for years that Ireland is going to become the Saudi Arabia of renewable energy - of wind energy. Yet, in recent times, we have become a net importer of electricity. We are going in the opposite direction to the rhetoric that the Government is using in these terms. We have been told about offshore wind. Forgive me if I am cynical in relation to this. This Government has had six offshore wind conferences since 2021. We have no offshore wind energy generation. Not one turbine is operating in this country. The Government is brilliant at developing conferences, brochures, plans and policies. Sticking a turbine in the sea does not work for the Government though. That is the major problem with all of this. Dysfunction in the system is holding back renewable energy.

We have, at the moment, marginal pricing in energy pricing in this country. That means the price of a unit of electricity is priced at the last unit that is added on to the system. If we keep adding data centres in this country, we are never going to get out of the grip of gas. We are never going to run fast enough to get free of gas being the marginal unit of electricity produced. The Government is going in the opposite direction in terms of freeing this country from renewable energy. The grid is creaking. It is grinding to a halt. Dispatch down, constraints and bottlenecks are all brakes to the addition of renewable energy. Every single turbine that is

added has a diminishing return. We are paying €500 million a year to renewable energy providers to stop producing electricity. The dysfunctional system means the network costs and the stabilising costs of the network are actually now more than the wholesale cost of producing electricity in Ireland, and that is adding to everybody's bill.

I want to talk about Sinn Féin's contribution. Sinn Féin Members spent their time attacking Opposition TDs on this while letting the Government off the hook. Let us be clear about this. Aontú voted for the excise cuts that helped people over the past few months. Incredibly, Sinn Féin was the only Opposition party that voted against the excise cuts that helped people over the past few months. Incredibly, Sinn Féin is now arguing against those excise increases, having voted against them being cut in the first place. Deputy Guirke spoke about the fact that Aontú did not speak on the Finance Bill. That is rubbish. Incredibly, Deputy Guirke, the stone-thrower, did not speak on that Bill; we in Aontú did. In 2024, Deputy Guirke had the lowest speaking contribution in the Dáil. He spoke for one hour in a whole year in total. Deputy Guirke is the Fr. Stone of Irish politics and he thinks being a TD is a remote job. It is not. Those who turn up here make the decisions, and not turning up and staying silent does not help the people of Meath.

It must also be said that the Government was pulled kicking and screaming to reduce these costs, and the reason for this was people power. It was because of ordinary people taking to the streets of this country and demanding help. Ordinary people, whose businesses, families and jobs were falling around them, took to the streets in desperation and this forced the Government's hands. If we are honest, the major reason this Government is not increasing excise until September is that it is fearful the protestors are going to come back onto the streets on this issue and it does not want these protestors to put bad luck on this EU Presidency. That is the biggest issue here.

The frustrations people have about the level of tax on fuel at the moment is because the tax they are paying is ending up in waste. That is a major issue. Most people do not mind paying taxes as long as they get value for money in the services those taxes are producing. We can look at the level of Government waste that is happening. Some €50 million spent on an Iarnród Éireann IT system that never worked. When we asked the Taoiseach about it, he did not know the answers. Some €300 million has been spent on metro north and not a shovel has been put in the ground. When it was announced 20 years ago, the price of it was €2 billion but now the price is edging towards €16 billion. There is the 100 electric buses that were bought that never moved an inch because somebody forgot to provide an electricity charger for those buses. There is the recent €127,000 for the HSE Kerry bike shed, following on from the €336,000 Dáil bike shed, and the €10 million that is going to be spent on the Dublin City Council offices in Wood Quay that it plans to knock in three years' time. Then we have the €2.4 billion on the national children's hospital, which is basically a monument to Government waste at the moment. There are so many examples of taxpayers' money, which is extracted from their pockets, being incinerated by Government over and over again.

One of the most insidious levels of Government waste that never gets looked at in this country are the overspends on an annual basis.

12 o'clock

From 2021, the Government has been overspending by €5 billion a year and it has come under pressure from IFAC in relation to it. Health accounts for 40% of that overspend and capital infrastructure overruns saw €1.6 billion in one year.

At the heart of the cost-of-living crisis in this country is the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Independents Government tax gauging the people of Ireland and allowing for dysfunction to reign in terms of the infrastructure and the spend in this country.

Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the whole of Europe and the second highest in the world. Incredibly, ESB made a profit of €3 billion just in the past four years. ESB is a public company operating on the basis of Government policy and that company is now looking to increase electricity prices today. Does the Minister of State not see the problem here? How can he stand over a Government company making €3 billion profit in four years and then in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis jack up the cost of electricity? The fact the Government is allowing that to happen is a major problem.

Last year there was €4.3 billion in fuel taxes and €1.2 billion in carbon tax, a tax that hardly existed five years ago. These are excruciating costs for families. They are hurting and damaging families. They are damaging businesses. These high energy costs are bad for the economy. That is never discussed here, that jobs are going abroad and businesses are closing because the Government is a high energy cost Government. The Government must get to grips with that and realise what levers are in place. One of the levers is excise costs. Over the next six months, the Government wants to increase excise five times in a cost-of-living crisis. I am asking the Minister of State not to do that and to back the Aontú Private Members' motion.

Amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1 put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The division will be postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 12.03 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.03 p.m. and resumed at 5.30 p.m.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla (Atógáil) - Topical Issue Debate (Resumed)

Bus Services

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In recent years, there have been some improvements on the bus transport in Limerick city, with routes such as the 310 from Annacotty to the city centre being rolled out. These new routes and improvements have to be welcomed, but significant gaps remain in the provision of bus services across Limerick city. Condell Road in Limerick is an example in this regard. Hundreds of new homes, which were built in recent years and in which families and workers live, are located on this road and in the surrounding area. The road itself is well laid out and has a significant amount of bus infrastructure, including a bus lane, yet there is no local bus services in the area. I do not understand how such a densely populated area with the necessary infrastructure in place does not have an active bus service.

The Kilteragh estate in Dooradoyle, where hundreds of homes are also located, has no bus service. The nearest bus stop is located outside the Crescent Shopping Centre, which is 2 km away. Another area that is lacking a bus service is that which lies between St. Mary's Park, the most deprived area in the whole city, and the Garryowen area. While the area has a bus route, the service ends at 6 p.m. The latter is due to a legacy issue dating back a number of years and that needs to be resolved in order that we can see the return of a proper bus service. The area in question has the lowest level of car ownership in the city, with an estimated 57% of householders not having access to cars. In addition, the population in the area is ageing. Having their bus service end before nightfall is absurd in this day and age.

We have faced major challenges in making the Limerick city centre a liveable and enjoyable place. Efforts have been made to improve the city and make it a more attractive place to visit and enjoy. We have had some great success with the promotion of King John's Castle as a music venue, Thomond Park and the annual Great Limerick Run. In light of the need to revitalise the city, it seems extraordinary that the residents of St. Mary's Park and Garryowen cannot avail of public transport to visit the city centre.

We are also trying to promote a more sustainable future. The use of public transport is crucial in this regard. Not everyone has the luxury of their own vehicle, yet there are populated areas of Limerick that do not have access to a properly functioning transport system. To date, BusConnects has achieved some progress, particularly in the context of services on new roads, and there has been an increase in passenger numbers. In Limerick, however, the BusConnects project has been marked by shortcomings in planning, funding and delivery. It is nearly a decade since the announcement of BusConnects and the projected completion date of 2027, but the timelines across the area to which I refer have been pushed out to 2030. The project has been plagued by delays and postponements. In Limerick, frankly, it has not been delivered. The costs relating to the project have spiralled, with an estimated increase in cost from the initial €1 billion to between €2.6 billion and €3.4 billion. We have already seen a four-year delay in the delivery of BusConnects, which has impacted the economic development and liveability of Limerick.

When raising the issue of University Hospital Limerick on many occasions, I have spoken about the growing population of Limerick and the wider mid-west region. The growth in population also makes the delivery of a functional, affordable and viable public transport system critical. Limerick BusConnects has the potential to transform connectivity within the city and between its suburbs, thereby improving access to employment and education, reducing congestion and delivering on commitments relating to sustainability. I see no desire to provide this urgently needed funding for BusConnects in Limerick in order that it can progress. This must change. The Minister of State needs to ensure that the necessary funding is provided promptly.

BusConnects across the State is yet another example of the Government's consistent failure to meet target delivery dates. Of course, it has failed, with costs in excess of initial estimates. I urge the Minister of State to get onto the National Transport Authority, NTA, to tell it to end the delays relating to BusConnects in Limerick, to get the project back on track and to get bus services delivered for the people who need them.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Quinlivan for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I commend the Deputy on raising the matter because it gives us the opportunity to provide an update on BusConnects in Limerick. I will take this opportunity to highlight some sustainable mobility developments in Limerick more generally. I will bring the comments the Deputy made regarding the gaps and deficits, as he sees them, in the service back to the Minister and the Department.

The Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy has been developed by the NTA in the context of delivering an accessible, integrated transport network that will enable the sustainable growth of Limerick up to 2040. I take on board some of the comments the Deputy made about Limerick being made liveable in the context of the redesign of the city centre. The latter includes the development of the bus system and the Limerick BusConnects programme. It is fair to say that good progress has been made in delivering the strategy, including BusConnects Limerick.

In 2023, the NTA carried out an extensive review of the Limerick bus network. This review was conducted in collaboration with Limerick City and County Council, Clare County Council and Bus Éireann, and was supported by the specialised expertise of the transport system designers Jarrett Walker and Associates. Following public consultation, the NTA published its final new bus network for Limerick in December 2023. The redesign of the bus network is one of the nine key elements of BusConnects Limerick that aims to transform the city's bus system, making public transport more useful and accessible to more people.

I take the Deputy's point that not everybody has a car. People should not have to own cars, particularly in cities like Limerick or Cork. The new bus network will enable more people to avail of public transport resulting in increased access to a greater number of schools and workplaces across Limerick city. Limerick is a college city. That is part of the whole network system. Overall, 41% of residents will live within 400 metres of a high frequency bus route, running every 15 minutes or better. Limerick is the first city in Ireland with a fully electrified bus service, with two phases of charger installation works coming on stream at Roxboro bus depot during 2024 and 61 zero-emission buses in active service today.

Regarding future phases of BusConnects Limerick, and the BusConnects programmes across the cities more generally, the NTA will publish its detailed national development plan implementation plan later this year, which will set out the elements of the programme to be progressed in the coming years within available funding to 2030. This follows on from the publication of the national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan by the Department of Transport last November, and the publication of the NDP review last July. In addition, the NTA is also preparing a BusConnects programme progress report. This report will set out the latest position across the programme, including developments in relation to network redesign, infrastructure delivery and overall programme progress.

In addition to bus-based improvements, the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy also recommends a number of improvements to rail infrastructure, including a new rail station at Moyross. Planning permission for this station was received from Limerick City and County Council in October 2025. The project has progressed into the detailed design phase, with procurement preparations under way. It is currently planned to commence construction later this year. Other rail interventions include increasing the frequency of services on the

Ballybrophy line to up to two trains per hour, double-tracking the line from Limerick Junction to Colbert Station and upgrading Colbert Station, a project that was successfully completed in November 2024. People are now benefiting from the improved facilities at the station, including the new car park, ticketing facilities, bus concourse and set-down area.

The NDP sectoral plan also contains an allocation funding for the delivery of a number of priority rail projects by 2030. I will pass that back to the Deputy, particularly as has received a copy of the Department's response.

I will take the Deputy's points regarding the areas he mentioned back to the Minister. I again thank him for raising this very important matter.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As stated, good progress has been made regarding transport in the mid-west, but we still lag way behind other areas across the State. Last year, I published a report on bus infrastructure in areas on the north side of Limerick City. It clearly showed that working class areas lack basic services and that they had no bus stops, signage or bus shelters. Some work was done on the back of that report. Some of the signage has been put up in the Ballynanty area where I live and where was no bus stop or signage previously.

I want to mention the 303 bus route that runs from Ros Mór to Kileely to Moyross. There is a very good and reliable bus service on that route, with buses leaving every 15 minutes. We are doing an active travel scheme in the area at the moment. What they have done with the route, with buses coming onto O'Callaghan Avenue from Kileely and then onto the High Road and Thomond at Johnseys shop, is very dangerous. The road has been narrowed so much that buses have to mount the footpaths on both sides. Somebody is going to get seriously injured unless something is done. The engineers involved in the active travel scheme have told me that they will look at what has happened when the project is finished. We cannot wait for that. The other day, someone walking on the footpath was nearly killed. That because buses cannot turn the corner without mounting the footpath on one side or the other. Buses often bypass this area, which they are supposed to serve, on their way to Moyross.

In the absence of BusConnects being done, I call on the Minister of State to ensure that the bus service in the St. Mary's Park and Garryowen areas is extended and that a proper service is provided. There is a bus service in place, but it comes to an end at 6 p.m. each day.

We also need a bus service for the Condell Road. We cannot wait for that. There is potential for the bus that serves Pineview Gardens to also serve Condell Road. When the Knockalisheen Road is opened, this problem could be solved. If we really want people to use bus services - I do and I use buses when I can - they have to be safe, reliable and affordable.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is correct. Bus services need to be safe, reliable and accessible. I will take the points he made about the areas he mentioned back to the Minister.

The Deputy referred to active travel. There needs to be collaboration between the NTA and the city and county council with regard to the issue to which he referred, particularly in the context of safety. If we are doing active travel, it makes no sense for it not to be safe for road users, pedestrians and, in particular, bus users. I take the Deputy's point in that regard and commend him on the work he has done.

The ambition is that there will be a 70% increase in bus services in Limerick. It is about accessibility. I genuinely believe that those who offer bus services across the country do not discriminate on the basis of eircodes or people's location. It is about ensuring that they have shorter waits and more direct routes and about making the network simpler, with a schedule that meets demand. It is also about the out-of-hours time, as the Deputy said, and about having additional services available, whether that is at weekends or in the evening. As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I have seen the success of rural transport. People will use it if it is provided.

Limerick has been leading the way in some areas, including in the context of electric buses. It has 61 zero-emission buses. The NDP to be issued later this year will outline in more detail the aspects of BusConnects Limerick that will be advanced in the period to 2030.

I will take the points the Deputy has made back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the NTA. It was the issue of the 303 route that he highlighted most, and I will bring that back.

Limerick has been leading the way in some of the areas including electrified buses. It has 61 zero-emission buses. The detailed NDP later this year will outline in more detail the aspects of BusConnects Limerick that will be advanced in the funding to 2030. I will take the points the Deputy has made today back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and to the NTA. It was the issue of the 303 that he highlighted most and I will bring that back.

The Leas-Cheann Comhairle referred to bus services in Kilkenny at Question Time last week. People want to use public transport. We have provided it. The Ministers in the Department work with the NTA. It is about an implementation plan or a roadmap to ensure the new network, in Limerick, in Deputy Quinlivan's case, is not only being worked on but that new services that can be rolled out incrementally on new routes will be delivered. It is also about staffing and resources being available, particularly drivers. Deputy Ó Laoghaire, who is seated behind Deputy Quinlivan, will know that in Cork we have an issue with staffing in the context of mechanics and drivers.

I will certainly bring Deputy Quinlivan's remarks back to the Minister. I again thank him for raising the matter.

Medicinal Products

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, for coming in to take this matter, which relates to the drug Pluvicto. This drug is for men suffering with prostate cancer. It was granted European Medical Agency, EMA, approval back in 2022. The HSE received an application for reimbursement on 9 January 2023. A rapid review was commenced shortly thereafter, on 10 February 2023. It was decided in March 2023 that a full higher technical assessment, HTA, was required in order to assess the efficacy of the drug. That assessment took the best part of 15 months to complete. A final HTA was completed in August 2024, when it was recommended that Pluvicto not to be reimbursed. That recommendation went forward to the drugs group, which followed through with its decision on the basis that it believed the therapy does not represent optimal use of limited HSE resources. That negative recommendation went forward to the HSE senior management team, which, as one would expect following a negative recommendation from the two subcommittees under it, followed through with its own refusal.

In the period that followed, 40 specialist consultants in oncology and radiology wrote a letter to the then chief executive of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, pleading with him to make the drug available to men suffering with prostate cancer. It has the potential to prolong their lives and has been described as a significant breakthrough. The consultants in question also highlighted that similar drugs are available to other men with similar prostate cancer conditions, which just deepened the inequitable situation whereby some people were able to avail of drugs while others were prevented from doing so.

The Minister of State is probably fed up with me coming in here looking for various drugs to be reimbursed. In that context, this drug is available in ten other European countries. I just checked my phone and discovered that it is available in France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Czechia, Slovenia, Greece, Spain, Germany and Great Britain. It is not just big countries, because Switzerland, Austria, Belgium and Slovenia have made it available.

I am here again beating the same drum. I commend the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, regarding the review she instigated. To be fair, she put her money where her mouth is. I look forward to that review being completed. I believe it has gone out to tender and will happen by the end of this year. Nevertheless, here we are again. I do not want to hear that what is happening in this instance is the fault of the drug company involved, the HSE or the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE. That drug was approved by the EMA in 2022 and an application in respect of it was made in January 2023. Fast forward three and a half years, and people still do not have access to a cancer drug that could save their lives and that is widely available in other European countries. Here we are again, talking about Ireland being behind the curve.

There will be a litany of reasons given as to why it has taken this long to get to this point. Ultimately, the drugs group and the HSE senior management team have decided not to reimburse the drug. Over the past few years, this Government and that which preceded it have approved more of these rare disease drugs than was the case over the previous decade. In the past three years, more of them have been approved than ever before. That is down to money. I am not asking for extra money. I am not trying to bankrupt the HSE, blow its budget or to do any of the other things I am being accused of. What I am asking for is a fairer apportionment of the existing drugs budget in this country. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Minister of State will know that we are working with Friedreich's ataxia patients who are undergoing a similar process regarding reimbursement of the drug Skyclarys, which, I understand, will be dealt with by the drugs group shortly. Still, here we are again. How many more patients' groups or cohorts of people will have to plead for much-needed access to quality drugs?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): Since I have known him, the Deputy has consistently come to the Dáil and raised issues relating to rare diseases. He has worked so hard not just in respect of this particular drug but also in respect of several others. I thank him for his commitment and his hard work on this. I know he is constantly meeting the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

The State acknowledges the importance of access to medicines. This Government is committed to providing timely access to new and innovative medicines and has made considerable investments in recent years, with annual expenditure on medicines now almost €4 billion. This means that nearly €1 in every €8 of public funding is being spent on health. This

level of investment is unprecedented in supporting patients through the availability of new and innovative medicines.

The budgets for the period between 2021 to 2025 included dedicated funding of €158 million for new medicines.

Budget 2026 allocated an additional €30 million of funding for new drugs out of €217 million in additional funding for drugs. This has enabled the HSE to approve reimbursement for 276 new medicines or new uses for existing medicines, including 110 for treating cancer and 75 for treating rare diseases. The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines and medical items, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. In line with the Act a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the formal reimbursement list. I know the Deputy is aware of this. Pluvicto is a medicine used to treat prostate cancer. It is indicated for certain adult patients with prostate cancer who have previously been treated with AR pathway inhibition and taxane-based chemotherapy.

The medicine was granted marketing authorisation by the European Medicines Agency in September 2022, following a positive opinion from the Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use. The centralised procedure results in a single EU-wide marketing authorisation valid across all EU member states. On 9 January 2023, the HSE received an application from Advanced Accelerator Applications, a Novartis company, for pricing and reimbursement of the drug. The drugs group is the national committee the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The membership of the HSE drugs group includes clinical experts and public interest members. The HSE drugs group considers all of the evidence and makes a recommendation to the HSE senior leadership team. The clinical and economic evidence for this treatment was comprehensively and extensively reviewed by the drugs group at the April 2025 meeting. Evidence considered included a HTA report from the NCPE, a patient interest group submission, two additional clinical representations, and advice from the national cancer control programme technology review committee, an expert group whose membership includes clinicians specialising in oncology. The decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE senior management team, which decides whether it can fund a new medicine. The senior management team supported the drugs group recommendation not to reimburse this treatment. The HSE corporate pharmaceutical unit issued a formal written notice of proposal to the applicant on Tuesday, 5 May 2026. The applicant has since met with the CPU, and it has submitted a commercial offer that remains under consideration. The HSE cannot comment on potential outcomes of this application. That information is important.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I have asked many parliamentary questions on this over the past few years. Very little has changed. The only thing that gives me hope is that the company has since met the CPU and submitted a commercial offer that remains under consideration. I am not asking for special treatment for any drug. These are all subject to commercial sensitivity. I am asking for fairness. This process started in January 2023, so we are here three and a half years later. They should be given a final response one way or another. That is all I ask for, good, bad or indifferent at this stage. People need to be put out of their misery. We can go on about the savings achieved in that timeline because this drug was not made available.

That is probably because people have died because of the lack of access to it, truth be told. Those are the facts.

I am not asking for special treatment. I have spoken consistently in the House about systems change. I hope to God the review the Minister commissioned brings the systems change I would like to see. Dozens of other countries do this in a better way than we do. We can continue to put up the front that we are one of the best at negotiating and we get the best price and the best value for drugs, but ultimately as a society we have to ask ourselves at what cost. Unfortunately, in this case it is at the cost of lives. I made a comment about the Skyclarys campaign. I know the Minister of State has to be careful what she says because it is due before the drugs group. I again make the case that these people just want a hearing as expeditiously as possible. Like I said, nine other European countries have approved that drug apart from the United States and a few other countries internationally. When are we going to step up to the plate with drugs like Skyclarys for Friedreich's ataxia patients? I know the Minister of State has constituents of her own and it is close to her heart.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Two new frameworks are agreed with Medicines for Ireland. This is the Irish pharmaceutical healthcare association on the supply and pricing of medicines. These have been successfully reached following extensive negotiation with the pharmaceutical sector. These two new framework agreements will change things. A tender for conducting this review was published on Monday, 15 June. Once commenced, the project timeline is between six and nine months. Together these measures will enable faster access to medicines for patients in Ireland. I thank the Deputy for this.

I will talk about my own constituency. I have met with a lot of families in Carlow affected by Friedreich's ataxia, particularly Emily and Oisín. As the Deputy said, it is important. The next HSE drugs group is meeting on Tuesday, 14 July and that will be discussed. Skyclarys is on the agenda for that meeting. It is important because I have met with so many families in Carlow-Kilkenny and with constituents who need this drug. These families are waiting to get it urgently. Like everything, there is due diligence and funding is always spoken about. It is important that we know we have the date for it. The meeting is on Tuesday, 14 July with the drugs group and Skyclarys is on the agenda for that group meeting.

I will bring all of the Deputy's important issues and concerns on timing to the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. Unfortunately, she could not take this Topical Issue.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Last night we had a debate on childcare. During the course of that I made the point that July and August can be stressful times for parents as they try to figure out a patchwork quilt of different types of care as school finishes and there are camps and things like that. The stress of that is multiplied by two, three and ten for parents of children with special educational needs. The Topical Issue I submitted is about the summer provision programme.

While the summer provision scheme obviously cannot be precisely the same as school, it is meant to offer a certain amount of continuity for children, staff and families in terms of the support, care and education those children get during the course of the summer. Unfortunately,

despite the fact that this is an annual debate, there still seem to be huge anomalies, discrepancies, things that are difficult to understand and shortfalls in time, hours and provision.

I was prompted to raise this in the context of an issue in a particular school. I was contacted by a parent and a teacher about a school where two children who had visual impairment were not going to be allowed access the programme because of a lack of SNA support. Trying to get that addressed was something the school had been chasing over the course of two or three weeks, and it received no response from the Department. In the interim, I have learned since submitting this matter that some additional resources have been allocated, but the fundamental point in terms of structure is that this school found it difficult to get answers. Time will tell whether the provision is adequate for those particular children. It still speaks to a fundamental point with regard to the programme as a whole.

I will give a number of examples. There seems to be a big issue with special schools in particular. Some parents have told me there was a delayed release of funding, which has led to some schools struggling to ensure staff are provided. There is a particular frustration with the reduced length of the day for special schools for 2026, continuing for the past number of years. The Department's position is that this is from stakeholder feedback. A lot of parents say that this really has not changed since Covid. The kind of feedback that might be talked about could go back that far. There is obviously a discrepancy with the special schools.

