



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	574
Data Centres	574
Energy Prices	576
Data Centres	580
Data Centres	582
Environmental Policy	584
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	587
Climate Change Policy	587
Fuel Poverty	589
Data Centres	592
Environmental Schemes	594
Waste Management	596
Electricity Grid	598
Climate Action Plan	600
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	602
Disabilities Assessments	602
Disability Services	604
Childcare Services	607
Departmental Policies	608
Children in Care	611
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	613
Departmental Legal Cases	613
Childcare Services	615
Disabilities Assessments	618
Parental Leave	620
Childcare Services	622
Public Sector Pay	624

Early Childhood Care and Education	626
Disability Services	628
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	630
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	643
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation.....	645
Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026: First Stage	657
National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026: Second Stage	659
National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee	697
Energy Policy: Motion [Private Members].....	697
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	730
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	731
Public Transport	731
Agriculture Schemes	735
Personal Injury Claims.....	738
Online Safety.....	740
School Costs.....	743

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 17 Meán Fómhair 2026

Thursday, 17 September 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin Teachta Michael Healy-Rae.

Danny, as you are here in the Chamber, I just want to pass on my best regards to your brother and to condemn outright what happened yesterday in Dublin. I am very sorry for him, for yourself and for your family. I wish him a speedy recovery. He is a tough guy and I know he will get through it. This should not happen. It should never have happened. I just wanted to say that to you.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Thank you, Minister.

Data Centres

1. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will report on the demands data centres place on Ireland's critical infrastructure and the plans to increase this demand; if he is satisfied with our infrastructure's ability to withstand this increased demand; the way in which this will be paid for; the contributions data centres have made to finance existing and increased demand; his views on whether access to this infrastructure should operate on a first come, first served model; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65942/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: This question is about data centres and the demands being placed on the grid. We introduced a Bill yesterday about the prioritisation network. Can the infrastructure that we have withstand the increased demand coming from data centres? Will the Minister accept that public infrastructure should be given priority for housing, water connections and electricity to deal with the scarce grid capacity ahead of the new data centre developments?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. This is our core energy-intensive industry. Data centres are fundamental to Ireland's position as a leading global hub for digital and technology-driven enterprise. They form a critical part of the State's digital infrastructure, supporting activities including cloud computing, artificial intelligence, financial services and public sector digital services. Their economic footprint is substantial with €104 billion in gross value added - that is about 20% of Ireland's economy - enabled by data centre-dependent sectors. Approximately 183,000 people are working in Ireland's technology sector with around 19,000 jobs directly in the data centre industry.

While Ireland has attracted some of the best data centre and tech companies in the world, the integration of large-scale demand on our grid must be facilitated in a sustainable way. The Government's large energy user action plan, LEAP, will progress a plan-led approach for future energy-intensive industry which will unlock investment and innovation in Ireland's renewable energy sector, maximise wider benefits in jobs and skills across Ireland's regions and ensure that the cost of developing additional infrastructure is borne in a manner that is fair. This is being reinforced by unprecedented grid investment of up to €18.9 billion, and that is beneficial to our whole economy and to our society.

Alongside LEAP, the CRU large energy user connection policy establishes a sustainable connection pathway for new data centres that manages demand by requiring generation and system support, addressing security of electricity supply and network constraint considerations, and promoting Ireland's renewable energy ambitions by bringing 80% of new energy demand for any new data centre connection through renewable sources.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply. I note what he says about the economic footprint and the necessity for a plan-led approach. I will come back to that in some of my later questions. However, we have had and continue to have a first-come, first-served, *laissez-faire* attitude, and some larger energy users have been facilitated in hoarding connections that they have. Some housing developments, like the one in the midlands, that have tried to get connections have been put behind data centres. A significant proportion of the connection queue consists of speculative applications, and communities and other connections have been left behind. The European Commission last December said we need strategic prioritisation of scarce grid capacity. Will the Minister move away from the first-come, first-served attitude?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have to manage the demand that is there. Ireland's demand will grow and will double between now and 2050. That is why the grid investment programme is so important, and that we improve the resilience, distribution and capacity of our grid.

To get to the kernel of the Deputy's question, no housing development has not been connected because of a data centre. PR6, which is our investment programme, outlines all the various things we need to do across the economy and society, that is, the 300,000 new homes we need to build, industrial growth, economic growth and infrastructural projects like MetroLink that we announced yesterday. That will require further electricity demand. We want to drive that through renewables. About 50% of our electricity so far this year has been generated through clean renewable sources. We have doubled our wind capacity in ten years and solar is a major part of our energy mix now as well. That said, however, large energy user

demand has to be managed in a planned way and that is what the LEAP does. The large energy user, LEU, final decision from CRU ensures that happens.

Deputy Pa Daly: A lot of this comes from the admission by CRU that it could not have a prioritisation and had to deal with it on a first-come, first-served basis. At this time, when there are soaring energy bills and businesses are struggling with costs, we see that there are new proposals to give data centres access to cut-price gas