6 o'clock

For them, it is from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., whereas mainstream schools with special classes or units attached to schools do full-time hours in many instances. Not every school does, but they are in a position to offer the full four weeks with full hours. The guidance for special schools seems to be that there is no scope for the provision of that.

There is also an issue with the window, which was shorter this year than last year - only ten days, when previously it was two weeks. It was opened quite late this year, towards the end of June, whereas last year it was open in May. A lot of parents who are looking to avail of summer provision do not have the opportunity. They are being offered a home-based programme, but that is only for ten hours per week for four weeks compared to either 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the special schools or for the full hours in some of the mainstream schools with special classes attached. There are different anomalies affecting different categories of parents, leading to an awful lot of parents not getting the support they ought to get. It was very late when they found out what would be available.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy very much for raising the summer programme. I will set out the details of the scheme in the first instance and then I will respond to the specific points raised.

The summer programme is hugely valued across the Government and by families and school communities. It is a vital and targeted intervention for the education of children with special educational needs and those affected by educational disadvantage. It is delivered during the summer months to ensure that children with additional needs or who are disadvantaged have continuity. There is an emphasis on different things in each of the schools.

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

The details of the summer programme were communicated to stakeholders, including the schools, in May of this year. While acknowledging that the details of the programme are technically announced earlier, the Department has continually kept in touch with the educational stakeholders querying when the programme might be announced. This ensured that the schools understood that it would be forthcoming and that they could start their preparation. As a result, and as the Deputy said, the online portal was open for ten days. Following feedback from schools in particular in relation to that, the portal was opened again to allow more schools to apply and get on board with the summer programme.

We have more school-based schemes this year than in 2025. That is hugely welcome and means that more primary, post-primary and special schools are engaging in the summer programme. The applications for home-based programmes also significantly increased on last year. A number of schools, including one cited by the Deputy, went back to the Department looking for extra staffing and resources. I understand that a lot of those requests have been met at this stage in terms of giving the resources.

In response to the points the Deputy makes, I understand the value of the summer programme. It is a hugely valued piece. It is vital that this valued resource be targeted at children with additional needs and those who are in disadvantage. While we have expanded the numbers quite considerably in recent years, we must ensure that we are targeting those who are most in need. I agree that we need to have the programme opened earlier and for a longer period. We had engagement between the Department and the stakeholders right through the year to say that the programme would be forthcoming but we need to make sure that there is a timeline for the schools because school communities are working extremely hard, in particular when it comes to the year end. Many school communities refer to it as "mad May". I take that point, which was made very clearly.

If it is okay with the Deputy, I might come back to a number of the points he raised about special schools and so forth in the closing remarks.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Will the Minister of State take away a couple of points? While the issue I raised was resolved ultimately, that does appear to have been after the last minute, as it was after the provision had already begun on Monday. It was only today that I learned that additional resources were provided yesterday. It should not have come to that. It should not have been the case that two sets of parents were faced with a situation where children with visual impairments were potentially not going to be able to avail of the summer provision because of a lack of SNA supports.

Parents of children with special educational needs constantly feel a number of things: first, that they have to fight for absolutely everything; and, second, that there is a constant cycle

whereby every spring there is a debate on special classes and every summer there is a debate on summer provision. That is despite the fact that the planning for these should be improving all the time, yet for parents it seems as if the same debate repeats itself and there is not any advance.

I want the Minister of State to take away in particular the point about special schools being able to offer full-time hours. Not every special class attached to a mainstream school offers full-time hours but the school has the option. However, it is not part of the guidance available to special schools, which operate between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Those children and their parents need the support the most, as the children struggle the most with the change in the pattern of their day.

I want to briefly raise the matter of children with special educational needs. Gaelscoil Uí Riada serves the Bishopstown and Wilton areas in the south-west of Cork city. Its application for two additional classrooms for special classes under the additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme was rejected. Will the Minister of State push for that within the Department? The Department keeps talking about modular units rather than an extension but there is not the space for them. It is a tight, city-based site. It is crucial to ensure that the school can offer additional special education classes.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I will take the points back in relation to the Gaelscoil.

Some 1,800 schools and 71,000 children are participating in the scheme this year. Going back five years, there were 545 schools with 23,000 children. We have seen a 210% increase in participation. That gives a sense of the Government's commitment to the scheme. There are issues in regard to the special classes, schools in disadvantaged areas and special schools. The teams that work in special schools are superhuman beings because they work with the most vulnerable children, who sometimes have a very high dependency. They work extremely hard.

I have had lengthy engagements with the special school community in recent weeks. We met the principals of all the schools who spoke about the challenges they had within their schools and communities. We will reflect on those points. As well as that, we want to make sure that the summer programme is a hugely important and embedded piece in special education and disadvantaged education now and into the future. We must be open to an evaluation of it and to how we are going to roll it out over the coming years to make sure that we are targeting the resources to the people who need them most. There are a number of points ongoing in that regard.

While we engaged with the school communities and the stakeholders on the scheme, which we said would be open – there was no question but that it would be running this year – we need to make sure that we start earlier. Schools and school communities are working extremely hard right up to the year end. We need to reflect very carefully on that.

I will give due reflection to the piece about the hours. A number of parents contacted me about that as well.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue debate. I want to raise the matter of the proposed amalgamation of two schools in the lower harbour area of Cork. These are Ringaskiddy national school and Shanbally National School. This is a project that has been in the pipeline for many years but, unfortunately, remains effectively stalled and has been so for the past number of years. There is very little progress to show.

I thank the Minister of State for visiting the school in Shanbally in recent months and seeing at first hand the condition of the school building. It is a school with nine classrooms, six of them prefabs. Many of these prefabs are old and in very poor condition with sagging ceilings, collapsing floors, dampness, electrical issues, and health and safety issues. Similar significant issues arise in Ringaskiddy. Neither school got much investment in recent years because this amalgamation was proposed and supposedly happening. The teachers, principals, students, parents and communities have to put up with two schools that are simply not fit for purpose in terms of the educational needs of today. In terms of size, Shanbally National School has just under 200 students and Ringaskiddy national school is smaller, with about 60 students.

Despite all I have outlined about the conditions of the buildings, they are fantastic schools that provide an outstanding educational service. They provide a very strong emphasis on special education, also. They are wonderful schools for any child to go to despite the issues with the physical buildings. The teaching staff are outstanding and the school communities, atmospheres and learning environments are second to none.

As I have outlined, the project seems to be stalled. It is to be delivered under phase 2 of the Department's accelerated delivery of architectural planning and tendering, ADAPT, 4 programme. A project manager was appointed in the third quarter of 2023, which is more than three years ago. This person had the task of preparing documentation for the tender process and the appointment of an integrated project team. I am anxious to get an update on the tender process. As the Minister of State can appreciate, there is deep frustration that it has taken so long after the appointment of the project manager to progress with the tender phase of the project.

When I raised this matter as a Topical Issue just over six months ago in December 2025, the reply at the time was very much focused on the fact that there was an issue with the site. I reiterate that there is absolutely no issue with the site. To give the history briefly, a site was acquired a number of years ago but it was then acquired for the M28 project and the construction of the motorway. A different site has now been identified and IDA Ireland is in the process of transferring it to the council, which will then transfer it to the diocesan office. This is at an advanced stage and the council is finalising the acquisition of the site.

I have it in writing from the council that it will fully co-operate with any planning application and any design work. The site itself will not be an issue and there will not be a delay. I really do not want the Department to use the site as a delaying tactic because there is no reason whatsoever that the project cannot proceed through the design and planning phase. The school site will be fully acquired and in the possession of the diocesan office so that it can progress with this project.

I would like an update on the overall project. The Minister of State visited the school in Shanbally and saw at first hand its condition. He will accept that the schools are not acceptable,

given the standard of education we expect for our children and the standard of the environment and school buildings they attend.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank Deputy McGrath for his question. I visited the school in Shanbally and saw the condition of it. I saw the excellent work being done by the school community - the teachers, the SNAs and everybody involved - and the commitment those people have to education. Both schools are co-education primary schools catering for boys and girls from junior to sixth class. Both schools have agreed to amalgamate, with a new school building to be constructed. The new school is expected to be located on a six-acre site that is privately owned. If I understand it correctly, this will be transferred to the council and then to the diocesan trust. This is a very important element and I will certainly relay the comments of Deputy McGrath back to the planning and building unit. A lot of the time, technical transfers are slow and cumbersome. When the transfer is made to the diocesan trust, we can make the decisions; we will have the site and we can move on to the next level.

Both schools are in separate buildings and Deputy McGrath understands all of this quite well. What we need to do today is make sure that we have the pieces together to move it on. I saw the condition of the school in Shanbally. Something needs to be done in the Department. We have project managers and others in place for this project. From what I have heard from Deputy McGrath today, the transfer of the site is progressing through various stages. If there is further documentation or information that Deputy McGrath can bring to the table, I would appreciate it in terms of the timeline, as we could then put it on the table and say that the site was moving forward. We could then move to the next stage.

With the best will in the world, there are a number of stages to go through, including planning and design. I know that Deputy McGrath will work with the local authority to ensure it passes through this stage. The local authority is very open to it and it understands it. The site has been earmarked. Without going through all of the detail, the brief is for 16 classrooms, as Deputy McGrath is well aware. This is about the amalgamation of both schools. Deputy McGrath indicated that there were about 200 pupils in one school and 60 in the other. This is very important for education, not alone now, but in future. If I could get sight of the transfer documents, I could then take them to the planning and building unit and we could ensure that a speedy response is given as fast as possible. We often talk about delays and legal issues but we have to try to cut through this. I have seen for myself the situation and I will certainly do what we can in the Department to move the project on.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State. I want to put on the record my appreciation for the Minister of State taking the time to visit the school. He visited Shanbally National School and heard about Ringaskiddy national school and the conditions there, and about how critical this project was.

I want to be absolutely clear about the land and I can furnish documentation to the Minister of State. A response from a senior person in Cork County Council states that, while finalisation of the acquisition is taking place and in advance of the formal transfer of land subject to section 183, Cork County Council will support any planning application submitted in respect of the new school and will also provide a letter of consent to accompany the planning submission at the appropriate time. There is no reason whatsoever that the land issue should cause any delay.

I notice from the reply this evening, which is deeply disappointing, that we do not appear to have progressed in the tender process since December last year. It is the exact same update, stating that the project manager was appointed in the third quarter of 2023 and was in the process of preparing documentation for the tender process for the appointment of an integrated project team. That is the exact same language as in the reply I received in December 2025. This is deeply frustrating and it is very difficult for me as a public representative to go back to the communities, principals, parents and teaching staff and say that this project has not moved forward. I do not want to be disingenuous, and I hope work is progressing on the tender process, but the reply seems to be the exact same, which is very frustrating.

To reiterate, the project is vital for these two school communities. The conditions they operate in at present are not acceptable. It has been promised for many years. This project has been in the pipeline for in excess of 15 years. There was an issue with the original site not being available because of the motorway project, which was facilitated. I plead with the Minister of State to go back to the Department and ensure that we progress the project once and for all and that the school communities - students, parents, families, teaching staff, principals and everyone else - have buildings that are suitable for the educational requirements of these children.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I accept that.

The Department is very committed to this. It has carried out a survey and the reports are very clear that this project must go ahead. There were delays over 15 years. The frustration in relation to a project like this is sometimes about it taking so much time. The point is, though, that we need to have sight of the exact legal situation because to progress the project to the tender documents and planning stages, we would have to be 100% certain. I would appreciate if I could get the document the Deputy read from, because I would like to try to get that in and to try to start moving.

This is a fundamental aspect. I am referring to the site, the land and the history with other sites and so forth. We have to have that information as the underpinning that will allow us to move forward. If we go to planning, tender and other stages, we must make sure that we have ownership of the site. This is the fundamental aspect to moving the project to the next stage. There is a lot of work ready to go. The specification in terms of what is being designed there - the 16 classrooms and all of that - exists, but we need to have certainty about the site.

I will take that document from the Deputy and any other supporting documentation he has. I will raise this issue and push it as hard as I can with the planning and building unit in the Department.

School Accommodation

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State will have received the letter this week requesting a meeting between him and the TDs from Cork North-Central in relation to Scoil Padre Pio. We had a very important meeting on Monday with the principal, Ms Sinéad Elliffe, where she outlined that the school had been waiting and was now caught in limbo. The school's extension was approved in 2019. The school has now gone through the whole design process

and has gone back and forth with the Department, and as far as the school is concerned, it is done. It has, though, not been able to get anyone to sign off on that design.

Scoil Padre Pio, then, is one of the schools stuck in the dreaded stage 2A. It is like a wasteland for schools. They go away and do the work, and then they are caught there. This is not the situation of Scoil Padre Pio alone. We also have Gaelscoil Pheig Sayers, which got approval for a new school in 2022, but it has been unable to get a response from the Department for the last 12 months. We have Scoil Chroí Íosa stuck at the same stage. Then there is St. Killian's Special School, Gaelscoil an Chaisleáin and Le Chéile Secondary School. A 15-acre site was purchased in Ballincollig in 2024, and there has still been no progress. Ballincollig is an area that is expanding hugely. There is a desperate need for school places, but once again this is stuck in limbo. There are ten schools in my constituency on the list for large-scale building projects and another 21 on the list for additional accommodation. Not one large-scale building project has been delivered in Cork North-Central since 2020. There have been 11 smaller scale accommodation projects.

We have seen other schools that cannot even get onto the list. These include Scoil Barra, Clogheen Kerry Pike National School, Scoil Eoin and the Convent Primary School in Mallow. Despite the huge efforts made by their principals, these are schools that cannot even get on the radar of the Department, whatever that is about. I have visited some of these schools and seen the holes in the floors and the roofs and the dangerous steps that cannot be used by children. I am speaking about brilliant principals, teachers, SNAs and kids. These are kids who are being failed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government because they are being educated in rooms and prefabs that are not fit for education. On one hand, the Government is recognising the needs of these children. On the other hand, it is letting them remain in accommodation that is unsuitable for children.

I will give the Minister of State an example. Scoil Padre Pio was one of the first schools in Cork to take on additional autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes. It led the way. It was seen to do unbelievable work. Prefabs went in there 21 years ago. I met a man who told me he was educated in those prefabs and now his son is being educated in the same prefabs. Does the Minister of State know that the Government is after spending €1.5 million on those prefabs? Almost €100,000 is being spent each year. What a waste of money that is. This project could have been delivered for €2.5 million in 2019. Does the Minister of State know what the cost is now? It is €7 million. The longer the Government delays, the more the cost goes up.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Gould.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We have a brilliant school that is dealing with some of the most vulnerable kids, both mainstream and special classes. They are being failed by this Government.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy very much for the question. He mentioned a number of schools, and I definitely will go back over them. The Deputy's question, though, was on the numbers of schools in County Cork at stage 2A. The Department has a strong track record of delivering the school building programme, with over €6.9 billion invested in the last six years. This has delivered approximately 1,400 completed school building projects and over

4,000 smaller improvement projects. Over €796 million in capital funding has been invested in County Cork schools since 2020. In this period, a total of 168 schools in County Cork have been upgraded either through the provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or the provision of modular accommodation. There are also currently 18 school projects in County Cork under construction. In late 2025, 35 schools were approved to undergo works as part of the climate action summer works scheme. In addition, since 2020, a total of 375 special classes have been sanctioned in Cork, of which 69 were sanctioned for September 2026.

Under the national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan for education and youth, €5 billion is allocated to project roll-out to modernise and expand school infrastructure. A first tranche of 105 school building projects has been published to proceed to construction or tender in the 2026-27 period. These projects were already at tender or advanced detailed design stage 2B, thereby prioritising urgent capacity pressures and special education needs. This list includes 12 projects in County Cork, which represents just over 10% of the projects within the first tranche.

Prioritised projects continue to be progressed through earlier stages of the design pipeline, with a focus on special schools; schools fully in interim accommodation with an urgent requirement for permanent accommodation; projects delivering significant special education capacity; additional accommodation required to cater for demographic growth in an area; and projects dealing with the most significant condition issues.

As part of the Department-led prioritisation process that is under way for 2026 and 2027, consultation with school patrons began this month. A further tranche of priority projects is targeted for publication in 2027, informed by departmental analysis, engagement with the patrons and schools, funding parameters and, where relevant, the Department's energy and condition inventory of the school estate, and this is due for completion by year end. Projects will need to be at an appropriate stage of readiness to be considered. In particular, projects already at stage 2A are well positioned for inclusion in the next tranche.

There are currently 47 projects progressing through stage 2A of the architectural planning process in County Cork, reflecting solid momentum within the county's school building pipeline. All projects continue to undergo detailed technical and cost assessment in line with Government infrastructure guidelines, with progression managed carefully across the wider capital programme. Departmental officials have recently intensified engagement with schools whose stage 2A reports have been under examination for some time, ensuring that each project is fully considered within overall prioritisation and programme management.

I must say that there is huge engagement within the Department. I take the points the Deputy made in relation to the schools he mentioned and the prefabs. I take that issue in relation to prefabs very seriously because I see this right across the country. The Deputy mentioned a number of schools and I will follow up in regard to them. There is, though, solid investment in the city and county of Cork.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I have the printout of the schools here.

They include St. Killian's Special School, stage 2A, Gaelscoil Pheig Sayers, stage 2A, Scoil Chroí Íosa, stage 2A, Gaelscoil an Chaisleáin, stage 1, Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, stage 2B, and Scoil Mhuire, stage 2B. Then there are Cork Educate Secondary School and Le Chéile

Secondary School, Ballincollig, stage 1, and Coláiste Choilm, stage 2B. When are these to move on to the next stage?

The Minister of State came in here and gave me a list. I have a list, too. All these schools are crying out for support and funding to move on to the next stage. I also have another list. I care about the two lists because they contain the schools in my area, Cork North-Central, which I was elected to come in here and speak for. There are four capital projects in Cork North-Central, none of which is large scale. Where are the large-scale projects that the Minister of State outlined for my community and for the children in my area? There are two new schools in Cork South-Central. What we are looking for on the northside are four small-scale projects, four extensions, but where is the commitment from the Department to move them on from stage 2A or stage 2B?

Scoil Padre Pio has waited for seven years. Is that acceptable? Deputy Moynihan is the Minister of State. I am asking him a straight question because I do not believe the wait is acceptable. Gaelscoil Pheig Sayers has been waiting for years. Is that acceptable? These are schools in my area and they are crying out. St. Killian's Special School, one of the best schools in the country, is crying out. Will the Minister of State give a commitment here today to ensure all these projects progress?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The only way we can give a commitment is by allocating sufficient funding within the Department. There has been a huge amount of continued investment in the school estate. There are literally billions of euro being spent across the country.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Not in Churchfield.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: To be fair now, the question I was asked to respond to was in relation to investment in County Cork. There has been considerable investment right across the education system, and the Department of education has full sight of it. I acknowledge the frustration of schools that urgently need to progress to the next stage, but there has been serious engagement over recent weeks and months on how we are going to prioritise and make sure our investment in 2027 addresses the most critical points, such as the condition of buildings. We have also prioritised ensuring special education is put at the centre of capital expenditure across the education system. We are building capacity for special education at both primary and post-primary levels, and indeed in special schools.

It is not true to say the Department is not spending money. There is a huge investment commitment in the national development plan. That is cold comfort for the communities the Deputy mentioned, one of which has been waiting for four years and another for seven. We should be targeting our resources to ensure that the condition of buildings does not deteriorate to such an extent that we have to do massive jobs on them. We should be investing earlier. Under the national development plan, we have committed serious money for the coming years, and we will be working with the schools. The Deputy mentioned a number of schools. I certainly will reflect on those and on the special schools. We have 20 of them open.

Ireland's EU Presidency: Statements

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I mo cháil mar Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála, is geal liom go bhfuil deis agam inniu aitheasc a thabhairt os comhair na Dála, ar an gcéad lá d'ochtú hUachtaránacht na hÉireann ar Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh. As Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I welcome the opportunity to address the Dáil today, the first day of Ireland's eighth Presidency of the Council of the EU. I thank colleagues for attending the opening ceremony but particularly wish to use this opportunity to thank the wonderful choir, Defence Forces band, artists and singers, in particular those who contributed today. They really added to the sense of occasion and gave people a sense of what was to come in the months ahead.

We take on the Presidency role at a crucial time for Europe. Why do I say that? The EU is navigating its most turbulent geopolitical era in decades, defined by Russian aggression in Ukraine, escalating conflicts in the Middle East and a volatile global trade environment. We are facing an environment where economic interdependence is frequently weaponised, challenging our traditional reliance on a strictly rules-based international order.

Across the Union, we are responding by strengthening our economic resilience, advancing the green and digital transitions and reaffirming our commitment to democratic values and the rule of law. Our Presidency provides Ireland with a platform and an opportunity to lead member states in this response, seeking to build consensus on how we respond to the challenges facing Europe, how we deliver practical progress on behalf of all European citizens and how, importantly, we seize the opportunities available to us.

Ireland brings to this role a strong track record as a committed and constructive member state of the EU. Our experience, values and diplomatic tradition equip us well to navigate the complexities of the Presidency. For me, this is not just an institutional obligation; it is a profound personal responsibility. The Irish Presidency will be guided by the old Irish proverb "Ní neart go cur le chéile", and our guiding star will be just that: strength in unity. As holders of the Presidency, we will lead a collective effort, and we know we can depend on the support and co-operation of our fellow member states as we work together in the interests of people, communities and businesses right across Europe.

We will build on the excellent work of the Cypriot Presidency, which has guided the agenda of the Council so effectively throughout the first half of 2026. It has achieved significant progress in many areas. I again thank it and my colleagues for the huge amount of work done over the six months. In turn, we will seek to lay strong foundations for further progress in important areas of policy during the Presidency terms of our Trio partners, in other words working closely with Lithuania and Greece. The Irish EU Presidency will focus its efforts on enhancing the competitiveness of our economy, safeguarding the values of our Union at home and abroad, and providing for the security of our citizens.

These core themes – competitiveness, values and security – are closely interlinked. They are mutually reinforcing. They will guide our work across all dimensions of our Presidency role. We will also strive for progress in a number of important areas which link all three of these thematic pillars. These include the Union's ongoing support for Ukraine and our global

engagement and relationships with key partners. This was reiterated in our engagement today with President Zelenskyy, who was very welcome here as part of our opening ceremony.

As Members will be aware, the specific objectives we will pursue in our Presidency are set out in detail in the policy programme we published last month. In order to deliver a secure economic future, one that meets the needs and expectations of its people, Europe must act urgently to enhance its competitiveness and productivity. The Irish Presidency aims to make decisive progress in strengthening Europe's competitiveness, focusing on the blueprint for action that was agreed by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission in the One Europe, One Market roadmap. This will be a core priority for our Presidency. Given the urgency of the task and the fact we have discussed and debated many of these issues for some time now, the targets, while ambitious and challenging, are ones we are certainly ambitious in wanting to achieve. Success will require all member states and each institution to work purposefully together in a spirit of co-operation and compromise in the interests of every citizen and business right across the Union.

Our work will be guided by five strategic building blocks. First, we will work to simplify rules to ensure a smarter, more coherent regulatory framework for citizens and businesses and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens. This is not about reducing or getting rid of regulation; it is about better regulation overall.

The Single Market is the foundation of Europe's economy and prosperity. Under our second strategic building block, the Irish Presidency will work to eliminate barriers, tackle regulatory burdens, boost Internal Market trade, drive digital transformation and ensure a level playing field for businesses operating across the EU.

Third, we must match our global diplomatic strategy with a bold, enterprising economic vision. Faced with rising trade uncertainty and fragmentation, we need to be more driven and adaptive than ever before.

Our Presidency will pursue an ambitious, open, rules- and values-based trade policy agenda that supports European competitiveness, resilience and economic security, and strengthens our trade relationships with reliable global partners. I will take responsibility for driving this in my role as chair of the meetings of EU trade ministers, including the informal meeting in Dublin in October.

We will work to strengthen our trade relationships and diversify our markets, advancing trade negotiations with important partners and looking to new markets in Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates, in line with commitments in the One Europe, One Market roadmap. I will start that engagement next week when I travel to the Gulf to meet with our partners in the region.

We will seek to build an ambitious EU-US trade and investment relationship, building on the work that has been done to date, including the ongoing implementation of the EU-US joint statement, which benefits all of us. We will ensure that the work around the digital dialogue that needs to happen will continue. That is a matter I have been pushing with my colleagues.

Fourth, and crucially, we must step up all efforts to respond to the exceptional energy crisis facing Europe. Geopolitical instability has laid bare our collective vulnerability, making it an absolute diplomatic and economic necessity that we act. We will prioritise work to enhance

Europe's security of supply and the development of sustainable, affordable and secure energy systems. During our Presidency, we will support and advance all EU efforts to strengthen economic resilience. Guided by the promote-protect-partner principles that support our economic security, we will work to bolster our supply chain resilience. Through all of these actions, we will lead the way in phasing out dependence on fossil fuel imports and securing long-term economic sovereignty for our partners and our people. We have in the past few months alone seen the impact that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has had. We saw the impact on fuel prices, commodities and prices more generally. We need to phase out our dependence on external fossil fuel imports.

Fifth, we must look to the horizon and work towards systematically building Europe's digital and technological sovereignty. We are living through an era of unprecedented transformative change. To secure our future, our Presidency will seek to strengthen the EU's capabilities and capacities in cloud computing and artificial intelligence, AI, while firmly advancing the Union's position as a global leader in responsible digital governance. The Irish Presidency will convene governments and global stakeholders for an international AI summit, which will be the flagship business event of our Presidency. This landmark forum will focus on a clear double objective: harnessing immense digital opportunities while empowering our people to thrive in a digital society. Economic leadership in the 21st century requires absolute resilience in our physical and regulatory infrastructure.

Our Presidency will advance work on digital networks, focusing critical investments on subsea telecom connectivity and the security of subsea cables. We will work to create an innovation-friendly regulatory environment that drives strategic sectors, including semiconductors, biotechnology and new technologies, while simultaneously prioritising support for our traditional competitive farming and fishing industries.

The Irish Presidency will continue to advance educational mobility through the Erasmus+ programme, ensuring our workforce is highly skilled and adaptable. Healthy societies are fundamentally productive and competitive. Health innovation is not a secondary concern but a central contributor to Europe's technological leadership. Accordingly, we will prioritise and advance vital legislation on biotechnology and medical devices, driving the long-term innovation, resilience and competitiveness of this indispensable sector. We will also continue to advocate, as I have in recent months, for the development of a task force to set out a more strategic framework for the life science sector - looking at not just the pharmaceutical sector but also the medical technology sector - to ensure we are planning for the future of those importance industries not just for Ireland but for the EU, and doing so in a strategic way. To put it bluntly, we want to ensure that through our competitiveness agenda, in all of the priorities I have outlined and all the actions, policies and legislative files that we progress, we are making it easier for people to do business. It is about removing some of the bureaucracy that we know has come to the fore in recent years. It is about getting rid of duplication. It is about making it easier to access money. It is about supporting business to grow and innovate to allow people to prosper. That is the overall objective and there are many ways in which we intend to do that.

The values that we share are the foundation of our Union. They are part of what makes Europe a good place to live and work, and they underpin our competitiveness and security. Fundamentally, they are the very bedrock of who we are. Our Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for

human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. These values, mirrored in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are the foundation that makes Europe a safe, prosperous place to live and work. They do not weaken us; they underpin our competitiveness and our security. Now more than ever, the EU must defend and vindicate these values.

Our Presidency will make the safety of children online a central priority. We will advocate for an EU-level decision on the digital age of majority, champion robust, privacy-preserving age verification measures, and listen directly to children's views on their own safety.

As Ireland takes on the responsibility of the Council Presidency, our values will be central to our policy. Ukraine continues to endure brutal, illegal Russian aggression against its people and its territory. The war has caused profound human suffering and systematic destruction of Ukraine's infrastructure, economy and environment. During the Irish Presidency, we will work tirelessly to enhance the Union's steadfast support for Ukraine and maintain pressure on Russia to end its brutal war. Continued political, humanitarian, military and financial support for Ukraine, alongside robust sanctions to pressure Russia, remains an absolute priority. We will continue to demand a just and lasting peace, upholding the fundamental principle that borders cannot be changed by force. It is time for Russia to agree to a ceasefire and to engage in meaningful negotiations towards peace.

The Irish Presidency will work to maintain the EU's deep engagement with the United Nations, consistently promoting human rights, women's rights, gender equality and the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons worldwide. We will promote active diplomatic engagement to support lasting peace and security in the Middle East, reaffirming the EU's commitment to a two-state solution. We will continue to work with key partners to address the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza. We will also not lose sight of the sharply deteriorating situation in the West Bank, where massive settlement expansion and rampant and escalating settler violence continues in an atmosphere of impunity. Alongside the situation in Lebanon, these developments demand a serious response.

Reflecting our commitment to upholding international law and in response to egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles, the Government has taken the decision to advance the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill. The Government's preference remains that collective action would be taken at EU level. This would have greater impact and is the strongest and most effective route. We continue to actively pursue this. The Commission will bring forward proposals as regards trade with settlements before our first, and my first, Foreign Affairs Council on 13 July. We take on the Presidency today. I will again press for action on an EU-level ban on trade with the settlements. We will also support EU efforts toward stability in Lebanon, Syria and the wider Middle East. We welcome ongoing negotiations between Iran and the United States to end the conflict in the Gulf. We must ensure that this brings real and sustainable peace to the region. We must reopen the Strait of Hormuz to international shipping, which will bring much-needed relief to the global economy and to our societies.

The situation in Lebanon remains extremely concerning. It is important that the EU continues to support the Lebanese Government in its efforts to bring peace and stability to the country. We do not approach the challenge of peacebuilding from a purely theoretical standpoint. The experience of peace on the island of Ireland illustrates the profound importance

of dialogue, partnership and sustained international support. The success of the peace process in Northern Ireland, achieved through the commitment of communities and institutions, and heavily backed by the European Union, reflects the unique history of our island. Ongoing EU support, notably through the PEACEPLUS programme, continues to underpin our efforts to strengthen reconciliation, deepen understanding and foster a shared, peaceful future together.

The international security environment has changed radically in the past decade. The need for measures to enhance European security and to build our resilience has never been more evident. We know that no country acting alone can address the entirety of existing and emerging security challenges. The Irish Presidency will contribute actively to the ongoing development of our security and defence. As I mentioned, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, the devastating conflicts across the Middle East and the Gulf, and the rapid evolution of hybrid threats and new forms of warfare, including cyber and hybrid threats, present profound challenges to our Continent and have revealed vulnerabilities that all EU member states, including Ireland, must confront. These crises have made one thing unquestionably clear: Europe must invest heavily in all dimensions of its own security and rapidly develop its defence capabilities. As we take up the Presidency, Ireland will work tirelessly to advance concrete measures that strengthen our security, resilience and defence. As I have said before in this House, it is imperative that the EU and its member states continue to provide Ukraine with the support that it needs but that we actively work towards our own security strategy to ensure that the Union can respond dynamically to today's challenges.

The Presidency will advance the measures set out in the White Paper on the future of European defence, the associated defence readiness roadmap 2030, and vital new initiatives on joint defence procurement. True security requires us to address critical capability gaps. We will support deep collaboration to build European resilience, particularly in the face of sophisticated hybrid threats which affect all member states, including Ireland. We will continue to highlight the central role of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP. The CSDP framework provides an invaluable contribution to our collective safety and the Irish Presidency will actively promote its development and evolution.

To secure our borders and networks, we will advance work on the proposed regulation on military mobility, tackle pressing maritime security challenges, safeguard the security of critical infrastructure and strengthen the Union's collective cybersecurity defences. During our Presidency, Ireland will support the mid-term review of the EU maritime security strategy while focusing on the work we are doing at home, identifying and increasing maritime domain awareness, combating the shadow fleet, and increasing member states' co-operation on maritime domain awareness, particularly through mechanisms like the common information sharing environment, CISE.

Russia's shadow fleet continues to pose a threat to European maritime security so Ireland will encourage and promote co-ordinated EU monitoring and surveillance measures targeting shadow fleet activities in European waters. Greater information-sharing between member states, the implementation of EU sanctions and the reinforcing of the legal framework underpinning our maritime domain are ways to address this threat.

I say all this being clear that our constitutional situation and our prerogative and position as a neutral country are not in conflict with everything I outlined. We need to and can work more closely with member states, invest in our economic security and security more broadly, protect

critical infrastructure and respond to emerging threats. This is something we must do as a country to make sure we protect, not just our citizens, but also our critical infrastructure while working closely with member states across the EU.

I look forward to hosting a dedicated maritime security conference in Dublin in October 2026 where we will bring together owners and operators of critical maritime infrastructure, maritime security policy and legal experts and EU defence policy representatives. Ireland has delivered effectively on our responsibilities in our Presidency of the Council on seven previous occasions, from our first Presidency in 1975 to our most recent term in 2013. I am confident that we will do so again on this occasion. I look forward to working closely with colleagues across this House, with our European partners and with all stakeholders to ensure that Ireland's Presidency is a success, and most important, one that delivers for people in Ireland, people in Europe and for our shared future.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): As Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and at the Department of Climate, Energy and Environment, I am pleased to join the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in welcoming the opportunity to address the Dáil on the first day of Ireland's eighth Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This is a significant responsibility for Ireland and a moment of real opportunity for us to shape the European agenda at a time of profound change and challenge. Our Presidency priorities have been developed through broad consultation with people and organisations across the country and with our European partners. I strongly believe that these priorities reflect what Europe needs to do to deliver effectively for people across the 27 EU member states.

From today until 31 December, Ministers and officials from across the Government are fully committed to serving in our roles as honest brokers to ensure positive outcomes for all of the Union's 450 million people. We will chair the Council across its formations, anchoring every negotiation in our core priorities of competitiveness, values and security. By setting clear agendas, building consensus and brokering compromises, we will achieve a critical legislative programme in the interest of all 27 member states. The scale of the task we face is huge, but we are ready.

In Brussels and Luxembourg, our Ministers will chair dozens of formal Council meetings. On the ground, our exceptional diplomats and officials will steer the vital day-to-day work of more than 170 Council preparatory bodies. Irish Ministers and Ministers of State, including me, will also lead on our engagement with the European Parliament across numerous complex policy areas, while leading and co-ordinating the work of the EU in major international negotiations, including significant United Nations conferences. By working with our partners across Europe to deliver an effective Presidency, we will ensure that Ireland's position, influence and reputation in the EU is maintained and enhanced.

We want to ensure the EU can respond effectively to the needs of citizens, communities and businesses across the 27 member states. One area that will be of particular importance during our Presidency will be circularity and the circular economy, which ties directly into the themes of competitiveness and resilience. At our upcoming informal meeting of environment Ministers, we will discuss the role of circularity as a critical component of resilience against external shocks and global supply chain impacts. Recent developments, including the conflicts

in the Middle East and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, have highlighted the far-reaching consequences of supply chain disruptions, extending well beyond energy security.

Turning to small businesses, which is an area I feel particularly strongly about, Ireland comes into this Presidency with a clear commitment to co-operation, ambition and delivery. We want to work constructively with our European partners to strengthen our economies, support workers and ensure Europe remains competitive in the long term. The Department will host the SME and Clusters Assembly in Dublin in November. This flagship Presidency event will build on our core theme of competitiveness, bringing together more than 600 entrepreneurs, business representatives, experts and policymakers from across Europe. The assembly will focus on practical measures to strengthen the SME sector, including improving access to finance, promoting entrepreneurship, accelerating digitalisation and supporting businesses to expand into new export markets. Through our work in leading negotiations and building consensus across the competitiveness agenda, we will help to deliver practical outcomes that enhance the competitiveness, resilience and long-term growth of Ireland's and Europe's small businesses.

I will turn to space policy, which might seem a bit removed from day-to-day concerns, but is not. It is becoming increasingly important for Europe's economic security and technological leadership. During our Presidency, we will advance work to enhance Europe's economic resilience, ensuring the European Union is well positioned to compete and prosper in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing global environment. This ambition also extends to the space sector, which is becoming ever more important to Europe's economic security, technological leadership and strategic resilience.

The Irish Presidency will prioritise measures to strengthen the competitiveness of Europe's space sector by unlocking the potential of the Single Market for space, fostering innovation, supporting the growth of SMEs and enabling European space enterprises to scale and succeed. We will also work to ensure that the EU's ambitious space agenda is underpinned by a sustainable long-term framework through progress on the EU space services agency regulation. At the same time, we will seek to advance the EU Space Act to help to maintain safe, secure and sustainable space operations as activity in space continues to grow. Through these efforts, Ireland will help to reinforce Europe's open strategic autonomy, strengthen our collective security and resilience, and support the European Union's position as a global leader in this strategically important sector.

When we talk about competitiveness, it is important to say it is not just about business; it is about people too. A competitive Europe must also be a fair Europe and we will strike the right balance between supporting businesses to grow and innovate and protecting workers and maintaining strong social standards. As highlighted by the Draghi and Letta reports, Europe faces significant competitiveness challenges, including an innovation gap, slower productivity growth and the need to deepen the Single Market. Our Presidency will support the European Commission's competitiveness compass by promoting an environment where SMEs can grow and scale, emerging technologies can flourish and investment can drive sustainable economic growth.

A key priority during our Presidency will be advancing the European employment agenda, including work on the forthcoming quality jobs Act and the fair labour mobility package. These

initiatives will help to shape the future of work across Europe by supporting quality employment, fair working conditions, skills development, social dialogue and labour mobility.

7 o'clock

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will start with the logistical side of things. I acknowledge that this is a project which many hundreds if not thousands of people in the Department of foreign affairs and other Departments will work very hard on. I am always very aware of the professionalism of the Department of foreign affairs. I commend it on its work today and on the work it does on an ongoing basis. I have every faith that it will deliver, from an organisational point of view, a very successful Presidency.

The other part of the logistical side of things to register again the concerns we have raised in the past about security. The anti-drone technology that was supposed to be procured and put in place last autumn is only just about coming into play now, just in time the Presidency. Our reliance on other member states, which has been reported, reflects the fact that for many years successive Governments failed to invest in defence. The priority for the Irish Government should be to be strong on neutrality and on defence. The two things need to go together. Ultimately, a failure to invest leads to a reliance on others that has been demonstrated in the context of this Presidency.

On the political side, this should be a Presidency that leaves a mark. If we get to a stage at the end of the Presidency where the Commission is happy that all its priorities were shepherded through by the Irish Government to the Commission's satisfaction, I am sure that will lead to praise for the Government and its Ministers. Ultimately, however, that is not what the Irish people need. They need a Presidency that is assertive, that shows leadership, that is proudly Irish and that is willing to highlight and advocate on behalf of our interests. Of course, there is a balance to be struck. We must acknowledge that we hold the Presidency now but that this is a role that only comes around every so often. In that context, we need to take this opportunity and show assertive leadership.

In our submission on the Presidency, we highlighted six key priorities, namely Irish unity, the promotion of peace, the cost-of-living crisis, workers' rights, overseas development aid and fair play for farmers and fishers. On the first of these, it is extraordinary that we are going to go into a Presidency at a time when the Irish Government seems to have no ambition whatsoever to talk about Irish unity. It is incumbent on those who support Irish unity to take opportunities such as this to advocate for it. I am not saying that this is going to be the number one priority for Slovakia, France or Greece, but the EU, as an institution, will have a role to play when and if reunification is achieved. That is very clear, and previous Irish Governments have made engagements to ensue that the North can, in the event of Irish unity, access the EU. However, in their contributions, the Minister and the Minister of State said more about space than about Irish unity. Investment in space is important, and I appreciate that it has knock-on impacts for research, science and so on, but this is the Irish Government and it should be using opportunities like this to advocate for Irish unity.

The next priority is the promotion of peace. The shameful record of the EU on the Middle East in recent years has been frequently outlined in this Chamber. We cannot allow a situation where all the focus is on the humanitarian side, which is important, and not push for a sustainable political solution for the Middle East, including in Lebanon. I wish to flag the issue

of Sudan. Too often, Sudan has been allowed to slip off the agenda. However, the conflict there is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, conflicts in the world.

The cost-of-living crisis is next. The cost of energy and reform of the energy markets are crucial.

Workers' rights are another priority we highlighted. I and many trade unionists across Europe are concerned that this Ireland Inc. proposal will lead to forum-shopping and to companies registering in countries with the weakest labour laws. We can all work towards simplification if workers' rights and the environment are not made victims, but I am concerned that they will be sacrificed for this.

On overseas development aid, unfortunately, many countries are walking away from their track record. There will be people, especially in Africa, who will suffer because of cuts to medical and public health programmes. We need to keep that matter on the agenda.

Last of all, fair play for farmers and fishers in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy.

The Presidency should, to the greatest extent possible, ensure there is Six Counties representation and engagement with them. That does not seem to be prominent enough in the programme as things stand.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Mar a dúirt an tAire, Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union comes at a defining moment for Ireland and Europe. Communities across the Continent are facing soaring living costs, deepening inequality, housing crises, climate change and growing international instability.

The Presidency presents Ireland with an opportunity not just to just chair meetings or hold photo opportunities but also to provide leadership rooted in equality, solidarity and justice. Our Presidency must place ordinary workers, families and communities rather than corporate interests at the centre of Europe's agenda. Ireland must champion a pro-social Europe that delivers for working people. Across the European Union, families are struggling to afford basics like housing, childcare, healthcare and energy. Economic growth means little if it fails to improve people's lives. Climate action remains one of the defining challenges of our generation, but the transition to a greener economy must be a just one. Workers, families and rural communities cannot be expected to shoulder the cost while large polluters continue to profit. The European Union must invest in renewable energy, public transport and sustainable agriculture while ensuring jobs with fair pay and conditions are created across every region.

Ireland must also use its Presidency to defend peace, international law and human rights. Ireland has a proud tradition of military neutrality and supporting peaceful conflict resolution. At a time when international law is being violated with impunity, Europe must apply the same standards consistently. Ireland must be at the heart of drafting Europe's new strategy for security and defence. We need to ensure that the core principles of European foreign policy include accountability for breaches of international law and meaningful international efforts to secure just and lasting peace in many conflicts just beyond our borders.

Our Presidency should also challenge the growing concentration of wealth and corporate power. Multinational corporations must pay their fair share of tax. Workers' rights must never

be sacrificed in the pursuit of competitiveness. Public services should never be weakened by privatisation or austerity. The European economy must work for citizens not financial markets. Ireland should also advocate democratic reform within the European Union. Decisions affecting people's lives must be transparent, accountably made and subject to meaningful democratic scrutiny. Smaller member states must have their voices respected and citizens must have confidence that Europe acts in their best interests.

Ireland's Presidency should reaffirm the values of solidarity that lie at the heart of the European project. That means standing with workers, supporting struggling communities and defending human rights. Ireland has an opportunity to demonstrate that leadership is measured not by military strength or economic power but by our willingness to stand up for fairness, equality and justice.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Ireland's EU Presidency is a significant opportunity for the country that must not be missed, but it has to be for the whole island. I was really glad to see our First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, at today's event, because we cannot talk about any of the issues we are going to talk about during the Presidency without taking an all-island approach. We have a chance to demonstrate leadership, advance Ireland's interests, address the democratic deficit within the EU and to help shape Europe's future at a very pivotal moment. While we must make the most of this opportunity, we must recognise that it comes with huge responsibility. The Presidency carries a substantial cost to the taxpayer, and the Government must ensure that every euro spent delivers lasting value for Ireland and for Europe.

One of the Presidency's central priorities must be to restore Europe's competitiveness. European businesses and innovators continue to face unnecessary red tape, duplication and bureaucracy. In that context, simplification must not mean deregulation. The Minister said that earlier, but it must be meant. We do not want deregulation. We are paying a price for deregulation in the form of the almost €9 billion that it will cost to resolve the problems caused by defective concrete blocks. Those problems arose as a result of light-touch regulation.

We need a Europe that supports enterprise, encourages innovation and allows businesses to compete globally, but we must protect workers' rights, consumer rights, environmental rights and human rights. This Presidency has also shone a spotlight on Ireland's own preparedness in an increasingly uncertain world. While Ireland remains militarily neutral, neutrality cannot mean vulnerability and, for decades, the Minister will know that the Defence Forces have been neglected. Despite years of warnings and ample time to prepare, we still lack basic capability to protect our own skies and seas against modern threats and we are, unfortunately, relying on others to fill the gaps.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Many Irish people have mixed emotions on the European project. It is a love-hate relationship of sorts. I spoke in the European Parliament recently as part of the Erasmus programme. I certainly love the element of mutual co-operation and cultural exchange with countries with which we have had links since the time of the monks shining a light into the dark Continent. However, many people dislike the increasing militarisation of a federal superstate that appears to prioritise the interests of corporations over communities. Ireland should be a voice for peace.

Only today, we saw how hard-pressed consumers were hit with a charge of €3 per non-EU product, which should have been passed on to billionaire corporations that produce the products and flood the market with them. There are also double standards whereby we strongly sanction Russian aggression in Ukraine but adopt a kid glove approach to the maniacal State of Israel, while we watch the world's first live-streamed genocide yet do very little about it. That represents rank EU hypocrisy. The sovereignty of national parliaments can be superseded by a federal superstate, such as with the EU migration pact, if a government rolls over and kowtows to Ursula von der Leyen and hands control over to unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. There has undoubtedly been much progressive legislation coming from Europe, such as the area of workers' rights and other dimensions. However, there is no reason that any national parliament should not be capable of enacting the same legislation.

I attended and enjoyed today's ceremony in Dublin Castle. It was very well run. I compliment those involved. There was a big emphasis on EU enlargement, which will allow 36 million and, eventually, 136 million from non-EU countries to have free movement into Ireland and elsewhere. Have we considered the practical implications of all this in terms of Ireland's infrastructure and people's access to housing, healthcare and education? We need to. Unfortunately, I do not hear much emphasis on EU enlargement into counties Fermanagh, Armagh, Tyrone, Derry, Antrim and Down and the use of our Presidency as a unique opportunity to garner support for Irish reunification, just as we did with German reunification.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The European Presidency gives Ireland the opportunity to put the interests of the Irish people firmly on the EU's agenda. First, Irish unity should be front and centre of that agenda. The Presidency is an opportune time to advance structured discussions on preparing for a united Ireland within the EU. Second, the cost-of-living crisis demands an EU-wide response centred on energy and food affordability and security.

Finally, this Presidency should be in support of peace and international law. It is within that context that I would like to raise the ongoing political situation in Cuba, which demands a strong humanitarian response both from Ireland and the EU. As the Chamber will be aware, Cuba has been suffering the result of 65 years of a US blockade and, of late, a complete sanction on the delivery of oil to Cuba. Schools and universities are closed as they cannot function without electricity. Food produced in the countryside is rotting in the ground because farmers do not have fuel to deliver it to the towns and cities. The urban people are suffering food deprivation. Hospitals cannot function due to lack of electricity either. The entire island is asphyxiated. There is no public transport. Sanitation is compromised, disease is everywhere and fresh water is hardly available. Their economy is completely compromised as most hotels are closed, causing even more unemployment and poverty. My heart breaks for the Cuban people when I see the reality of what is happening to them. I realise it is probably unique to raise it in the context of this, but I do think we have a unique voice here. The role that Ireland plays on an international level is an incredibly strong one and now we have this Presidency. We should use it to amplify our views and, indeed, amplify a moral voice within an increasingly difficult international context. We need to do everything that we can so there can be a free flow of fuel, medicines and essential supplies to the Cuban people.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to speak today. Well done to the team involved on a very successful launch in Dublin Castle today. I genuinely wish the Government

all the best in the EU Presidency. I know it is a big undertaking. However, I also urge it to listen to what is being said today from the Opposition benches. I believe there are a lot of insights that could be well used by Government during these coming six months.

Being a proud European means being an active voice, and we in the Social Democrats are proud Europeans. However, that pride is not based on blind loyalty. It is based on a commitment to the values that are supposed to form the bedrock of the European Union - peace, social justice, solidarity and human rights. We are an influential voice within a group of 27 nations and we need to stand by those values when others seek to turn their backs on them. As António Costa said earlier today, Ireland is not just at the heart of Europe, but a decisive actor. When we refuse to call out the abandoning of those values and when we view constructive and valid criticism of EU actions as taboo, we feed anti-EU sentiment and the erosion of our democracies, here and abroad. Ní mhothaíonn formhór na ndaoine nasctha leis an méid a tharlaíonn sa Bhruiséil.

People in this country do not see Ireland meaningfully defending environmental regulation at EU level. They do not see Ireland fighting for better digital protections at EU level. They do not see their Government defending their rights. Instead, the State approach to this EU Presidency seems to be about prioritising deregulation and collapsing social cohesion spending, while building war machines across our Continent with taxpayer money. We cannot and should not sacrifice Europe's social values in the name of competitiveness and simplification. These buzzwords will not deliver the positive change our citizens need. The multi-annual financial framework has expanded both cohesion and competitiveness funding to include military spending and defence industry support, respectively. This will have the effect of benefiting our most developed member states, which are home to the arms factories where this funding will be funnelled. This is all while small businesses operating outside the military space will find it harder and harder to access supports.

We in the Social Democrats argue that our best defence against interference and propaganda from foreign powers is a strong and socially cohesive Union of democracies. Courage means leading the way. It means not allowing inaction in the face of genocide and aggression. So many people in Ireland feel let down by the refusal of the EU to act on Israel's genocide in Gaza. They are angry that in the face of blatant violations of the human rights clauses of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, we have seen no action. I welcome that we took decisive action against Russia for its illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. We need those values to be upheld consistently, no matter the perpetrator. We need companies and people who support and fund wars of aggression and genocide sanctioned and held accountable. The words of our treaties, the promises made to our citizens and international law mean nothing if we do not see those things enforced.

In the words of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, speaking earlier today in Dublin Castle, "it's so important to keep promises". These are not optional extras. They are not a gift or an act of charity. These are our legal and moral obligation to act, and Europe has utterly failed in that legal and moral obligation towards the people of Palestine, instead continuing to be complicit in occupation and genocide. The refusal from this Government to ban services in the occupied territories Bill was blamed on Europe. Now is the chance to lead. If the Minister means what she said about pushing for action at EU level, we need to see that urgently and completely. We need a Europe that is based on decency and shared humanity and Ireland now has a

responsibility to champion that. Instead of dealing with refugees as human beings, the European Union plans to pour billions of euro into our own version of ICE. The Commission has proposed to spend nearly €12 billion on Frontex in the next multi-annual financial framework. We know Fortress Europe policies push people into the arms of traffickers, push people into boats in the Mediterranean and push people to their deaths by drowning, while Europe then tries to imprison people doing search and rescue in EU waters, like our own Seán Binder. This is coming at a time when MEPs are being refused access to see conditions in migrant centres run by EU member states in third countries, like in Albania, where six people have attempted suicide since mid-May. These practices, where lives are being destroyed and people are being treated as disposable, and attitudes we are allowing to take hold and grow exponentially across Europe have a real impact.

The migration pact, championed by Fine Gael's party colleagues in the European People's Party, EPP, was also welcomed by the far right of the same chamber with chants of "Send them back", a chilling moment for our European Parliament. When we refuse to stand up unashamedly for decency and for the humanity of every single person on our shores, this is the Europe we create. We in the Social Democrats believe we can create a better Europe, but only if those in power stand up for a better Europe, a decent Europe. Ireland must lead that fight during this EU Presidency.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I congratulate the Minister, her Department and, indeed, all of the artists and designers involved in the new passport design. It is a beautiful document. It clearly shows the importance of nature to the Irish people. Fifteen thousand people were engaged in the process of designing this document. The reality is we as a state have not been kind to many of the species that were illustrated in that new design. Our Atlantic salmon populations have decreased by 90% in the past five decades. One third of our bee populations are facing extinction. Whales, dolphins and our sea birds are still waiting for this Government to bring forward marine protected area legislation. We kill thousands of badgers every year, we hunt our foxes with dogs and we course our hares for sport. It is clear that the illustrations are beautiful but we need to do a lot more for those particular species. I hope that when the Minister, all the other Ministers and all the officials are flying back and forth to Europe over the next six months and are flicking through their passports, they will be reminded of their responsibility to protect nature and the importance of nature to the Irish people, they use this next six months to fight for nature, environmental protection and funding for the nature restoration laws, and they do not allow the continued watering down of environmental protections that we have seen over the past number of months. We need to keep the environment on the agenda. Unfortunately, it has clearly fallen right off it. Even the speeches tonight were a demonstration of that. What we do not want is that the next generation of children will only experience the species that are in that document through the pages of that document. They need to be able to experience them in the wild and that will happen only through an Act of protection that the Minister can afford them.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I will raise two issues. The first is the issue of policing. It is deeply disappointing that there has been a reduction in Garda resources across the country as a result of the EU Presidency. In my own constituency, Ballymun and Finglas Garda stations will see a reduction in the coming months as a result of gardaí being allocated elsewhere in relation to the Presidency. There is a feud ongoing in Ballymun and shots fired yesterday. We cannot

have a situation whereby the EU Presidency results in a reduction in safety in communities, particularly our most disadvantaged communities. I would like the Government to give a commitment to ensuring that that will not be the case.

Second, on the issue of housing, it really is incredible. Housing, as the President of the European Council, Mr. António Costa, said at the ceremony today, is one of the biggest issues facing Europe today, but yet when you look at the Government's plans for the Presidency, there was not a mention of housing in the 13 pages of the two speeches. It is incredible.

Across Europe today, there is a generation who cannot afford to pay the rent. They cannot afford to buy a home. They do not see a future where they can start families. They are facing record rents and record house prices because governments have failed to build social housing and have turned housing into an investment asset for landlords. We see the latter in AirBnB. The fundamental failure is that, across Europe, housing has not been treated as a human right.

You would think that we in this country, which has the worst housing crisis in Europe, would use the opportunity of the Presidency to put solving the housing crisis in Europe at the heart of what we are doing, yet there was not a mention of it. What a wasted opportunity. We talk about threats to Europe and to the European project, yet young people feel completely excluded and alienated from Europe when they cannot get the basic need of having a home met. That is not a social Europe. It is not the Europe that was envisioned by the founders of the European Union. It is not the European Union that we want to see where people can have a decent life - a life with dignity. That starts with having a home. I would ask the Government to reconsider, put housing central to what it is to do in the next six months, and use this as an opportunity to bring European governments together and bring a resolution to the housing crisis.

Deputy John Clendennen: I will start by acknowledging the Minister and her officials for the event that took place in Dublin Castle today. It showcased the best of every facet of Irishness, our identity and how we had evolved since we joined the EU all those years ago. It was a day when I was proud to be Irish and proud to be European. It shows our strong affinity with Europe and how we have evolved over the past 50 years.

I am very much proud to be a member of Fine Gael and of the EPP, one of the leading parties in Europe, but one of the things that we should try to look at as part of this Presidency is ensuring that future generations recognise what it means to be part of Europe. One of the key parts of that is engaging at community level with our schools and communities. I met the Belgian ambassador, H.E. Mr. Nicolas Nihon, today. My county is paired or twinned with Belgium and we have ambitious plans to bring the European message to every corner of the county. There is a lot of work being done in relation to the likes of the Blue Star programme in primary schools but I think that this is an opportunity for local authorities to engage and maybe look at a European community day, where, led by local authorities, we could encourage every community to embrace this and get involved. Otherwise, I am concerned that a lot of this will be in Dublin. It will be in Dublin Castle and around the M50. Will it get out into rural communities? Will it be regionally balanced right across the country? We should be looking at initiatives to try to determine how that can be done better.

I do not believe that there is any facet of Irish society or the economy that has not benefited from Europe, from students, workers and farmers to families and entrepreneurs. When we look at all of the different initiatives since the turn of the century, we have got a common currency

in the euro, a common travel area, interrailing for students, European health insurance cards and Erasmus. Those sorts of change have given Irish students and every element of the Irish people a real sense of opportunity beyond our shores. We are a country of 5 million but when we see what it opens us up to in terms of hundreds of millions of people, it has given us a new outlook, not only on Europe, but on the world. When we see our investment overseas and the employment that we create right across the globe today, it shows how confident we have grown as a country and how we have invested and delivered, not only here at home, but overseas.

It is a proud day for me as well when I see the logo of the EU Presidency and its connection to Offaly in that the whirlpool nebula, which was identified in the 1840s through the great telescope at Birr Castle. There is another reason to try to bring this EU Presidency on the road and explore such venues as Birr Castle.

I look at some of the funding that comes through the EU and wonder where would we be as a country without it, including most recently the European Structural and Investment Funds, Erasmus and the just transition. We have been critical in one sense of just transition in my own county but at the same time it has provided a foundation or platform to go forward and ensure that we can see the transition from an overdependence on fossil fuels to looking at renewables through a whole different spectrum. That is something that needs to be reflected, not only in my county, but nationally.

The LEADER programme is a scheme that came about as a result of Europe and I would hope that there will be a commitment, through this Presidency, to ensuring that it is protected and maintained. It makes a significant difference to rural communities. I look at some of the challenges that we face in terms of small businesses and their investment. LEADER has been a significant player in giving businesses in small rural areas an opportunity to diversify, expand and bring new economic activity to areas.

When I look at the slogan of the EU Presidency, "Ní neart go cur le chéile", I think back to a former leader of our own party, Garret FitzGerald, who regularly referred to how membership would protect our national sovereignty through the sharing of sovereignty with other EU states. Now that we are a leading net contributor to Europe, it is something we need to be conscious of to ensure we do not take it for granted that opportunities for funding are no longer there. That is where EU funding officers, potentially through local authorities or regional assemblies, should be explored by Government and looked on as a potential way of ensuring we keep communities alive in order that we see that continual economic and social progression.

In respect of the three pillars we are looking at in our own objectives - competitiveness, values and security - these are fundamental and something we live by daily. We have seen the cost of doing business in Ireland and the challenges around it, but we have to stay innovative and connected to that Single Market, and we have to advocate for entrepreneurship. If we can do that, we will be competitive and we will continue to see businesses flourish. From a values perspective, we can all be confident in the democratic system upheld in Europe today. We see how transparent the recent elections in Hungary have been, but also here at home. Going into a count centre and observing how our elections unfold through the counting of ballots, this is not something we should ever take for granted. It is a significant part of where we are at as a society and country.

Sometimes in this Chamber, defence is something we take for granted on several different levels. Like it or not, there is a threat to the European border of our Union and we need to stand by our fellow member states and the likes of Ukraine to ensure we are united together. A strong message was sent from a European perspective today, with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in attendance as well as António Costa. However, we cannot take it for granted and we need to invest in it and support the Union as a whole. I heard some of the debate earlier about a decision between drones and homes. We have to protect our country and ensure we have the necessary and adequate defence while also investing in our future infrastructure. We need to ensure that as we continue to work with member states as a Union, we also have our own independence. From a defence perspective, we need to ensure we continue to see that investment and not necessarily have to rely on our neighbours.

The same applies to energy. We have had some difficult debates over the past couple of weeks in this House with regard to gas reserves and the strategic need for security, with others proposing we just rely on our neighbours. What happens if there is a challenge with our neighbours? We need to have that independence and security, and we need to ensure we pass on over time to the people and to businesses that affordability in the cost of energy, while also reducing our emissions in fossil fuels.

Overall, this is a very proud day, and it was a real honour to have been present. I wish the Minister and Government well, and I look forward to seeing how the next six months unfold. I am sure it will be through a very positive lens.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Ireland's EU Presidency is not an exercise in mere administration; it is a significant political opportunity, and this Government must not squander it. A Presidency that prioritises optics over action would be an abdication of our responsibility to the Irish people and to the future of our Continent.

As we mark a decade since the North voted to remain in the EU, our Presidency must be anti-partitionist in word. The Brexit process was imposed on the people of the North against their democratic will. The Good Friday Agreement provides for Irish unity, and the EU Council confirmed that a united Ireland would automatically rejoin. The Irish Government must weave the preparation for reunification into the heart of its Presidency, and we must begin the groundwork for a smooth and democratic transition. The North should be represented, and Government must ensure the active participation of the Assembly and Executive in events and advocate for observer status for Northern representatives.

This Presidency must be a force for peace. The EU has lost immense credibility in its response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Ireland must use its leadership role to build alliances and move the EU. We must push for immediate recognition of the State of Palestine, an EU-wide arms embargo on Israel and the full suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The EU must be a beacon for peace, not a bystander or active participant in atrocity. Crucially, this must be a social Presidency. While Brussels talks of deregulation and competition, Irish families are crippled by the highest energy prices in Europe. The Government must demand action to restructure the energy market and draw a line in the sand against any proposals that roll back workers' rights or environmental standards.

Ireland is a neutral country. The EU was not imagined as a military alliance. Our Presidency must draw a clear distinction between EU and NATO business, and there must be no meetings

of any military alliance on Irish soil. This must be an active, ambitious and proudly Irish Presidency, one that champions unity, defence and neutrality and fights for a social Europe. To do anything else would betray the trust of the Irish people.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: As we assume the EU Presidency, it is important we set out the context we now face globally. To one side of Europe, we have an aggressive Russia which, to this day, continues to take the lives of Ukrainians in its illegal war, while to the other side, we have the United States which, for the first time since the Second World War, has an outwardly aggressive tone towards its dealings with Europe. We have a bloc of countries that, despite the huge market we command, are falling behind competitively when it comes to the US and China. Ultimately, as we assume this Presidency, Europe is scrambling - scrambling to increase defence spending, scrambling to tackle a housing crisis that is felt more acutely in Ireland, and scrambling to reduce our reliance on the United States as it moves toward an isolationist economic and foreign policy. Post Brexit and post tariffs, there is no doubt Europe is bruised.

We have an opportunity over the next six months to turn the tide. This Government, which has been known to keep the handbrake on when coming to any decision, can choose to take it off. The Irish Presidency will have three key priorities: competitiveness, values and security. The worry is that when it comes to those priorities at home, this Government has kept the handbrake on and, because of this, it has failed. Why should people believe our Presidency of the EU will be any different, and if it will be different, why has that same effort not been shown at home?

With security, we know defence and security are the focus of Brussels, and in many respects, they should be, but how can we be leading that conversation? This Government is more interested in debating the triple lock than providing real investment in the State's own defence. We sit bottom of the EU table in terms of defence spending, and no matter how impressive the men and women in our armed forces are, we are not equipping them with the tools to do their job as effectively as possible. It is why we continue to rely on the RAF and, now, the French military.

President Zelenskyy, who I am glad was able to return to Ireland today, was put at risk in December by this State's underinvestment in our own defence capabilities. We have also still not got real answers to the drone incursion. Neither the Members of this House nor the defence committee know the exact details of what happened that day, and that is hugely concerning. As we discuss air defences in committee over the next week, I request again that the Minister would brief the committee properly on those drone incursions. If we are going to be steering conversations on defence, Ireland needs to get more serious on its own. This is not a call to waste money or to start buying up tanks. It is, however, a call to pay members of the Defence Forces better so that we can improve recruitment and retention. It is a call to invest in drone technologies, as suggested by President Zelenskyy earlier, to move away from our reliance on the RAF, to invest in our navy to move away from our reliance on the French navy, and to invest in Army barracks across the country and more.

I welcome the Government's willingness to double down on European support for Ukraine, including its accession to the EU and the ongoing accession of Moldova and other countries.

The more nations that want to join the EU, the more it shows that while Europe might be bruised, it is not beaten.

We sit at a window of opportunity now that this State has to deliver not just in security, which is a key component, but also, as the Government has outlined, on our values. What are those values, and will we apply them universally? The EU is rightfully vocal when it comes to Russia and its illegal invasion of Ukraine, but that conviction disappears, certainly in many member states, when it comes to criticising Israel and the genocide it has committed in Gaza. Will Europe pressure the US to stop the blockade and the subsequent starving of the Cuban people? I am a proud European, but we need to acknowledge the hypocrisy the EU can display, and the need for a new direction. A Cuban life should not be worth any less than a Ukrainian or Palestinian life. All life is the same.

Our values are on display on the international stage while we hold this Presidency, but our values at home and how we bring them to the Presidency are equally important. The website that has been set up for the Presidency states, "We will work to support a socio-economic model that emphasises societal resilience, inclusion and cohesion, and will take forward initiatives on employment, supporting quality jobs within modern labour markets." Societal resilience comes from equity in opportunity, so I ask that as part of the values portion of our Presidency, Ireland focuses on housing. There is no equity in opportunity between the older and the younger people living in Ireland. Thirty-year-olds are stuck living in a box room at home, or paying €2,500 for a studio apartment in Dublin. We have a generation who according to the ESRI will be worse off than their parents and because of that, as sure as night turns to day, we will continue to see a breakdown in societal resilience, not just in this country but across Europe.

We need a radical reset, and that means State intervention in the housing market and State building, but more than that, and this Presidency gives us the opportunity to say this, we should be looking at the EU taking a much bigger role in housing across Europe. Supply is the only way that we will drive prices down. We need big institutions to be playing bigger roles. Ireland has the opportunity now to get the ball rolling in that direction.

This needs to be a Presidency that is prepared to be bold and dynamic and to rip up the rules that the EU has in place where the US and China have pulled away from us economically. The Government is saying a lot of the right things on the competitiveness front - simplifying rules, a more integrated Single Market, accelerating the energy transition - and if all these happen, I will be the first to put my hands up and say well done, but nothing this Government has shown in running this country gives me confidence that it can drive these objectives at a European level. The Government does not have a history of simplifying rules. Just look at the new rural housing policy or the new rental rules - the list goes on. We are the furthest away from achieving an energy transition. We are missing targets, embracing LNG and ignoring opposition on it to boot, and we have an energy grid that is falling apart from years of underinvestment. On both those fronts, the jury is more than out on whether this Government can deliver. The next six months will be vital with regard to the direction Europe takes. I urge the Government to push Europe beyond what it is, and towards what it can be.

With my remaining time, I would like to address another challenge the Presidency faces, which is the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the realities of the tightness of the European budget. Let us be realistic about the resources at our disposal. The MFF is arguably

the most demanding task that the Government will face over the next six months. The Minister of State knows that. We are facing a paradox: the demand for shared European investment in security, economic competitiveness, the CAP, cohesion funding and myriad other competing areas. This demand has never been higher, yet the overall budget remains intensely constrained. As impartial chair of these negotiations, Ireland must balance our desire for traditional cohesion funding and agricultural support with new, critical industrial investments. The reality is that we are looking at increased and competing demands while not increasing our spending. Frankly, no group is going to be happy with the outcome. There are a number of potential areas, long mooted, that we can examine at an EU level, including levies on online gambling, on digital services and big tech, and financial transactions or capital gains from crypto assets. An expanded Union cannot survive on solidarity, pretty speeches and well wishes.

During our Presidency, we must push the conversation forward by integrating the practical, financial realities of expanding the Union into our MFF discussions, and we must seriously look at how we simplify decision-making across the bloc. Ireland knows first-hand how the EU can transform a nation from a peripheral, economically depressed state into a thriving, globalised hub. We understand the immense mutual benefits of this project, but with that privilege comes a profound responsibility to lead. I hope that we will.

Deputy John McGuinness: On a 13th century site in Graiguenamanagh, County Kilkenny, stands one of the last remaining textile mills, run by a family since 1778, the Cushendale Woollen Mills. It was successful in the procurement process to provide a corporate gift of a scarf for those who will participate in the EU Presidency. I mention this because it is of significance to how a family-owned Irish company can benefit from a procurement process that will now bring its product to the attention of countries within the European Union. It is proud of the fact that it goes from fleece to fabric. It is a wonderful family and I am delighted to have the opportunity to mention it in this House. I wish it well in the markets it will engage with through trade within the European Union and beyond.

Like other speakers, I acknowledge the very positive role that was played within the European Union, the positive benefits to Ireland from that participation, and how we have successfully managed to develop as a country within that European Union, but when that Union started out, it was about more than trade. It was about the importance of the European citizen within that Union. An effort was to be made to ensure that the citizens of Europe would be better off as part of that membership. That, in my mind, has faded away to an extent. For example, why is it that within the European Union, you can get a very cheap mortgage, but you cannot get it here? It is a simple question but it is fundamental to the rights of Irish citizens to be able to get what citizens in other parts of Europe can get, which is a cheap mortgage. Why is it that the insurance industry within Europe is not open to the citizens of Ireland for them to benefit from cheaper premiums? Why is it that Sparkassen banks in Germany cannot be part of the banking system here? These are questions that need to be asked by the Government during the time of this Presidency.

I listened to the Minister, who referred to simplifying rules, which is a good statement, but it is not what is happening in the European Union. The bureaucracy of the European Union has run away with itself and it has become more important than European states, and it has put the citizen in a second-class place. That has to be corrected and that is what I hope will happen

during the Irish EU Presidency. The Minister referred to eliminating barriers. There are barriers to Irish farmers farming.

That barrier is bureaucracy and red tape. It is putting farms as we would know them, small farms that make up the bulk of the country's farming families, to the pin of their collar to make money and to make a profit. It is only that profit that is going to keep them there. They are saying that they will be given a grant, and then tying so much red tape around that grant that it is not worthwhile for them to get it, but still they want to farm. It is making it difficult for them to protect the environment, in which they acknowledge the role that they play in that protection, and making the grant system impossible for them again. That has to be simplified.

We talk about enterprise then. I am trying to highlight the imbalances that are there in Europe, some of the positions taken, the hypocrisy of them and, simply, the fact that maybe it is Ireland's fault that we do not stand up within our European Union and do what other countries do. For example, Taiwan has a population of 21 million people. It is a massive market. We have no place in that market, yet 16 individual European states have trade offices in Taiwan. Ireland does not have one. It did have one. It closed it down. It cost the State €50,000 a year, but we closed it down back in the downturn in the economy. It should be reopened. It is not interfering with our One China policy. It is doing what 17 entities from Europe and 16 member states are doing in Taiwan. They are trading and using that as an access point to China and Asia, yet we hide behind what is historically an outdated policy statement from China. We are not going to offend them. The other 16 countries that are out there do not offend them. Members of this House have travelled out there. Members of the Government have travelled out there when they were in opposition, but there are different standards now because they are in government. Yet, the European Union is leading the way in terms of the numbers that are out there. I want to see that changed.

I want to see a student exchange, which the UK benefited from when it was in the European Union, between Taiwan and Ireland. I want Irish students who want to go out and see how the semiconductors are made to do so. I want to allow them the opportunity to be able to educate themselves on that issue, on AI and on technology. Taiwan is the leading producer of semiconductors. In fact, it opened and invested in Germany. It built a factory out there. Why is it that Ireland could not be at the table fighting for that investment, the same as every other country? These are the issues that I see in terms of enterprise.

Social justice and the rights of people are a big thing. There was a group of whistleblowers in the Gallery a few weeks ago on World Whistleblower Day, some of whom went to try to have their rights vindicated within the European Union. The European Union fines us for not doing stuff, yet when it does not do stuff like protecting the rights of those whistleblowers, everything goes silent. Julie Grace, Noel McGree and Lorraine Morris and so on were out there. I want to see the European Union take on the role of defending those who had to go out there to vindicate their rights and perhaps to tell Ireland it should start doing its business at home rather than what it has turned a blind eye to, ending up in Europe to be sorted out. There is a mishmash here of all sorts of things happening in Europe that happen in Ireland where we do not fulfil the rights of individuals. Dan Brennan is another one I can think of. I want to see the citizens of this State being placed in the centre of any policy that is being developed or any action that is being developed whereby the citizen can benefit - not big corporations, vulture funds, banks or anyone like that.

By the way, in relation to the banks, we were short-changed in a big way by the European Central Bank during the crash. That was never really addressed. We had big issues in terms of Covid and we want to investigate that. That was not addressed. Surely one rule for one country within the European Union should be the same in every other member state.

The EU provides grant aid for all sorts of projects in Ireland. Essentially, what is happening with that funding is every city, town and village is starting to look the same. They have the same big cycle tracks, the same narrow roads, the same lights and the same everything. We should tell the European Union that everyone is not the same; we are different, and that should be celebrated.

Deputy Thomas Gould: First, I stand in solidarity with the staff and students of UCC who have been locked out of their college and workplace because of the visit of Ursula von der Leyen. Why there was a need for this extreme when people just want to go to work and college, I do not know but it goes to the over-the-top way that Europe and this Government are treating the citizens. Once again, the elites are being prioritised over ordinary people. There will be a gridlock in Cork. There will not be a gridlock for the elites. For the ordinary man or woman trying to get to work, college, school or to collect their kids, there will be. I have serious concerns after hearing comments in the past few days about the State's ability to guarantee security while we have the Presidency. The Taoiseach, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have rolled out the red carpet to the Europeans. I am a proud Irishman and a proud European. I think you can be both. At the same time, however, we cannot have a situation where millions upon millions are being spent while children grow up in hostels and hotels. Millions and millions are being spent while children with disabilities cannot get access to school places, school transport or July provision. People with disabilities cannot get them. Our priorities have to be here.

We have a Passport Office in Cork. Everyone will be travelling now into Ireland but Irish citizens cannot get passports because of delays in the Passport Office. In Cork, there was supposed to be a new Passport Office in August. Now that is being delayed until next year. The joke of this is there will be no passport printer in a brand-new office that is being set up in Cork. How crazy is that? People are having to get emergency passports. People are facing delays. I dealt with a lady who could not fly out on Monday because her passport was delayed. She had to fly out on Tuesday and book new flights, with the cost of that. If we are going to spend millions, we need to spend it where it needs to be spent. The EU Presidency should be a source of pride. The Taoiseach has an unbelievable opportunity now to make a real difference. Number one, we have to call out how Europe threw us under the bus during the financial crash and how the Irish people paid more than anyone else because of bankers and speculators and how they destroyed our economy. Fianna Fáil must take the blame for that. That lands clearly at its doors.

We need the occupied territories Bill to include services. There is an opportunity now for Europe to lead and say that there is a genocide in Gaza. We should stop supplying the Israeli army with weapons. We should stop letting bonds being sold for money. Settlers are driving people from their land in the West Bank and people are being killed. There is a genocide in Gaza. We have an opportunity now that the Taoiseach must grab.

8 o'clock

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The jamboree of propaganda for the EU has started with the beginning of the Irish EU Presidency. The bit that concerns me is confirmed in the Minister's speech:

The [Irish] Presidency will advance the measures set out in the White Paper on the future of European defence, the associated defence readiness roadmap 2030, and vital new initiatives on joint defence procurement.

The paper she is referring to is the paper ReArm Europe. That is what this is about. That is what Zelenskyy's visit is about and what von der Leyen is about. It is about doubling arms expenditure in Europe from the current level of €400 billion to more than €800 billion – just a little under €1 trillion. To put that into perspective, how much has Russia, which is an aggressive imperialist power that has illegally and brutally attacked Ukraine, spent on military and weapons? €190 billion. Europe is already spending twice that but it wants to double that again. NATO in total spends 53% of all global arms expenditure, which is now above €3 trillion; in other words, €1.5 trillion – ten times what Russia spends. Spending lots on weapons does not stop war, does it? It does not stop the killing. What does it do? The European Union exports €800 million worth of armaments and weapons to the State of Israel while it is massacring and engaged in a genocide against the Palestinian people. It is profiting from genocide. It gives the state that is committing genocide favoured trade status. Yes, we are looking for a suspension, which we know we will never get. Ireland is a major trading partner. The European Union as a whole has €43 billion worth of trade with a state that is in the dock for genocide. Ireland is one of the biggest of those trading partners at €5 billion worth of trade and the Government guts the Bill to impose minimal sanctions with the Occupied Territories Bill. In the midst of the genocide, we discovered €20 million in one year goes in dual-use exports to the Israeli military. That is to the Israeli military while it is committing a massacre. At the same time, the Government is going to get rid of the triple lock, which removes some barriers to the Government deploying troops in a European military project which Ursula von der Leyen has spelled out when she was speaking about the Strait of Hormuz, which the Minister mentioned. She said we must open the Strait of Hormuz. Who closed them? Israel, who we are arming and the United States. Donald Trump closed them by attacking Lebanon and Iran yet this is what von der Leyen said in April:

A threat to a merchant vessel in the Strait of Hormuz is a threat to a factory, for example, in Belgium. So today I propose that we move beyond reactive crisis management.

She went on to say the EU must consider expanding the scope of missions. She said together we should “build a region where peace is not merely the absence of war”. To me, peace is the absence of war but that sounds like she thinks peace is war. Peace is European military action in the Strait of Hormuz – not defensive action but sending troops to the Strait of Hormuz to deal with the problems created by a war started by the United States and Israel, to which we are providing the weapons to conduct that war while they are slaughtering Palestinians.

I appeal to people; we have to protest against this madness. Money that von der Leyen wants to put into weapons should be going into housing, health, education and dealing with the cost-of-living crisis faced by working people. That should be our priority.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Competitiveness, security and values are the key themes of Ireland’s Presidency. Each of these themes should be intertwined with our goals for a decarbonised, energy abundant, peaceful EU and peaceful world but, as we have seen from some Government pronouncements, these values are open to interpretation. I think we should be competing to have the most energy-efficient buildings, to have the fastest public transport; that real security means energy security through actioning renewables and that our values should be to protect those suffering from the depredations of war in Gaza. I hope the Government will agree with those points but some of the announcements that has come from the Government in recent days lead me to question that.

These values demand a commitment from our politicians at both a national and a European level not to allow populism to strip away our empathy or to keep us from making our societies more climate resilient. I worry that as part of a broader headlong rush into that deregulation agenda, the Government will favour profit ahead of people and ahead of planet in our Presidency’s plans. While the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade was talking up competitiveness earlier this week, she failed to mention that the European Commission has opened infringement proceedings against Ireland for not meeting our climate deadlines. The Irish Government has missed its 31 December 2025 deadline to submit its draft building renovation plan to the European Commission, which is a core requirement under the energy performance of buildings directive. With the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council warning that a failure to take climate action could cost the State €13 billion, it is crucial that the Government prioritises climate in its EU Presidency plans. The Irish Government needs to get its house in order and it needs to get our housing stock in order at the same time. We need to ramp up renovations, particularly for those living in food poverty. Energy costs for householders have spiked and the crisis in the Middle East, coming on the tail of the Ukraine war, shows that sadly this will not be the last time an energy crisis of this nature takes place. Well-insulated homes save householders money, are more comfortable and help us meet our climate goals as well. Without a plan, too many households will face a choice of food or heat this winter. As new weather records are set across Europe, the Government has an opportunity to act on both climate and household costs but they must not be found wanting.

We need to use the time this evening and the time of our Presidency to speak out against the Israeli establishment’s destruction of Gaza and continued oppression of the Palestinian people. The Government has outlined that it wants to take further measures in regard to sanctioning Israel to be taken at EU rather than national level for greater impact. The Taoiseach is on record as saying he intends to push for concrete EU action and urgent discussion on this but the time has come for the Government to step up and put meaning behind these words. We now have six months before us when Ireland will have the potential to have huge impact on this issue. We should be aligning with allies in Spain and Slovakia to put Palestine firmly on the European Union’s agenda. This involves not only highlighting the issue of the EU-Israel Trade Association Agreement and humanitarian aid for Palestine but also calling on the European Union itself to finally recognise the State of Palestine and all the rights that come from that. The Green Party was proud to be part of the Government when Ireland first recognised the State of Palestine in 2024. Since then, and because of the leadership shown by Ireland, many other member states have followed suit: France, Luxembourg and Malta. We not only have an opportunity but also a responsibility to use the Presidency to promote the dignity and the rights of this oppressed nation over the next six months.

Deputy Barry Ward: I might start by recognising a very strong European who was a former Member of this House and who passed away on Monday. David Andrews was a TD for Dún Laoghaire and was somebody who showed on a number of occasions as Minister for Foreign Affairs his commitment to the European project and his commitment to the ideals of Europe. He is a great loss. I wanted to pay tribute to him. I have not had an opportunity in the House to pay my respects to his family, to his wife Annette, his sons David and Barry, and his daughters, Mary, Sinead and Claire. Déanaim comhbhrón leo as ucht an chaillteanais atá acu an tseachtain seo. I wanted to mark that because I thought it was important in the context of this debate.

I thought this debate was about the EU Presidency which we took over today rather than an opportunity to criticise every aspect of the European Union. Listening to the debate, I think some people have seen it in those terms. I do not for a moment suggest Europe is perfect or that it does not have its flaws or areas where we have an opportunity to correct the problems with Europe but what we saw today with the opening at Dublin Castle was an extraordinary event that did reflect our uniqueness but also our uniqueness within the context of Europe.

I congratulate those involved in organising the ceremony. I want to mark the extraordinary contribution that Carrie Crowley made as MC of the event and the extraordinary musical talent of Cormac Begley and Iarla Ó Lionáird who really showed the depth of musical talent and culture in this country. There was also the recitation of Seamus Heaney's poetry by Ruth Negga. It was a lovely event. I was on radio this morning and one of questions asked was whether we will have the opportunity to make our own mark on this Presidency. We have started down that road. The opening ceremony today was a triumph for everyone involved. It is also a reflection of the level of organisation and preparation that have gone into the Presidency. As Chair of the Joint Committee on European Affairs, I know we have had a lot of dealings with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who are involved in preparing for the Presidency and the level of preparation is extraordinary. It has not happened in the past week or two. It has been in the making for over a year, and credit is due to those officials for what they have done and the Ministers who will coming into play chairing meetings. I know from speaking to colleagues that they are so prepared. They have a map of where they want to go during the Presidency and who the personalities are on their Council and how they will achieve what they have to achieve.

Although it is not an officially announced theme, one of the things we have to look at is expectation management in the context of the Presidency. There is an enormous weight of expectation on Ireland. It is not just because this is our eighth Presidency. We sometimes forget that we were part of the first enlargement of the European Union in 1973. We are one of the older members of the European Union so there is a breadth of experience and understanding of the European Union within the Civil Service and the body politic in this country that does not exist in most countries. Cyprus, before us, is a younger member and a much smaller country that faced enormous challenges with what happened with Iran and attacks on their own soil during their Presidency. That made it incredibly difficult for them to move the agenda they had set out for their Presidency. We can only hope that will not befall us during our Presidency. Lithuania also joined the European Union, like Cyprus, in 2004 so is a relatively new member. They will take over from us next year.

As I look at our Presidency, we exist in a gap in the foreseeable potential political turmoil. There is an opportunity for us to achieve great things through this Presidency but also an expectation that Ireland will deliver an excellent Presidency. I fully expect we will but so much of what we could achieve during that time is outside our control. It depends on the co-operation and ambition of the other 26 member states who will share those meetings with us during the Presidency. We do not know if something will happen to us like what happened to Cyprus. We do not know what complication or what attack there will be. When the French had their Presidency, they did not expect war to break out in Ukraine. When the Croatians had their Presidency, they did not expect Covid to hit. There will be unforeseen events that will interrupt our ability to get things done. We have the best chance here because in 2027 there will be all kinds of elections in Europe that may change the political landscape and make it much more difficult to get things done. When we look at what has to be done, there are some really important things within that Presidency. We have set our priorities as competitiveness, security and values but the MFF looms large as well. That seven-year budget is a constant battle between the frugals who want to cut and cut, and those who want to expand spending. Ireland, as an honest broker, running this Presidency has to be the middle ground that can bring those two sides together and that will not be an easy task. It will not be easy to broker a deal on the MFF. If we can do it, or substantially do it before the end of this year, it will put Europe in a much stronger position. I am grateful we have the opportunity to do that and we have a strong team in place at official and political level. However, in the context of the MFF and the changing political and diplomatic landscape of the globe, it is really that we do not cut back on the external action service in the European Union. We have to maintain the European footprint. We have to do so in a way that does not cut our aid budget. Only Ireland and Spain, as members state, have increased their overseas development aid budgets and that is a challenge. When I have said that to colleagues around Europe, they feel that because their countries have cut their ODA budgets, Europe cannot do it. I hope that will be borne out in the MFF negotiations.

More important than just diplomacy, we have also have consider our relationship with other countries, particularly in the global south and Africa. We have to move away from a situation where we just see them as recipients of aid but instead as partners for natural resources, trade and development. It is not just because the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, is here that I want to pay tribute to Irish Aid. The manner in which Ireland provides aid to the global south is beyond compare because it does not come with strings attached. We invest in particular countries and identify particular projects. The money and resources are diverted into them but not with strings attached. Even though USAID has been slashed and burned under the Trump presidency, in the past the Africa Acts meant that aid would be delivered but it had to be spent on American products. It came with strings attached. Irish aid and foreign policy do not do that. It is worth recognising that as well.

It is also important in what we have identified as our priorities is values. I listened to my colleague criticising Europe's reaction to what is happening in Gaza. I agree with a lot of what he said. I have been consistently disappointed by the European approach to this. Contrary to what he said, I have not been disappointed by the Government's reaction. In fact, Ireland has led the charge in recognising what is happening in Gaza. Never is credit given on the opposition benches to people like Leo Varadkar who was the first western leader to call out Israel for what they did, or the Tániste who was in the Department of Foreign Affairs when we recognised Palestine as a state, or the Government for building an alliance of states at European

level that is beginning to approach this in a different way. Spain, Malta, Belgium, Slovenia and the Netherlands are changing their attitude to what is happening there. If we can build that coalition at European level, we might be able to make a change in the way Israel is treated by the international community. Ireland cannot do it alone and this is why being part of the European Union and having the Presidency is so important at this pivotal time. We can build those alliances at that level that might actually make a difference in a way that we, as a solo country, cannot do.

Enlargement is part of the values priority. We have such a close relationship with enlargement, not just from when the ten accessions states joined in 2004 but going back further. We were part of the first accession. It was largely during our Presidency in the first half of 1990 that German reunification was debated. Ireland's experience of being part of the European Union has been almost universally positive. For all of its flaws, we have benefited significantly and not just from Structural Funds, motorways, infrastructure and things like that. We were a postcolonial society and country that grew up for its first 50 years in the shadow of Britain economically. Even in terms of the courts, before we became a republic, decisions made in courts in London were binding on Irish courts. There was a monetary union, and we were dependent on the British exchange rate and its currency. In 1973, for the first time we sat around tables in Europe as equals with other European states. We should aim, to the greatest extent possible, to encourage any country that wants to share that experience of true independence and taking their place among the international community. Over the past number of months as Chair of the European affairs committee, I have met with representatives from Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine. These are all countries that have bent over backwards to become part of the European Union. Some of them still have work to do. We have to use our Presidency to give them every opportunity to deliver, to recognise the work they have done and to allow them to become part of what is the most progressive union on planet and the biggest trading bloc, that genuinely stands up for human rights, the rule of law and the perseverance of the right of everybody to enjoy life equally.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are here because of the Presidency of the European Union. It is a great honour for Ireland to have the Presidency and to be in that position for the next six months. It also brings a lot of responsibility. From my perspective and the agriculture portfolio I hold, it is a critical time because we have the negotiations on the CAP budget. We see there are proposals to cut that budget considerably. That is something Ireland will have a key role in over the coming months. I hope we are able to bring about a situation where we recognise agriculture and European farmers are central to European security because food security is as important as any other aspect of security across the European Union. That is why the CAP budget needs to be restored and expanded and grown, if at all possible. That is exactly what we need to be doing. The Minister of State nodding in agreement, and we all need to work together to make that happen.

We need to recognise that farmers in every part of the European Union contribute hugely not just to the wealth of the Union in regard to the food that they produce but also to the public good that they do and from an environmental perspective as well. That also needs to be borne in mind. We have a climate crisis across the world. We have certainly found some element of it in Ireland in the last couple of weeks. We have had record temperatures and I understand there are more record temperatures to come. We have had record storms and all of these things

are having consequences. What we do with our land, how we farm and how we how we develop our agricultural systems will have an impact on that, but farmers cannot change and adapt unless adequate provision is put in place. In other words, they need to be paid for the public good they provide. That needs to be central to the CAP negotiations.

I want to turn to one other aspect of it. Strength with unity is the motto of the Presidency. The previous speakers spoke about a previous Irish Presidency when German reunification was an issue. Irish reunification is something we all need to look to at the moment because a couple of miles from me in County Fermanagh people who voted to stay in it are now outside of the European Union because of Brexit. The region wanted to stay part of the European Union. We have an obligation to ensure that over this Presidency we work towards developing a critical mass of European nations to recognise that the reunification of Ireland is also something that would hugely benefit the European Union. We have a region which was part of the European Union before, which could immediately go back into the European Union if it became part of a unified Éire. That is something we need to work together to try to develop. We must work with people across this island, but also across all of Europe so that we can see what kind of funds and resources we can put in place to integrate two parts of this island which have been divided by an artificial border for far too long, so that they can come together and be part of a new united Ireland within the European Union.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Mar a déarfá, tús maith leath na hoibre. Even if it is only the start rather than half the work done, today's launch of the Presidency of the EU Council in Dublin Castle was, if Members can pardon the pun, a real "Ode to Joy" - from the band of the Defence Forces and the National Youth Choir who heralded the hanging of the Irish, EU and then the Ukrainian flags, to all the other performers, it was indeed a hugely positive occasion from an artistic and cultural perspective. "Samhradh Samhradh" was performed by a collection of musicians, including Laoise Kelly on the harp, Cormac Begley and Christina Polycarpou on the lyra, which segued nicely from the Cypriot Presidency. As someone who likes to sing and has written songs, I was blown away by the depth and variety of all the talent on display - from The Gloaming to the sean-nós, Iarla Ó Lionáird and the ensemble, Francesco Turrisi and Séamus Ong. Cormac Begley performing "O'Neill's March" with Stephanie Keane doing the sean-nós style dancing was absolutely amazing. Ruth Negga did a great reading of Seamus Heaney's "Beacons at Bealtaine". Tolú Makay did a fantastic rendition of The Cranberries' "Dreams". I noticed that a lot of the diplomatic corps from other EU member states were swaying to it. They knew the song and it really got them going. All in all, it was a great start and as Deputy Barry Ward just said, Carrie Crowley did a fantastic and very dignified job as master of ceremonies.

Then we had the politicians. In fairness, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste were very strong in outlining our vision both in terms of Ireland's role within the EU and also the direction of the EU, as were all the Ministers. Everyone batted very well for the team. It was good to see the European Council President, António Costa, make reference to Palestine, Lebanon, the Strait of Hormuz and the war in Ukraine. It was great - I also thought it was touching - that the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, was able to visit these shores so soon after his official State visit when he addressed Dáil Éireann. This again afforded him the opportunity to call on the EU to keep its promises. That is what I took out of his contribution. He pointed to Ukraine's future as part of the European Union and sounded further warnings about

continued Russian aggression and how Putin is not going to stop unless strength and unity are shown. That is the theme of the Irish Presidency - ní neart go cur le chéile.

I will reference the themes which have been referenced already: competitiveness in terms of strengthening Europe's economy, boosting innovation and productivity in the Single Market and supporting prosperity and jobs across the EU; values in terms of upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law and defending these values not just in the European context but also globally; maintaining the foundational principles of the EU going back before we joined the European Economic Community in 1973; and security in terms of protecting EU citizens, strengthening stability and addressing the geopolitical challenges such as the aforementioned war in Ukraine and other global conflicts, and in terms of building resilience and defence capacity, which President Costa mentioned as well.

On a related note, I mentioned at the EU affairs committee of which I am a member the need to really get involved with our young people and young people across Europe and to engage with them. It is great to see that this will form a good part of the local engagement and interaction process over the coming six months.

That is all well and good - *tús maith, mar a dúirt mé* - but Ireland is only going to be judged on tangible achievements. It can be a steady-as-she-goes Presidency where we just keep it ticking over until the next country takes over, or we can try to get some tangible achievements. Obviously any country has to be realistic, especially a small country like us on the periphery, in terms of what we can do in six months given the real need for continuity, but it would be nice to see little bit of progress.

On competitiveness, we have to focus on practical outcomes. That means focusing on cutting the barriers for SMEs, reducing energy costs and supporting innovation. It is about getting the balance right between regulation and enterprise. In terms of AI and social media companies, while the EU is quite strong in some ways, I notice a little bit of a dilution.

I also notice a dilution on the measures to tackle climate change. Maybe there will be a redoubling during this Presidency. I hope there will be because we still have the naysayers saying that this is just a repeat of the summer of 1976. Our continental cousins are being absolutely devastated by the record global temperatures. We need to have energy self-sufficiency, which will have to be renewable, but also interchangeable across the grid between the French nuclear, the Irish wind and wave, and the solar, especially coming from the Mediterranean states. We have to show real leadership on this, and not just kind of keep things ticking over.

On the values side, Ireland has to prioritise concrete action. We can talk about supporting the rule-of-law mechanisms, humanitarian leadership and maintaining a clear and principled stance in Ukraine, Gaza and other global conflicts like Sudan but what President Costa said today is only lip service when other EU member states refuse to stand up to the Israeli genocide because of their historic guilt or their geographic proximity. We are only talking the talk unless we use our leadership over the next while to put more pressure on Germany, Denmark and the likes of Cyprus to get tougher with Israel. We can still be friends, but we have to draw the line at some stage, just like we have in many ways drawn the line and risked the ire of the Trump Administration with our fairly modest occupied territories Bill. It would be great to see the occupied territories Bill passed during this term, and also for the Government to try to stretch

it out to services. Let the legal eagles come in and show why it cannot be done, but let us push the boat rather than saying we are not even going to try it. We have to show true leadership in this context and maybe put a few noses out of joint among our partners because that is what you do when you are showing leadership - you tell it as it is. We are no longer trying to play the national card for the next six months; we are trying to play the European and the global card.

On security, we again have a constructive role to play in strengthening EU co-operation on all sorts of security - energy security, which relates to the conflict in Ukraine; and cybersecurity, because again there are many malicious elements out there trying to attack European member states, be it from Russia, troll farms or other as yet unmentioned terrorist organisations or countries. We can lead without compromising on our long-standing policy of military neutrality. I take it from the Government's statement that we will not, but I just want to say anyway that we must not hinder the closer defensive co-operation of those other states which want to get involved. We know all too well, especially those in eastern Europe, Poland and the Baltic states, the dangers of being unprepared.

On the wider delivery front, the Government has to focus on getting agreement across the line. Rather than just talking, let us see what agreements will be passed during these six months and what EU legislation will be further advanced and ready to sign off. It should not be a holding Presidency or just a thematic Presidency; it should be a tangible and transformative Presidency. I know this is a big ask in six months but we only get it every now and again and we have to use this time. I urge the Minister of State to be as firm, blunt and forceful as possible and, as I have said, put a few noses out of joint if needs be and we can repair the collateral damage afterwards.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am delighted to get this opportunity to contribute to the debate. We know there are huge opportunities in relation to the European Presidency. We know we are in a very volatile world with an awful lot of circumstances changing by the minute and hour. It is fair to say that for all of the positives of the European Union, there are failings. There has been much talk about the failures of Europe, and we can go back to the financial crash and the fact we were not necessarily shown the solidarity we should have been shown. This is accepting the improvements during Covid and the huge solidarity shown to us during the Brexit disaster, the Brexit negotiations and all that was required in that regard.

We all accept there has been a huge hit to the body politic and people's trust in politics, and to people's very financial being across Europe and the western world. When Europe talks about issues of security, and I am not even getting into the arguments about rearming the EU, we all know the Irish people are absolutely committed to an independent foreign policy, non-alignment and military neutrality. That goes without saying. If we are going to talk about security, we also have to talk about the security of our people and the fact there has to be a rebuilding of trust and relationships. This is about addressing the financial crisis that people are in. I accept we have our own issues here, where health meets housing meets the cost of living and the cost of fuel. The EU can facilitate us and we can work alongside each other on delivering on the big idea of dealing with the issue of the changes we need to make on where we get our supplies of fuel and power. We keep talking about wind power but we know there are huge possibilities. We could be talking about strategic autonomy for Ireland and strategic autonomy for Europe across the board but this is where we need to go.

I agree with everything that has been said as regards overseas development aid and the fact USAID has cut to bits many necessary projects. People might care from a point of view of the issues they are worried about, whether this is the impact across the world of how people are being treated, the lack of fairness and equality, even in relation to trade, and also the impact it has on immigration to this country.

The Minister of State will expect that I will finish by saying that we need to see proper movement on the EU-Israel Association Agreement. We need to do work on what we can do. As difficult as it is to push the Europeans, we need to see movement. I welcome the Tánaiste's foray into the issue of Irish unity, following the route map of the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond. I also welcome what I have heard from the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. We have to have a conversation with our European neighbours on the importance and necessity of doing our own preparations but then their facilitating us in delivering Irish unity, which could really change things positively, North and South and across Europe.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank all of the Deputies who have contributed to this very timely and pertinent debate as we embark on the eighth Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union since our accession in 1973, following the first Presidency in 1975. My dear friend Deputy Ó Murchú has laid out his concerns about the supposed failure of the European Union, to be expected from a party that has opposed every European referendum and Europe in its entirety until Brexit showed up. I appreciate the comments he has made. It is really important in this context to look at how Ireland has changed since we first joined the EEC in 1973. The average income of an Irish worker was two thirds that of the EU average then and it is now more than double the European average. At that time my mother was the victim of the marriage bar. She married in 1971 and was sacked from Ulster Bank, and I can give out about it now that it is no longer in the jurisdiction. In 1973, she had my considerably older brother and was sacked from a supposedly more progressive bank. It did not change until 1976.

In 1972, the year we voted to join the EEC and Deputy Ó Murchú's political movement, of course, opposed that referendum, 55% of exports from Ireland went to Britain. Today it is in and around 10%. We were wholly reliant on our former colonial administrator to be the customer for our products and, in many cases, the receptive home for so many of our people. Our biggest export on paper may have been butter, beef or whiskey but really it was people. The era of mass emigration was in full flow and continued for many years, perhaps only starting to stem off when the EEC became the European Union.

We were an economically lacking, socially regressive country whose water and air quality standards do not bear thinking about. Deputy Kenny very eloquently provided the muster as to why we need a strong Common Agricultural Policy as part of the MFF. The reason we have the CAP is for the very basis of food security, an issue that has returned to European shores in light of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe. Food security must, of course, come back to being a central argument in budgetary negotiations.

Deputies Gogarty and O'Donoghue very eloquently talked about the need to make sure that we do not just pay lip service to security and that security is one of our values. The fact it is one of the three value points in our Presidency is not just a matter of words. I take very seriously Deputy O'Donoghue's criticism and I take it on the chin but, of course, what he failed

to include is that the retention crisis in the Defence Forces is starting to reverse. In the past two years, we have seen more people joining and that is a good thing. The average numbers are turning around. The investment in naval vessels and radar technology is real and it goes to the heart of what the European project really is in its iteration and creation. It is a peace project and it is the most successful peace project. We have had the largest continuous period of peace between what are now EU member states in the history of mankind, and certainly in the history of the nation state.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, in her lengthy intervention, supplemented by the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, in addition to the various speeches today, set out that our policy agenda for the latter half of this year is ambitious. To support this policy agenda we will host an extensive programme of Presidency meetings, with more than 270 events including a European Political Community summit, where the Heads of Government of at least 47 countries will come to Ireland. We also look forward to the informal meeting of the European Council here in Dublin in November. Alongside this, we will host 22 informal ministerial meetings. This is why the Government has been determined from day one that the Presidency belongs to the entire country and not only the capital, a concern laid out by Deputy Clendennen. By hosting six of our 22 informal meetings and approximately one quarter of all of Presidency events outside of Dublin, stretching into every part of the State, we are ensuring the Presidency leaves a truly national footprint. I had the honour of working on our previous Presidency with the European Movement in 2013 and it very much had a Dublin focus. There were only 11 informal meetings compared to the 22 we will host this time, and none of those took place outside of Dublin. Of course, there were no other summits.

I will go back to the point concluded on by my friend Deputy Ó Murchú, and alluded to by Deputies O'Rourke and Kenny, on making sure the North is part of this. I was cheered to see the likes of the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and the leader of the SDLP, Clare Hanna, at the event today. Crucially, one thing left out by Deputies O'Rourke and Kenny was that the reason the European Council agreed unanimously that a united Ireland would be automatically part of the European Union was due to the advocacy of the former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, at one of the first European Council meetings after Brexit.

Deputy Gould raised the issue of costs. This is an important issue of misinformation that needs to be tackled. An article is going around the national press, amplified by a number of elected representatives at local and Oireachtas levels, claiming that this Presidency is going to cost us €400 million and that it is, somehow, multiples of the cost of other Presidencies. I do not know how this figure has been arrived at. The exact cost, excluding security, will be €168 million. The cost of the Presidency in France was €145 million, in Sweden it was €121 million and in Spain it was €170 million.

Deputy Gould is also outraged that there will be limited access to UCC tomorrow as we host the entire College of Commissioners. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and I know that we are not in term time now. While there are staff members in UCC, one day and a couple of hours of limited access is not somehow an attack on people by the elites. We need to have a bit of relativity and reasonableness in these debates.

A successful Presidency is about two things. First, it is about making real progress on important legislative and policy proposals that will help to shape Europe's future. I do not intend to repeat the areas led out by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, or the Minister of State,

Deputy Dillon, but I will touch on two points raised respectively by Deputy Ward and Deputy Ó Murchú. Crucially, there is also the importance of the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which was also touched on by Deputy O'Donoghue.

I appreciate Deputy Ward's desire to highlight expectation management, but in the very same period, in the grips of the financial crash, this same responsibility landed on the last Irish Presidency in 2013. I have no doubt that we will be able to move budgetary proposals into a position where we will be able to hand them over in a very good condition to be agreed under the Lithuanian Presidency.

I really want to underline, as the Minister of State with special responsibility for international development, as Deputy Ó Murchú laid out, that the abolition of USAID puts the focus on Europe. The European Union and its member states now account for over 50% of global development co-operation. Throw in Norway and Britain and we account for over two thirds of the world's development co-operation. When it comes to budgetary discussions, Europe cannot fail the Global South. Irish Aid has stood tall. We are one of two member states, the other being Spain, to have increased our development budget. I look forward to seeing all-party agreement on that again in this budget. It is why we want to make sure that it is at the heart and the soul of the process when we have the first development informal meeting in 18 months in Dublin on 8 and 9 October. I thought of bringing it to Leopardstown Racecourse and maybe having a night at Johnny Fox's, but common sense prevailed.

The second aspect in this context is really important. It is about communicating effectively with people so they understand what these decisions mean in practice and how they affect their communities, jobs, opportunities and daily lives. This is why it is important that everybody across Ireland has the opportunity to engage with the Presidency. Our Presidency provides a valuable opportunity for reflection on what it means for Ireland to be a member of the European Union in 2026 and what our enduring place within the Union means. This is why we have had serious levels of extensive consultation and outreach across the State. I was delighted to hold a development consultation on 8 December. The views we heard all contributed towards an ambitious policy programme that we can and will absolutely deliver on. It is also reflective of the shared priorities and aspirations.

Deputy Clendennen also highlighted the need to make sure this is used as a template for re-engagement. This is why we see a children's version of our Presidency policy programme. The Blue Star programme that he referred to was born out of the 2013 Presidency. I had the honour of working on the pilot project in that year. We also see the county pairings with member states. Dublin is tied with Greece, and I am delighted that the Greek ambassador could join me for Europe Day in St. Brigid's Boys National School.

Deputy Gogarty, also known by his stage name, His Sweet Surprise, in reference to his singing abilities, rightly championed the breathtaking cultural performances we heard in Dublin Castle today. Throughout this Presidency, we will see a real focus on our cultural offering as a nation and a people. This is also the first time where Gaeilge will be an official working language of the European Union under an Irish Presidency. This gives us a great opportunity.

In conclusion, we have an immense challenge in front of us, which is coming at a stage when the world is in flux. We have a great opportunity and a great responsibility, and we are

absolutely blessed to have a diplomatic and official team of over 500 individuals in Brussels and hundreds of people around our network who will drive an ambitious policy agenda and, crucially, a smooth Presidency that will be inclusive and welcoming and will get the job done. I look forward to all Members of the Oireachtas contributing to that and not just using these annual debates or the Europe Day debates to air whatever local grievances they have. Go raibh maith agat.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legal Aid

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration whether any assessment has been made of the risk that the proposed changes to the criminal legal aid scheme could result in reduced participation by solicitors in criminal legal aid work; the implications of any such reduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49647/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: As predicted by many, we now have a chaotic situation in the courts, and in the District Court, in particular, due to the Minister's new criminal legal aid scheme. It would be helpful if the Minister would outline to the House the assessments he carried out beforehand in respect of the risk of the changes to the criminal legal aid scheme, any potential for reduced participation by solicitors in this work and the implications of any such reductions.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy for his question. I also thank him for organising the meeting of his committee yesterday and for inviting me to it. I thought it was a very useful and effective meeting. It gave me an opportunity to put out the reasons I am introducing this new scheme in respect of the District Court. Obviously, it also gave other persons whom the committee invited, members of the legal profession, an opportunity to appear before it as well.

In terms of what has happened since yesterday, the first thing I should emphasise is that the 8% increase in criminal legal aid fees, which has long been due and should have been restored a long time ago, has commenced as of today. As the Deputy knows, I said that would happen and it has happened as of today. It applies across the board, including in the Circuit Criminal Court and in the Central Criminal Court. In respect of the €520 flat fee I have put in place for the District Court, as I explained yesterday, that has also had the 8% added to it, on top of the five appearances. I think the Deputy also wrote a letter inquiring about the report. I want him to know that the report has been published on the *gov.ie* website today in the section with criminal legal aid.

The Deputy's concern is, I think, whether this is going to lead to an exodus of criminal law practitioners from the legal aid panel. I do not believe it will. Approximately 825 solicitors are on the criminal legal aid panel. This number has gone up significantly since 2023, when there were only 672 solicitors. This means there is a significant number of solicitors there.

Obviously, it is very early days and I do not want to say anything that is going to aggravate the situation. As of today, however, no solicitor has resigned from the panel. Three emails came into the Department from solicitors stating that they would be resigning. As the Deputy

knows, however, in order to resign from the panel, solicitors have to contact the section of the Courts Service that deals with this area. I will be keeping a very close eye on this issue.

Deputy Matt Carthy: My question was not about whether the Minister thinks this will have an impact but, rather, whether he carried out an assessment prior to introducing this scheme. I have to take it from the Minister's answer that he has not carried out any such assessment. I welcome the Minister's statement that he does not want to aggravate the situation. It would have been helpful if he had given himself that advice a number of days ago. Many solicitors I have spoken to feel the Minister made an allegation of widespread abuse of the current system against an entire profession. There is deep, deep anger and hurt that has been palpable. The Minister said I know about the system. I do not pretend to know the intricacies of this system. However, I can tell the Minister that people I know and trust, whom I have contacted in respect of dealing with vulnerable cases in the past, have told me they now feel their work is being undervalued, underappreciated and underrecognised by the Minister.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As I mentioned yesterday, I am not here to prioritise the interests of the legal profession and neither is the Deputy. My task is to focus on the administration of justice, people who are brought before the courts, people who are accused of criminal offences and the effective operation of the administration of justice in the criminal section of the District Court. That is my focus. If we look at the fees available, if we want to just leave this as a discussion exclusively about fees, last year, in 2025, the cost of the criminal legal aid scheme was €120 million. Of that, €40 million was attributed to the District Court. Obviously, the significant majority of that money, two-thirds, was attributable to the Central Criminal Court and to the Circuit Criminal Court.

I do not believe there is going to be an evacuation of people from the criminal legal aid scheme. It is still a very profitable scheme for solicitors. It is very well paid. Many people have put down parliamentary questions asking about the amount of money that is paid out. Of the 825 people, those at the top receive in the region of €950,000 per annum. At the bottom, the figure is small, namely a couple of hundred euro.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have engaged with a large number of those from the legal profession regarding these changes to the legal aid scheme, and I really do believe it would be helpful if the Minister took the opportunity to apologise for the manner in which the remarks have been interpreted. It is being generous to him to say he castigated an entire profession and suggested there is widespread abuse of the current system. The representatives of the legal profession have challenged him to provide evidence of that. I certainly have not seen that evidence yet.

Does the Minister accept, for example, that custody cases, children's cases, psychiatric cases and probation-linked sentencing cases cannot reasonably be run within five hearings? This relates to the evidence and testimony our committee received and that I have heard directly. If the Minister accepts my point – I am told that anybody who understands the District Court and how it operates would – does he also accept that there is genuine potential that solicitors will withdraw from the scheme in the same way as they withdrew from the civil legal aid scheme because it simply was not viable for their businesses to continue?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The basis upon which I referred to unethical practices is in the report that is now up on the website, *gov.ie*. In fairness to the Deputy, I do not believe he has seen it. It is in the criminal legal aid section of the website. I refer to the review of the criminal legal aid system in the District Court.

The Deputy mentioned a whole series of cases, including custody cases. I have changed what was originally proposed as a result of my interaction with the Law Society. Any case that now moves forward to a higher court, whether it is the Circuit Criminal Court or the Central Criminal Court, will attract the full fee in the District Court as well. Once a serious case, whether it is a murder case or an assault case, goes to the Circuit Criminal Court, it is going to be subject to the fees that apply in the Circuit Criminal Court and Central Criminal Court, which are very generous and to which, today, I have added 8%.

It is a fair scheme. As I said to the Deputy yesterday, my primary focus in doing this is to try to reduce the number of adjournments in the District Court so that we can have more efficient administration of justice in that court.

Substance Misuse

2. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the position of his Department on the central recommendation of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use that the offence of personal possession of drugs be repealed; his views on whether the Government's stated commitment to a health-led approach is inconsistent with the continued criminalisation of people who use drugs; the specific legislative steps he intends to take in response to the committee's final report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49887/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to ask the Minister about the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Drugs Use, particularly as they refer to the decriminalisation of drug use. I had not intended to ask this question so quickly following the release of the report, but it is important to seek clarification on some statements the Minister made in the media. I am looking forward to addressing them because I see that they are also in the response that has been sent to me right now.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question and, indeed, for his work chairing the drugs committee and the work on its report. I have had an opportunity to read the report. A very significant amount of work went into it. There are 161 recommendations in it. I agree with very many of them. There are parts in the report that are excellent, especially the section that refers to sports, well-being, combating addiction and trying to divert children through the use of sport. As we all know, sport is the most effective diversion project there is in trying to protect children.

I want the Deputy to know I agree with a huge amount of what is in the report. However, in fairness to him and to the media, the one issue everyone wants to address and ask me questions about concerns what he has described as the central recommendation, which is to decriminalise all drugs, full stop. I will give the Deputy my straight answer or my personal view, if he wants. Alternatively, I could say the Department will consider the matter. I have

concerns about decriminalisation. The reason relates to what is set out in the report and it is also based on my own views. One of the findings in the committee's report is that if there is decriminalisation of all drugs, it is likely there is going to be increased public use of drugs in public areas.

I want to consider situations that might arise in my area or the Deputy's. If, for example, somebody was taking heroin outside a school or smoking joints in a park or another public area, there would be nothing the Garda could do. At present, if that is happening, a person can be moved on. Gardaí can, because there is criminal activity, apprehend a person and seize the drugs because the activity is contrary to what is set out in the criminal law. If there were decriminalisation, I fear that what happened in Oregon and British Columbia would happen here. We would see an increase in public disorder and the public use of drugs. I just want to be conscious of the impact it would have on society more broadly, particularly children.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire for his response. I was coming in here for a fight, but he has disarmed me somewhat with his response. What he has in his written reply is different from what he has said in that he said we went beyond the recommendations of the citizens' assembly. I wanted to read the recommendation of the citizens' assembly as presented on 24 October:

The Citizens' Assembly has recommended that the State pivots from the status quo to a comprehensive health-led response to drugs, including decriminalisation for people found in possession of drugs for personal use. The details of how decriminalisation can be legislated for is a question that the Oireachtas should determine following detailed legal scrutiny.

That is what the citizens' assembly states on its website.

We also considered the matter and were quite fearful. I represent the inner city. We examined the Oregon model in detail. What we found there was that Oregon failed on a number of fronts, but for one, it did not have the assets that we have. We use the word "therefore" in our recommendation when we acknowledge the potential for substance misuse or increases on the street. We state we should empower local authorities to have by-laws similar to those on the use of alcohol on the streets. We recognised that after our scrutiny and we would empower the Garda to go further than what Oregon or any other jurisdiction, including Lisbon, was able to include.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: This is an interesting discussion. I am very happy to have a policy discussion with the Deputy. We obviously have different views. My concern is what happened in British Columbia. The Minister of Health there is a social democrat, a member of the New Democratic Party. British Columbia introduced decriminalisation about three years ago and is reversing out of it now because, it says, it has led to much public disorder and much public taking of drugs.

I have great empathy for people who have addiction problems. Addiction is a huge challenge for anyone in life, but the Deputy and I also have to consider what the impact is going to be on other people, people who are not taking drugs, if you can openly take all drugs. It is not just cannabis the Deputy is talking about. We are talking about heroin and crack cocaine.

If people can take those drugs openly without the Garda being able to say they cannot do that, it will have a very negative influence on people, especially children. If they see this happening, it is going to be normalised.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Does the Minister honestly believe I would stand over a policy decision that would enable an increase in open drug dealing? Does he actually believe that a committee that had representation from members of all parties, including his own and including incredible members such as Deputy Brabazon, whose views differ from mine on this, and Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, would do that? We examined the matter and what we established quite clearly was that the Oregon model failed because wraparound services were not present there. It was the same with the British Columbia model. What we also established was that we have one of the highest numbers of drug-related deaths in the EU. We have several provisions in the Statute Book – sections 15, 22 and 23 – that enable the Garda to go after those who are dealing the drugs. The section of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 that criminalises possession for personal use actually prevents people from coming forward to seek treatment.

To ensure there would be no public consumption of drugs, we recommend clearly that council by-laws be passed to enable gardaí to move people on in that scenario. Also, we recommend that if they do not move on, public order measures would enable the Garda to arrest them. I assure the Minister that neither I nor anybody else on the committee would enable or support a situation where public consumption of drugs would even potentially increase.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am not in the slightest challenging the Deputy's bona fides or genuine beliefs. I just have a concern that a policy advanced by people who are legitimately motivated by the best intentions may have a negative consequence.

There is one thing we agree on, namely, that there is and should be a health-led approach. Under the Government at present, there is a health-led approach to drugs. The health referral scheme, which will be in operation shortly, will provide an opportunity for someone who has, by statute, committed an offence to engage with health services and, as a consequence, avoid a criminal sanction. In this way, we are taking clear health-led steps to tackle the misuse of drugs.

I am concerned about the matter. I want to be frank with the Deputy and I do not want him to think I am sitting on the fence. I disagree with him. I fully respect the opinion he has come to. Just because I disagree with him does not mean that I am right and he is wrong.

9 o'clock

I may be wrong but my view, and it is a strong view, is that the decriminalisation of drugs is going to increase the public use of drugs and, as a consequence, also increase the use of drugs generally.

International Agreements

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the progress that has been made on securing a bilateral agreement with Britain to ensure that those

international protection applicants who should be processed in Britain can be returned there in a timely manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49648/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will return to the issue of a bilateral returns policy with Britain. The Minister and other Ministers have put on the record of the House on numerous occasions their belief that between 80% and 90% of international protection applicants are travelling here via the common travel area. It would be useful if the House could get a report on any progress that has been made on securing a bilateral arrangement with Britain.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. Since the previous occasion that the Deputy and I engaged across the House on these questions, the International Protection Act has commenced. It commenced on 12 June. These are very early stages. We are not even three weeks into it but the statistics I am seeing show that the number of asylum applicants coming to Ireland is down considerably. I do not want it to be understood that will inevitably continue, but that is the case in the very early days of the scheme. I believe the reason it is happening is because of the increased powers in the International Protection Act, including the ability to search the baggage and luggage of individuals who come here to find documentation. We have found a lot of documentation, such as UK driving licences and passports. It is a much more vigorous system. Notwithstanding the fact that the Deputy opposed it, it is improving the situation for us at present.

On the situation with the UK, it was the case that 90% of applicants or more were coming in directly at the port and coming over the Border. That has reduced according to the figures over the past two and a half weeks but, again, it is very early stages. It is in the region of 78% of much smaller numbers. It is going in the right direction. I spoke to the Home Secretary on 15 June after that appalling attack in Belfast and the appalling racist riots afterwards. I emphasised three things. There needs to be greater data sharing between the UK and Ireland. The UK wants that. It wants to get data that we have access to in the EU. We said that we need to have more policing operations on the Border. That will happen. As the Deputy knows, and I keep asking Sinn Féin to emphasise this, the common travel area is only for the benefit of the citizens of Ireland and the UK. We also discussed the issue of returns.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The question was what progress has been made on a returns policy and only in his last four words did the Minister mention "the issue of returns".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will come back to it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I would appreciate if the Minister would outline what progress has been made. He outlined that individuals have had British passports and driving licences in their possession when they have applied for international protection. The Minister has no power to do anything about that because there is no bilateral returns policy in place. I love the Minister's confidence that international protection applicants have been following the passage of his legislation through the Oireachtas and awaiting the President's signature. The truth is that he knows there will be periods of time when the system comes under pressure. That is how the international protection system has operated to date and will likely operate again. The

Minister has said in the House on numerous occasions that the vast majority have come across the Irish Sea using the common travel area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That is true.

Deputy Matt Carthy: How is the Minister going to deal with that if he does not have an agreement in place on a returns policy?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There were examples where UK driving licences were found. The passports were not UK passports. The great benefit of the legislation, which, of course, transposed the pact, is that it does make returns much easier - not to the UK because we do not have an agreement with the UK but to other countries in the EU. That is the big advantage of it. Under the Dublin III regulation, as the Deputy is aware, we would have to get the permission of, say, Germany to send somebody back if they had applied in Germany. Now we do not need its permission. It is already agreed that we will send people back to Germany and the airport in all the countries is designated.

On the UK agreement, I have designated the UK a safe third country. I want to see operationalisation of an agreement between the UK and Ireland for returns. However, I cannot force the UK to recommence an agreement or to start accepting people back if it does not agree to do so. I have limited powers in what I can do. I can say I want to do it but I cannot force the Home Secretary or the British Government to enter into an agreement with us.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister knows that I and Sinn Féin support the returns regulation. The big contradiction in everything that the Minister has said is that the returns regulation is important in the context of the EU, but we will manage if we do not have it for the source of 80% or 90% of arrivals. I do not know if the Minister is willing to give a percentage now because a lot of it is pure conjecture and speculation on his part.

The Minister says he cannot reach an agreement if the British Government is not willing to agree. Is that the state of play? I have asked for an update. Is the update that the British Government is refusing to enter into negotiations-----

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----or is holding back? If the Minister wants it and says that the British Government is not refusing, where is the delay in securing a bilateral arrangement? Does he accept that designating Britain a safe third country is pointless if we do not have a returns agreement in place? What proviso or mechanism in law will the Minister use to implement returns if there is no bilateral agreement?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not believe it is pointless designating the UK a safe third country. That is what it is. The Deputy is aware of the politics of the United Kingdom probably just as well as anyone else in this House. There are considerable issues of sensitivity in the UK around accepting returns from other countries. The Deputy knows that. It is an issue of political sensitivity. I have spoken to the Home Secretary. I invited her to the informal meeting

of the ports alliance on 16 July. We spoke shortly after the riots in Belfast. The reason that was of particular interest to her was because the suspect in that case was somebody who had landed at Dublin Airport, coming from Luxembourg, claimed asylum in Dublin and then left Dublin the very same day for Belfast. The next day in Belfast, he claimed asylum there. I said to the Home Secretary that this is an example of why we need a returns agreement in place.

Road Safety

4. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to confirm if there is currently any policy review under way in his Department regarding the enforcement of speeding laws through the use of static cameras on the national road network; if divergences between the number of fixed charge notices issued for speed detections at individual locations are compared and reviewed by his officials or An Garda Síochána; the engagement his officials have had with the Department of Transport on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50222/26]

Deputy George Lawlor: The question relates to the issue of static speed cameras on the national road network and whether divergences between the number of fixed charge notices for speed detections at individual locations are compared and reviewed by officials and An Garda Síochána. The Minister will perhaps be aware of the massive disparity in the number of fines issued at various different cameras. One has issued 30,599 notices while another has issued 397 in an 11-month period. The Minister might make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. There are fixed cameras, average speed cameras and GoSafe vans. That type of technology is vital in ensuring that we keep our roads safe. Road safety cameras are intended to be a tool to support safety, prevention and behaviour change across the road network. They are not about catching people out. They are about trying to ensure that we keep our roads safe.

Nine static speed safety cameras have been in operation across the country since 2024. The locations of these cameras were selected based on fatal and serious injury collision data from the preceding seven years and speed data, as well as feedback from stakeholders. We have seen an increase in the total number of fixed charge notices issued for speeding in recent years. In 2024, 137,806 fixed charge notices were issued and in 2025, that went up to 168,882. In terms of analysing any divergences in fixed charge notices generated by particular cameras, I understand that the Garda analysis service supports all functions of the Garda national roads policing bureau. This includes providing the evidence base for roads policing operations, reviewing and analysing operations and providing ongoing support to external stakeholders in the area of road safety.

Further action is being taken in respect of making better or more effective use of static speed cameras.

The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who is centrally involved in this, published Ireland's first national safety camera strategy in April this year. Officials in my Department were represented on the working group that developed the strategy. The strategy sets out a partnership approach to camera deployment and enforcement between An Garda Síochána,

Transport Infrastructure Ireland and the National Transport Authority. This strategy seeks to define the optimal structures and partnerships across State agencies for delivering camera-based enforcement systems on Irish roads going forward, thereby reducing unsafe driver behaviour.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister. I wholeheartedly agree that these cameras are essential, vital and necessary and play an important role in road safety but we need fairness. We need these cameras to be operated fairly. The Minister cannot tell me there is not a problem when one camera in Glenmore, County Kilkenny is reading speeds for 30,599 fines, another camera read 3,000, some cameras read approximately 1,000 and one in Galway read 397. A person does not need to be a detective to understand that 30,599 fines from one camera indicates there is a problem. Can we have an independent review of this to investigate and interrogate why this is the case? People have said all along that they do not have a problem with the cameras but the signage is the problem. They are being captured and entrapped by these cameras. There is a major problem and it needs to be investigated.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is hard for me to contest that the figures indicate there are aberrations in different parts of the country. When the figures were presented to me, I asked the Department why a greater number of fixed charge notices are being issued by two particular cameras and one list of cameras than by others. I do not have an answer for the Deputy at present but I have asked officials to inquire into it. Maybe there is a road people speed on consistently. I do not know the answer but I will look at it and I will ask officials to inquire into it because there is a significant deviation between the notices being issued by cameras in one area and those in other areas. I do not have an explanation for the Deputy but I heard what the Deputy said and I have already asked officials to look at it.

Deputy George Lawlor: I welcome the Minister's comments. I am not campaigning for people who are speeding to have their fines rescinded. There is a problem with the signage, particularly in Glenmore. People who are driving in a 100 km/h zone arrive at an 80 km/h sign and are almost immediately captured by the camera and not given a chance to obey the law. People who were driving below 100 km/h and were captured by this camera, many of whom were decelerating, should be fairly treated. This one camera generated €4.9 million in revenue in 11 months. It is off the charts. It needs to be seriously investigated. Court cases are being taken because people have lost their licences as a result of this camera in Glenmore in particular. It is beyond the pale to think we are penalising people unfairly. They must be treated justly and if it comes to it, their fines and points must be rescinded.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I assume people who receive fixed charge notices for speeding are speeding, - hear me out on this - but it may be the case that they are given insufficient time for the change of speed limit from one area coming into another area. I will look at that. I cannot give the Deputy a categorical answer about the reason for this at present but being frank, looking at the data, it seems unusual that two cameras seem to have so many more fixed charge notices emanating from them than others. I do not think it is because people are safer drivers in one area than in another. I suspect the reason is the positioning of the camera, perhaps coming out of an area that permits a faster speed limit into an area that is perhaps very close,

with a slower speed limit. That could be the reason for it. I have asked because the figures jumped out at me when I saw them.

EU Presidency

5. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the impact the EU Presidency will have on the availability of the Garda fleet to service our communities, particularly DMR west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49649/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: It is apt for me to ask this question on the day that is in it. It is particularly about DMR west, which includes Clondalkin and Lucan Garda stations. I have a particular interest in the availability of Garda cars and the Garda community bus.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Today is an important day for Ireland. It is the first day of the EU Presidency. It is an important function for Ireland. We want to do it well. As I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, it is a big security challenge for An Garda Síochána. Today, the President of Ukraine was here. A huge amount of security was required for his arrival. The Deputy will permit me to take the time to commend the Commissioner and An Garda Síochána on their work today. It is challenging when a figure with as high a profile as President Zelenskyy arrives.

At present, the Garda fleet is the largest it has ever been. There are 3,680 vehicles distributed throughout Garda divisions and specialist units. However, in the months leading up to the Presidency, An Garda Síochána scaled up its overall fleet capacity. We have moved up fleet capacity for the purpose of the Presidency. It is not as though the fleet is being dispersed because of the Presidency. The scaling up has been the addition of 78 cars, 75 motorcycles and 12 mini-buses.

With respect to vehicles assigned to the Deputy's region, 125 vehicles are currently assigned and available to DMR west. This allocation has increased in recent years, as only 101 vehicles were assigned to the division in 2021.

At the end of May, there were 772 gardaí assigned to DMR west. Some 75 probationers have been assigned from the two attestations held this year. That is the most for any division in the country. If other Deputies were in that position, they would be very happy, because, as the Deputy will be aware, most of the time when people ask me about Garda probationers, they are looking for them. Some 75 have gone this year to DMR west and a further attestation is coming later in July. These gardaí are supported by other national specialist units and by the 63 Garda staff assigned to the division.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister. DMR west is a huge area. It covers Blanchardstown, Clondalkin, Lucan, Saggart, Rathcoole, Brittas, Palmerstown and the junior Minister's area, Ballyfermot. It is a wide area so we need more than 125 cars. I would like to see that scaled up.

I raised a situation here last year that despite having these 125 cars, on one occasion last year, only one Garda car was available to cover the Clondalkin, Rathcoole, Newcastle, Saggart and Ballyfermot area. On that particular night, there was a serious incident, because of which

the car was tied up, and that meant that calls in that area went unanswered. The Garda car did not call out. I have concerns about that.

I asked in the question - I know it was not in the written part - about the availability of the Garda community bus to residents in DMR west during the EU Presidency.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Garda community bus will not be used for any Presidency activity so there will not be any impact on it.

On what the Deputy said about the evening where there was only one car, that may have happened but the resources there now are significant. As I said, 125 vehicles are assigned to that division. The Deputy mentioned it is a large division. There are Deputies here representing Kerry and Donegal.

Deputy Mark Ward: It is about population size as well.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They look at the different sections of Dublin and wonder why they are not getting more of the fleet as well.

Deputy Mark Ward: It is about population.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The most important thing is that we have resources. I got a lot of good resources for An Garda Síochána under the national development plan. A huge amount of money is available. I want to see it spent. I want to see the fleet increase and we are seeing it increase. That will be of benefit to the people in the Deputy's area and throughout the country ensuring they can see gardaí in their communities. The most important thing the Deputy and I want to see is gardaí out in communities because it gives a great sense of confidence to people.

Deputy Mark Ward: I respect that I only mentioned the Garda community bus at the end of my question. I got a response this week from the Garda station saying the DMR west Garda community bus will be unavailable from the end of the month for the rest of the year due to the requirements of the EU Presidency. I met two groups in the area recently, the Quarryvale Butterflies and the Rowlagh women's hub, which are campaigning for an additional bus. The bus that was available was in Blanchardstown, across the River Liffey, and we have managed to get a new bus for that area, which we will use and share. The women were delighted and are still going to campaign for the additional bus.

They are really disappointed with the response I had to send to them this week indicating that the new bus we were getting for the whole of the DMR West was going to be taken for the EU Presidency. We are back to square one with no bus available. This bus is vital for community groups but also for building good, positive relationships with the Garda. I ask that the Minister do everything in his power to restore this bus and also look at funding for an additional bus for the area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am sorry that I was not aware of that. I will certainly follow it up. I do not know why a community bus is needed for the Presidency. I do not see the Commissioners going around in a community bus. It is something I will look into.

On the funding, the Deputy might agree it would be preferable if the community had its own bus as opposed to having to use the Garda bus. As he will know, applications can be made to the community safety fund. The Department of rural and community development also has funds available. We will look into the matter and I will raise the issue of the bus. If it is not available for the six months of the Presidency, I am disappointed to hear that. I hope an alternative mode of transport can be provided for that period.

An Garda Síochána

6. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if his Department will consider introducing a statutory indemnity for gardaí who are acting within reason while pursuing persons driving scramblers and other vehicles recklessly and illegally. [49644/26]

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raise again the issue of scramblers. We all know responsibility for this is across the Minister's Department and that of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. We need to get to grips with this problem. We need to take back our streets from scramblers, which are being deployed by criminal gangs as a method of muling drugs and intimidating communities. I warmly welcome the enactment of Grace's Law but, on its own, it is not enough. We need to follow up with enforcement of this law. In that context, will the Minister consider implementing a professional licence or a statutory indemnity for gardaí who act reasonably in the pursuit of scramblers?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with everything the Deputy said about scramblers. We need greater enforcement, and I believe that is happening. The tragic death of Grace and the enactment of Grace's Law was a seminal moment that really changed the attitude of this House and the body politic to how we deal with scramblers.

Already in 2026, over 1,000 scramblers and e-bikes have been seized by the Garda. That is considerably up on the figure for last year. I want to see that continue. I have spoken to the Commissioner. He has said to me, and emphasised publicly, that he wants to see a much more robust response from An Garda Síochána, and we are seeing that. Obviously gardaí need to use their discretion when it comes to whether to pursue a scrambler. The most preferable way of dealing with this is through technology. Drones would be a great mechanism to identify where somebody on a scrambler is going. There may be occasions when it is appropriate for gardaí to start off in pursuit but if something goes wrong and an innocent bystander is injured, very serious questions will be raised about why that happened.

I agree with the Deputy on the proposed changes to legislation. As a brief entry into it, I remind him, though I am sure he knows, that in the UK, under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, there is a separate protection for police officers when it comes to dangerous and careless driving. The provision included there is that a police officer will only be liable for the offence of dangerous driving if "the way the person drives falls far below what would be expected of a competent and careful constable who has undertaken the same prescribed training". It is something the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I are looking at.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome the Minister's response in that regard but the suggestion made is only one of a suite of measures to combat this reckless carry-on. We need more accountability from importers of scramblers, more Garda pursuit training, more intelligence gathering and more community involvement in handing over intelligence to Garda authorities. Police services in other jurisdictions are provided with training on scramblers to pursue and apprehend people riding scramblers. This Government must urgently support the Garda, not just with legislation but with the wherewithal to pursue, apprehend and prosecute those involved. The courts must also take a very serious view of this behaviour and back our gardaí in their work.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. This requires a multifaceted response. It requires a policing, criminal justice and youth diversion response to ensure we get kids and teenagers away from scramblers and involvement in criminal activity and divert them towards sport or something that is positive for them. Last Friday, I was in East Wall in Deputy Gannon's constituency to see a place where there is a proper scrambler course. That is where they should be used, rather than on the roads or other public places. The message is getting through but the most important thing is strong Garda enforcement, so people who are in public places on scramblers have their bikes seized and retained. I hear what the Deputy said about importers as well. That is something that needs to be looked at. There are trade policy issues in respect of that but it needs a whole-of-government response.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Minister again. We must act with a comprehensive suite of measures, as he said, and we must make rapid progress on this. I know what he said about thousands of scramblers being seized by gardaí but there are still many on our streets endangering the public, so we must act with speed.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. There needs to be enforcement and there is more enforcement. That is why we are seeing more scramblers and e-bikes seized. There needs to be more of that. People need to be aware that if they are using a scrambler on a public road or in a public park, it will be seized. That is the great advantage of Grace's Law. If gardaí see someone in a public place on a scrambler, they know they can seize the bike because it is unlawful activity. I am constantly talking to the Commissioner in respect of this. He is very strong on ensuring we do not permit communities to be terrorised by young people on scramblers. Those bikes need to be seized. We also need to strengthen our legislation. The word is getting out there, though I have no doubt it is still happening, that enforcement is up. We also need a societal response to it that says it is socially unacceptable, as well as unlawful, for people to be on scramblers in public areas because they are endangering their own community.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 7 taken with Written Answers.

Prison Service

8. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration his views on the fact that there are currently no dedicated addiction nurses working in Irish prisons despite his Department estimating that seven in ten people committed to prison have addiction issues; and when he expects specialist addiction services to commence in prisons. [49882/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I commend the Minister on his visit to the Alfie Byrne Road on Friday. It was a source of great annoyance to me that he left such a great impression on the lads down there, so well done to him on that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Very good.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Back to the fighting. I want to speak to him about our prison services and the fact that we do not have any specialist dedicated addiction nurses within the Prison Service, despite over 70% of the prison population having addiction needs.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I had a very good time in his constituency and I also got a present of a Troy Parrott jersey-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: I hope he declared it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----which is going to be hung in the Department of justice, I am pleased to tell the House.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Brilliant.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We have not hired people known as addiction nurses since the mid-2010s. I do not want the Deputy to think - I know he does not think this - that because of that, there are no services. There was a change in how we deal with addressing the addiction needs of people in custody. To use a word that is sometimes overused, the Prison Service adopts a multidisciplinary approach to it. This includes nurses, general practitioners and psychologists, supported by in-reach mental health services and addiction counselling services delivered by Merchants Quay Ireland. Merchants Quay Ireland plays a huge role in the context of the role the addiction nurses used to play. It currently provides 19 addiction counsellors, with one vacancy in Cork Prison. In addition, Merchants Quay Ireland has recently introduced six project workers and two prison recovery educators.

To support rehabilitation, reduce reoffending and facilitate successful reintegration into society, people in custody have access to a broad range of clinical and rehabilitative interventions. These include opioid substitution treatment, counselling, harm reduction initiatives, peer-support programmes and psycho-educational services delivered through prison education units and the prison television channel. Merchants Quay Ireland also delivers the national treatment and rehabilitation programme, which is based in the medication unit at Mountjoy Prison. The Irish Prison Service also works closely with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, which provide ongoing support across the prison estate.

As I said, the Prison Service has not employed addiction nurses *per se* since the mid-2010s. The historic approach of having a narrow and focused resource has been superseded by the prison primary care team and supporting agencies.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am correct in saying that the programme for Government includes a commitment to recruit addiction nurses. The last addiction nurses left in 2016. We have a problem in our prisons. People are going in there with addictions. Over 70% of the prison population, or 4,000 people, entered prison with some form of addiction. The Minister knows our recidivism rates. Almost exactly seven out of ten people who go into prison will reoffend within three years. A large part of that is precisely because the addictions with which they went into prison are being compounded, in many instances, and there are certainly no recovery options. I do not doubt for a second that Merchants Quay Ireland is doing good work within our prisons, but its representatives have also said continuously that, actually, the supports available are not commensurate with the needs they are meeting while they are in there. There are also any number of reports that call for specialist addiction nurses going in, which are different from general practice nurses because the skill level is different. Comprehensive addiction assessments, and management of withdrawal and medication, can be offered by an addiction nurse. All of these are specialist skills.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have been to 12 of our 13 prisons. I am aware, having spoken to prisoners, prison officers and prison management, of the issues of addiction in prison. However, I also want the Deputy to be aware that there are some success stories as well. There is a lot of good work being done in the prisons in training and getting people off addictive substances. There is success there. The real difficulty is with people who are in for short terms. Even if they get a certain amount of recovery in prison, when they get out they get back on to the appalling vista of addiction. There were six addiction nurses employed by the Prison Service in 2006. However, they had all either left the service or moved into general prison nursing posts by 2016. As I said, the role of addiction nurses has now been superseded by the prison primary care team and supporting agencies. The Irish Prison Service actively reviews the need for addiction nurses. However, there are no plans in the short term to recruit dedicated addiction nurses.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Minister might want to check the programme for Government in terms of the plans in relation to that, but okay. We have a profound problem when it comes to our prisons. I do not doubt for a second that there are some success stories, but that is by no means the norm. That is actually a failure of opportunity because we talk about the people going into prison for absolute reasons, but while they are there, there is an opportunity to ensure that when they come out, they do not continue the hurt that led them there in the first place. That does require intensive treatments for addiction. At the moment in our prisons, clearly, that is not being met. I do not doubt the work the Minister mentioned by Merchants Quay Ireland. However, that is the moment of intervention when we can actually prevent the follow-on hurt that is coming from a recidivism rate that is extraordinarily high because the addictions are not being dealt with in there. I can reference any number of reports that talk about the need for addiction specialist nurses, the most recent being the Crowe report on prison healthcare in 2022. We need to reflect on the absence of those specific specialists in our prisons.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are a lot of services there providing assessments and care planning, evidence-based interventions, including support for opioid substitution treatment, detoxification and overdose prevention and helping people to access community services on release to reduce relapse and reoffending. There is a good amount of work being done within the Prison Service. There is obviously more that needs to be done. I fully appreciate that. Merchants Quay Ireland is doing a very good job. There is a real challenge in the prisons in terms of trying to deal with people's addiction. I would love to see more resources available to ensure that people can be weaned off addictive substances while they are in prison. The truth of the matter is that there is an opportunity. We do have to use it. I do not mean this facetiously, but there is a captive audience when somebody is in prison. We can try to work on them in the hope that they will not gain access to drugs while in prison. There is a lot of good work being done in keeping drugs out of prisons.

Housing Provision

9. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration whether a review has been undertaken of the long-term role and cost-effectiveness of modular accommodation centres established for persons under temporary protection, including a development (details supplied); whether alternative future uses for such facilities are being considered in light of changes to accommodation policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41558/26]

Deputy Michael Murphy: Following on from the decision to withdraw from State-contracted commercial accommodation for beneficiaries of temporary accommodation, to what extent has a review been undertaken of the long-term role and cost-effectiveness of modular accommodation centres, of which there are 11, including whether alternative future uses for such facilities are being considered in light of that change in accommodation policy?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. He is referring to developments in Clonmel. The Deputy has spoken to me before about that. I know it is an issue of concern to him.

The rapid build modular units, including those in Clonmel, were built to accommodate beneficiaries of temporary protection fleeing the war in Ukraine. In total, we have 654 units across 11 locations across the country, accommodating 2,640 people in family units of four with children. The long-term use of these units has always been an important aim of the rapid build project. These homes are durable units with an expected 60-year lifespan and are highly energy efficient. They were all developed in an environmentally friendly way.

The Office of Public Works, OPW, is undertaking a post-project completion report to which my Department has contributed. It is still being drafted and is not yet available. To determine the long-term strategy for the sites post temporary protection, we are starting a process of consulting stakeholders. That started back in March 2025 and is chaired by officials from my Department, including people from the OPW and the Department of housing. In tandem with the consideration of the feasibility of potential future uses, this work involves exploring planning regularisation at each site. There has been no final decision made yet on long-term future use as discussions are ongoing. We will explore all potential options within the local

areas. These options include social housing and lower-cost affordable housing, such as cost rental. Obviously, the residents there will not be required to vacate this accommodation until March 2027. To meet the conditions of the scheme, they can apply to the new temporary protection transitional scheme. I do not know if they will come within that, but that is an option for them. To date, full occupancy has been maintained with over 90 units relocated since the sites were first occupied. We have not reached a final decision on what will happen after March.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister. I want to focus on Clonmel. As he said, there are 654 units at the national level, of which 82 are in Clonmel. From the very outset, not all, but the vast majority of people understood that these modular homes were built as an emergency response to the war in Ukraine. They accepted that such extraordinary circumstances required extraordinary measures. I am somewhat concerned, though, that there is no final decision on the future of these sites despite that multi-agency process the Minister referred to, which has been under way since 2025. What I am really looking for is an assurance that consultation will take place with the local authority, the locally elected representatives and, in particular, local communities living close to the development. I would really welcome the assurance that engagement and consultation will take place.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I think that has to happen. These have got the support of the Deputy, other local representatives and the community. There needs to be engagement, and that engagement needs to continue. There are also units that can be used. As I said, they could be used for social housing or other purposes. Obviously, we will also take into consideration any suggestions the Deputy or other local representatives have in respect of them. There is uncertainty at present because of the ongoing temporary protection directive. It looks like it will be extended; it may be extended on terms, but it looks like it is going to be extended beyond March 2027. I do think, and I agree with the Deputy, that there needs to be a plan as to what we are going to use these very valuable and useful units for. Certainly, I believe there should be, and I want to see, consultation with the community before any decisions are made by officials within Government Departments.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I welcome confirmation that these are durable homes with a 60-year lifespan. Indeed, I further welcome the Minister's suggestion around social housing or perhaps cost rental. It would be helpful as well if that Office of Public Works post-project completion report is published, particularly in the interests of transparency.

The units in Clonmel were built at an average cost of €436,000 each. Taxpayers have invested many millions of euro. I welcome confirmation from the Minister that the people of Clonmel, together with Tipperary County Council local elected representatives, will have a genuine opportunity to shape the future of the Heywood Road modular unit site. That is key.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They did cost the State a lot of money. They are a valuable resource that we own and we want to see them used effectively.

The Deputy talks about Clonmel. There are 82 units in Clonmel accommodating potentially up to 328 people, but there are ten other sites around the country as well, some of which are even bigger than that in Clonmel. We need to have a plan for what we will use this valuable

resource for. They have a good lifespan. They are something that will be of great benefit, I would have thought, to local authorities or, indeed, the Department of housing for the purpose of providing accommodation for those who are in need of accommodation because they clearly are very suitable as medium-to-long-term accommodation units. I will certainly keep in close touch with the Deputy in respect of the matter. The Deputy can always come to me and raise the issue. I will certainly insist that there is engagement on it before any decision is made.

Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.

Family Reunification

11. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to outline the measures being taken to address ongoing delays in the processing of family reunification for critical skills professionals working here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49851/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Family reunification for people recruited here for critical skills is an issue I have raised here previously and it still has not been addressed adequately. I am constantly getting people into my office raising their situation with me where they are waiting for their spouse and children 18 months and more. It is very difficult on families. What immediate action can be taken to reduce those delays?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As the Deputy will be aware, Deputy Brophy has ministerial responsibility for this, but he and I have a close and shared view in respect of this issue. Obviously, we both fully recognise that so-called join family visa applications are very important for the people involved. I understand that people are eager to have their families join them in Ireland and I can appreciate why Deputy Moynihan, as a hard-working Deputy, or, indeed, any other Deputy in the House, is asked frequently by persons who have such occupations as to when they will be provided.

My Department operates seven overseas visa offices, as well as the visa office in Dublin. Processing times for these join family applications can take time. They can vary between visa offices. Most visa applications receive a decision within our published target times. Some applications can take longer, depending on the circumstances. Processing times are influenced by a number of factors, including the complexity of the application, the volume of applications received, and the quality and completeness of the information provided. It is important to recall these applications are screening processes. They require careful probing in order to establish that the person has a legitimate reason to come to Ireland prior to travel.

A critical skills employment permit holder, as I say, can apply for a join family visa at the same time as their employment visa. These applications can then be processed together and typically receive a first instance decision within the ten-to-12 week business target. People who make join family visa applications separately, will generally receive a first instance decision within the 12 month business target. In December 2025, the immigration service of my Department introduced online payment functionality to my Department's online visa system. This allows applicants to pay visa fees as part of the online application process. The initiative is being rolled out on a phased basis and is currently live in 40 countries.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: First, I acknowledge the headway that is being made on it. On the idea that most are within target, for many that is not their lived reality. To put it in context, these are the people who are caring for our elderly in our nursing homes, caring for us in our hospitals, maybe doing the NCT on our cars and maybe even cultivating our food on our farms, and they are not able to have their family around them. Many of them, Indians and Filipinos, who have been in contact with me on it are telling me of experiences of 18 months and more. That is a big stress and pressure on families. Is it a capacity issue to clear the backlog that is there? Can people who are waiting longest be prioritised?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Last year, I and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, introduced a new non-EEA family reunification policy. It sets out the rules that apply in respect of it. Every country in the world has a regulated system in respect of family reunification. It has to involve a system where there are rules in place. If you fit within the rules and you have the resources to bring family members over, it is permissible.

Part of the reason, I suppose, is that there are so many visa applications being received in the Department of justice. For instance, last year we received over 206,000 visa applications. That was an increase on the previous year as well. There are a lot of join family visas issued as well. In 2025, there were 14,599 join family visas. That was down on 2024. It was 17,000 that year. They have to be probed carefully. I cannot just say, "Give out the family visa".

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: It is right and proper that there would be proper checks and verification and a thorough examination of all of the different applications. The experience that I am hearing from my constituents is that it takes approximately 18 months or more. I understand that there is a target of 12 months. Even that target seems lengthy, and it is difficult for families. Is it the case that it is slow because there are not enough people to deal with the backlog? Is there a need for additional staffing to clear a short-term backlog and to prioritise people who have been waiting the longest? It is a pressure on those people who have been hired to do critical work in our communities. That pressure will often put them thinking on whether they should be going back home and leaving a skills gap that we need to fill here as well.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: A critical skills employment permit holder who applies for a join family visa at the same time as their employment visa typically receives a first instance decision within the ten- to 12-week business target. For stand-alone join family applications and those linked to general employment permits, the current business target for a first instance decision is 12 months. I know they can be frustrating. I assure anyone who has made an application for a join family visa that my Department is doing everything possible to progress these as quickly as possible. It is not an issue of resourcing within the Department. There are a lot of staff in the Department of justice working on this but it requires a lot of information to be procured, to be examined and to be assessed before a decision is made in respect of it. Through advocacy by Deputies such as Deputy Moynihan, the message is coming loud and clear to me and I will pass that back to officials in the Department that I want us to try to see the process expedited.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Visa Applications

13. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on his Department's progress in establishing a single application process for employment permits and visa applications; the progress that has been made to date by the interdepartmental group established to review this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48684/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Minister to provide an update on the Department's progress in establishing a single application process for employment permits and visa applications, the progress that has been made to date by the interdepartmental group established to review this process, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As the Deputy will be aware, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, is centrally involved in this. Government approved plans in May 2024 to introduce a single permit for people coming to Ireland to live and work. Currently, employment permits, visas and residency permits are processed separately. This is a significant technical project involving the integration of two IT systems. In the short term, we are streamlining the existing process by removing duplication, aligning online information and introducing a single payment model. These improvements will make the system simpler and more efficient.

In recent weeks, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, had a very productive meeting with the Minister of State with responsibility for employment, small business and retail, Deputy Alan Dillon, and his officials on this project.

The project is progressing through a phased development and scoping process, with ongoing cross-departmental engagement to support the design and testing of the proposed model prior to wider implementation. A pilot is also currently being scoped out to test the proposed new approach to delivering the single permit directive.

Changes introduced in 2024 also mean that spouses and partners of employment permit holders can now take up employment without requiring separate employment authorisation. These initiatives support the long-term sustainability of our economy while recognising the important contribution that legal migrants make to our society.

My Department is also leading the development of Ireland's first whole-of-government migration strategy, which I and Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, are working on intensively, and we hope to publish this strategy later this year. There is progress being made in respect of this. The Ministers of State, Deputies Brophy and Dillon, are centrally involved in it and I hope to be able to provide the Deputy with further progress reports on final timelines in due course.

Deputy Colm Burke: I raise this because one of the areas where I have had many people on to me is for those who are working in nursing homes. There seems to be a huge problem between work permits and residency permits. For instance, I had one case which I sent a parliamentary question on to the Minister, where the person made an application for an IRP card on 6 March and by 30 June - 16 weeks later - it still had not issued. I am concerned there is a lack of information for both employers and employees about the process. I have had cases

where applications should have been made well before the card expired, but many people are not doing that and there needs to be more information sent out by the Department.

However, I am concerned about the 16 weeks for an IRP card application that still has not been issued as of today.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That is a concerning period, but people sometimes leave applications until the very last moment and that is not good practice. It will create difficulties for them, so we need to encourage people who are applying for renewals to apply early.

As I said, an implementation team has been established jointly between my Department and the Department of Enterprise to commence implementation of the single permit model. This is really the solution to the issue, Deputy. The programme is being delivered on a phased basis in the short-term and officials are examining how best to re-engineer processes to remove duplication and scope possible technical solutions. A single approach to how work permits and visas can be processed is also being developed, with changes to include a single payment model.

I understand the Deputy's concern in respect of the delays, and obviously, this can apply to anyone in the House, but if there are issues with respect to applications they think merit bringing to my attention or that of the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, they may feel free to do so.

Deputy Colm Burke: Where it really affects my constituency is, taking Apple computers for instance, which is the biggest employer in the constituency, there are people from 90 different nationalities working in that facility and it is important that this information gets out to employers. The problem arising is the delays in the processing now. I outlined the case of 16 weeks, which should not be happening, but people are being advised they must apply and that it will take 12 weeks. There is then the whole issue of the period in which people can continue to work even where the card has not been renewed on time. That also needs to be looked at.

Until such time that we streamline the system and make it far easier for people to have both the work permit and residency permit and all the processes sorted, we will have people - and I have had several of them - who will be laid off work until the issue has been resolved, which is now causing problems.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is a challenging task from the point of view of the Department. I have been to the section of the Department dealing with visa applications, and there are huge numbers of people there; you realise the extent to which each application has to be considered and appraised individually. There is a significant number of applications coming in and they need to be considered individually.

I hear what the Deputy has said about Apple. Obviously, we want to ensure people who are here believe and feel they get an effective response from the public service in Ireland. In general, I believe they do. However, one of the consequences and downsides of being a TD is people only ever come to us problems. People who are happy with the systems in operation do not contact us to commend us on the service we provide. We only really see things when issues have arisen and there are failings in the system, but there are many successes also.

An Garda Síochána

14. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of gardaí in County Meath; if he is aware that County Meath has for years had the lowest number of gardaí per population in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48865/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): The Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and allocation of Garda resources. We are assured by the Commissioner that, when allocating Garda resources, consideration is given to commitments and undertakings outlined in the annual policing plan. The requirements of all Garda divisions nationwide are also taken into account, which include local and national crime trends and workloads, policing arrangements and operational strategies, local population and trends, and geographical area and size. Transfer applications, including welfare, personnel issues and concerns, are also taken into account.

Under budget 2026, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, secured funding of €2.74 billion for An Garda Síochána to support recruitment and staffing. This will support recruitment of up to 1,000 gardaí, 200 more Garda staff and additional members of the Garda Reserve. Significant initiatives have been taken to boost recruitment, which have been reflected in the numbers entering the Garda College, which was just under 800 in 2025.

As the Deputy will know, recruitment into An Garda Síochána has gathered real momentum and we are determined to ensure we have a steady pipeline of new recruits into the Garda College so that we can see more gardaí assigned all around the country. Interestingly, the most recent recruitment competition, which closed on 3 June 2026, attracted 4,115 applications. This brings the total number of applications received to join An Garda Síochána to over 15,000 since February 2025.

We are informed that as of 31 May 2026, there are 561 gardaí assigned to the Meath-Westmeath division. This includes 323 gardaí assigned to the Meath south and Meath north community engagement areas, which include Ashbourne, Kells, Navan and Trim.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: As regards those figures, it is 323 gardaí in Meath compared with 335 in 2020. The current figures are up a little bit on last year but, compared with 2009 and 2010, we have seen practically no increase. At the same time, we have had a very significant increase in population. The Minister of State outlined the type of consideration the Garda Commissioner makes in terms of allocation of resources, and one of them is local population and trends, and geographical area and size. There must be no weight on that consideration, if County Meath is anything to go by.

What efforts will the Minister of State make to bring County Meath up the ranking tables in terms of the number of gardaí per population, so that it is at least commensurate with other counties of a similar size?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Obviously, population trends are monitored on a continuous basis, but looking at what we are doing to ensure overall community safety in County Meath,

the Department is pleased to secure €8 million in budget 2026 for the national office for community safety to ensure the office carries out its functions, including its support for local community partnerships and the work on the national development of a national strategy for community safety.

Much of the Deputy's constituency is obviously rural. One of our success stories is Operation Thor. Several Garda operations are already supporting the plan, such as Operations Thor and Táirge, which tackle burglaries and theft from homes and retail crime, respectively.

10 o'clock

In recent years, An Garda Síochána has had unprecedented success in reducing and preventing burglaries through Operation Thor. In the ten years since Operation Thor began, burglary and related offences have declined overall, and the number of residential burglaries during the winter months of October to March have fallen by a remarkable 75%.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are 220,000 people in County Meath and there are 323 gardaí. Whatever way we cut it up, rural or urban, and the division between them, that is nowhere near enough. I have two specific points. Some of it is the responsibility of the Garda Commissioner. The resource allocation model has to be reflective of the growing population and of the demands in the community. One of the issues is the number of training stations. The number of stations that new recruits can actually be deployed to is limited. That has to be reviewed. The Minister of State has a target set out, and she referenced the annual service plan, of 14,820 sworn gardaí by the end of the year. Will she hit that target?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I take the opportunity to commend the gardaí on the street. We are seeing huge effort being put in gardaí, not just in Dublin city but on a nationwide basis. We can see the number of people going through Templemore and the standard of the gardaí coming out of Templemore is really noticeable. Population trends and community trends are always under review. We are using census data to ensure that populations are represented according to increases in the local population. This will be reviewed on a continuous basis. The Deputy's point is well made and I thank him for asking this question.

Domestic Violence

15. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the timeframe in which refuges will open in counties Cavan and Monaghan. [49803/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am taking this question on behalf Deputy Bennett. It is to ask the Minister for a timeframe in which we will see domestic refuges open in Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I recall when I started as Minister, Deputies Carthy and Bennett, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, from Fianna Fáil, and their fifth colleague-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: David Maxwell

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: David Maxwell as well. The issue is that there were no plans for Cavan and Monaghan. As Deputy Carthy now knows, the Cavan-Monaghan region is listed as a priority area for refuge development under zero tolerance. The capital assistance scheme, CAS, stage 1 application for a refuge site in Monaghan was approved by the Department of housing last October. Work is ongoing towards submitting a stage 2 application, which will include further detail and costings on the full extent of works that will be required. The CAS process, I regret, takes on average 75 weeks, with construction typically taking 15 to 18 months. Safe Ireland is the lead approved housing body on this development. This new refuge facility will include 12 independent units of refuge accommodation, along with essential ancillary services, thereby strengthening domestic violence support in the region.

Developments have been progressed with the support of Cuan. An interim refuge with five family units will open in Monaghan this year. Cavan and Monaghan county councils will allocate three units, to deliver three safe homes in each county this year, which will be run by Safe Ireland. All key stakeholders are working together to ensure there is a substantial increase in service across the Cavan-Monaghan region. Safe Ireland is working with the stakeholder group to create a solid infrastructure and a coherent connected response across both counties. An interim refuge with five family units will open in Monaghan this year. It will be run by Safe Ireland. It is being put in place in order to strengthen domestic violence supports in the region. I am conscious that we did not have plans a year and a half ago. There are now plans in place for Cavan and Monaghan. Progress has been made in respect of them. I cannot give the Deputy a date but he knows that an interim refuge will open in Monaghan this year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome that there has been progress.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When I was first elected as a TD and raised this issue, the Minister at the time disputed that there was a need at all. There has been quite significant movement. In fact, after the horrendous killing of Ashling Murphy, there was unanimous agreement in this House that every county should, at a minimum, have one refuge. I am holding Government to that. The process for delivering refuges needs to be speeded up drastically. The suggestion that from the beginning of planning to final completion stage could be three or even four years is far too long to deliver what should be a simple infrastructure project.

The second point I want to emphasise relates to the geography of Cavan and Monaghan. The distance from Blacklion at the far end of Cavan to east County Monaghan is a third of the width of the island of Ireland. It is unfeasible to suggest that one centre would cater for the entire two counties.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for acknowledging the progress that has been made. I want to ensure that we speed up the process. It is important that we have a good geographic spread of refuges and safe homes throughout the country. It probably will be the case that every county will have one but I am cautious about trying to adopt it as though it is just a county thing. It needs to be spread out in areas where, demographically, refuges are needed. I also repeatedly emphasised, and I am sure that the Deputy will agree, that refuges are short-term solutions to deal with women who have been subjected to domestic violence and

need immediate short-term accommodation. The ultimate solution is that the person who is the abuser is the person who should get out of the house as opposed to the woman having to get out of the house and end up in a refuge for lengthy periods. That is legislative measure I am working on too.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The difficulty when dealing with gender, sexual and domestic violence is that there is not a neat provision. That is why refuges are required. There is not a neat one-size-fits-all approach. I am aware, as I am sure colleagues are, of situations where it is not feasible and certainly not in the victim's interest to return to her home, and it is predominantly her home, particularly in rural areas. Peculiarities about the homestead or home parish need to be taken into account. We know there is demand from Women's Aid and all the organisations. In fact, Men's Aid tells us there is a need for men's refuge spaces too, although much fewer. We know there is a critical need. Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Ireland and all the front-line organisations have told us that there needs to be much greater capacity in terms of refuge spaces. As well as looking at demographics, we have to look at geography, particularly when dealing with counties like Cavan and Monaghan, where the public transport network is so deficient. We need a refuge in each centre. The timeframes we are talking about mean that we need to advance the second refuge now as opposed to putting it on the long finger.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Safe homes are very important too and local authorities are providing safe homes, which are places that can be used as safe accommodation for women fleeing violence. Monaghan County Council have promised three safe homes. It is the same with Cavan. There is a need for refuges. If we have more time to have a debate on this, we really need to look at the root causes of these issues as well. One thing that we will try to do in the Department for the next strategy is to do more research on why certain men get involved in domestic violence. I know people might say that we do not want to spend money on dealing with the perpetrators but we do need to research the perpetrators and find out why certain men are getting involved in violence in a domestic arrangement. People repeatedly tell me that online extreme violent pornography is having a distorting impact on young people. I am fearful about how that will develop in the future.

Question No. 16 taken with Written Answers.

Crime Prevention

17. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on the work in his Department to counter money laundering in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49236/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister for an update on the work of his Department to counter money laundering in the State. I am sure that, no more than me, he has been contacted by many people, particularly parents, where kids have been stupid, got messages on the Internet and fallen stupidly into being a money mule, or even other scenarios where they have fallen in with their friends and been used and abused to a degree. In some cases, it is small numbers but still significant, but in others, huge sums have been put through people's accounts.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. He asks an opportune question because last week, along with the Tánaiste, I launched Ireland's third national risk assessment on money laundering, terrorist financing and proliferation financing. Risk assessments are key in identifying the risks from money laundering and terrorist financing. There was a report that contains a lot of useful information. One of the things I was trying to do last week, and it is important that we emphasise it again, is that there are many commercial enterprises which are not fulfilling their money laundering obligations. If somebody comes into a shop with €10,000 in cash and they want to buy a handbag, piece of clothing or something like that, it should trigger immediate concern. There are statutory obligations on the part of the shop owner. That is an area that An Garda Síochána is concerned about, that a lot of money laundering is being done by purchasing expensive products. There was the introduction of a ban on cash payments over €10,000 and the extension of anti-money laundering laws to new sectors, including football clubs.

My Department's anti-money laundering compliance unit is engaging with the Central Bank on the establishment of the EU anti-money laundering authority, which will be vital to maintaining the stability and transparency of the EU financial system. On Monday, I signed the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) (Administrative Sanctions) Regulations 2026 into law, providing the anti-money laundering compliance unit with the power to impose administrative financial sanctions on trust or company service providers for breaches of the Act.

The Deputy mentioned the issue of money mules. People need to be aware that if something looks too good to be true, it generally is not true. They need to be really careful and cautious, because they will find themselves before the courts getting a conviction for doing something that is very serious.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister is right. It is about getting the message out there that as much as somebody might stupidly fall into this, the ramifications for their future life can be serious, as they should be. It is not only kids who are involved in this. We are talking about some highly sophisticated operations. There is huge money in the drugs business. We know the huge impact it has on individuals and communities. The impact on communities is the reason the Committee on Drugs Use came up with the recommendations that it has. We know what is happening at the minute is insufficient and is not dealing with the issue. That is the reality, no matter what the Minister's view is on decriminalisation. We have to get serious. We need to make sure we have the capacity to deal with everything from businesses to small operations that can build into big operations, where people were taking control of people's bank accounts, putting huge money through them and leaving them open to prosecution and whatever else.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: An Garda Síochána has a good record when it comes to organised crime. I was at an event last Friday to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the murder of Veronica Guerin. If we think about that, in terms of the organised drug gangs in Ireland, many of them have been taken out of action by An Garda Síochána. They went to Spain. They were then chased out of there. They went to the United Arab Emirates and they are being chased out of there. You cannot get away from the consequences of your actions. It is inevitably the case that somebody is going to take over. For as long as there is a demand for drugs, there is going

to be a business in drugs. We also need a strong message to go out that people who get involved in serious crime, in terms of organised crime, are going to face serious sentences. There are lots of people in prison for organised crime and drug dealing. They have been given lengthy sentences. I urge anyone who thinks they can make money easily by allowing their accounts to be used by others to reconsider. They will find themselves before the courts and, potentially, in prison.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all welcome the action that was taken after the death of Veronica Guerin. It is a pity it took that. I do not think there is anyone who has not welcomed the action taken against the Kinahans. We need to see more of it - quicker, better and faster. It is as simple as that. I have seen many instances of the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, taking houses or vehicles off people. Unfortunately, that is just the cost of doing business and they are back in operation the next day. As much as we are not going to police our way out of this situation, we need to deal with those serious criminals who are involved in violence and using vulnerable and younger people to clean their money. It is vital we get the message out there. There will have to be action against those who are doing this. The fact is that we need a huge level of support, including early family supports to deal with the underlying issues in some of these cases.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Criminal Assets Bureau has a good record. To go back to Veronica Guerin, her murder inspired the enactment of the proceeds of crime legislation and the establishment of CAB. The bureau has a strong record. Other European countries are interested in the fact that one can have a non-conviction based seizure process. People have assets taken from them which are the proceeds of crime, but it is on the balance of probabilities. We do not need to establish in front of a jury. Strong evidence is put forward by a chief superintendent. I commend CAB on the outstanding work it does. It is seizing a lot of assets. At the end of each year, there is a CAB auction online and one can see the types of products that have been seized, including watches, expensive handbags and clothing. The money that CAB generates as a result of the auctions is significant, although obviously it is just a fraction of the money that was spent on these goods. It shows the level of money that is involved in drugs. That is why we need a consistent message in respect of drug gangs, that the State will stand up to them and take them out.

Questions Nos. 18 and 19 taken with Written Answers.

Child Protection

20. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration his views on the prevalence of childhood exploitation into crime; and his plans to address this issue. [49884/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is appropriate that we move on from discussing the successes of CAB and the evolution of how we target the drugs gangs. That has consequences in terms of how the gangs have tried to innovate. One callous activity they have engaged in is the coercion of children into crime. I do not believe eight- and nine-year-olds were being used as drug

smugglers 30 years ago. Today, the prevalence of that is substantial. I want to talk about the coercion of children into crime.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: The Deputy, the Minister and I all represent inner-city Dublin constituencies and we know very well the devastation the grooming of children into criminality has on all our communities. I have delegated responsibility for youth justice, and it has been a priority of mine since before my appointment to the Department of justice. I am very glad to take this question today.

The Government's Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 creates a whole-of-government framework to address the challenges around children and young adults' involvement in the criminal justice system. It assesses how we can stop young people from becoming recurring adult offenders, as the Deputy described. Among the key actions within the strategy is targeting harder to reach groups, including those subject to grooming and coercive control by criminals.

An interesting programme the Deputy may be aware of is the Greentown programme, which aims to disrupt the grooming of children into network-related criminal activity by adults and provides children with meaningful and practical routes out of these networks. It is made up of four strands, namely, an intensive family programme to help with parenting and general family functioning; providing young people with pro-social opportunities; supporting communities to withstand gang and network influences; and targeting groomers and disrupting their networks. The first Greentown programme progress report from 2023 found that there have been notable improvements in reducing the influence of criminal networks in the trial site communities, including that children and families are better enabled to withstand the powerful attraction of network membership and to make pro-social choices. I am hoping the Greentown project will be rolled out across our communities in the future. Support is provided from An Garda Síochána and expert youth justice services specialising in family support and engaging with hard-to-reach young people.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I can hear the Minister of State's passion for this area. The problem is that in 2017 or 2018 the Greentown project, in its first national survey, found that at any one time over 1,000 children in the State were being coerced into crime. Between 2018 and 2026, every metric has got worse. I have to assume the coercion of children into crime has got worse. The Greentown project has good outcomes but it is very small and geographically based. I would like to see a national programme that is funded, seeks to prioritise prevention and recognises that the factors that make a child vulnerable to be coerced into crime are often the conditions in which they are born, with poverty foremost among them.

Even today we are talking about young people on scramblers, which is very dangerous and we need to cut it out, but a lot of those young people have been coerced into using those scramblers to sell drugs. Only 17 charges have been made so far under Fagin's law. What are we going to do to improve how we go after people who are targeting children?

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: As the Deputy knows, we are coming up to the end of our youth justice strategy and we will have a new strategy as of the end of 2027. The Greentown project has been extended. The extension of the programme has reduced the influence of criminal networks on children at risk of involvement in crime and improved the likelihood of pro-social

outcomes for children who are already involved in criminal networks. We know that investment in these programmes does work, albeit in pilot and smaller models. I agree with the Deputy that this will have to be rolled out across the country, especially across large urban areas. We know, because we represent those areas, that that is where we have the problem.

The Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024 makes it an offence for an adult to compel, coerce, direct or deceive a child for the purpose of engaging in criminal activity or induce, invite, aid, abet, counsel or procure a child to engage in criminal activity.

On CAB and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister of State.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Sorry.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State will be back in. Deputy Gannon, finally.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024 was welcome but there are flaws in the legislation in that it has the expectation built in that a child would be the witness to their own coercion. Too often we do not see children and young people who are being coerced into this as victims even by the very fact that we talked about the recurring offences. We separate ourselves from the fact that these children are literally being coerced into crime. Sometimes we assume it is through money or financial gain but it is often through the threat of violence to them or their parents.

This is a national problem. It extends beyond urban areas into more rural parts. Much of the anecdotal evidence we have on the level of drug-related intimidation in the State involves children being used to carry out the violence. It is at a level where it has to be an extensive national priority to prevent this, to convict those who do it and to stop a network of young people being dragged into this through violence and coercion.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I agree with the Deputy. Words like "multidisciplinary" and "multidepartmental" are often used very flippantly but education has a piece, as do criminal justice and the HSE. We, as legislators, have a piece. Supporting our local community is a part of the puzzle. We all must play our part in it.

On what we can do from a community point of view, I have been to many of the projects in Ballyfermot like skate parks. The Deputy will be aware of the community safety fund, an annual grant fund that supports short- to medium-term projects which allow for the proceeds of crime to be directed back into communities. We have seen some really successful projects around the country where we use ill-gotten gains to fund innovative local projects aimed at building stronger, safer communities. I know Deputies from across the House welcome this. Since the fund launched in 2022, it has supported 127 community safety projects nationally. Over successive years the community safety fund has expanded in both reach and impact, supporting projects addressing youth engagement, domestic and gender-based violence, restorative justice, substance misuse and antisocial behaviour.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.24 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 2 Iúil 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.24 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 2 July 2026.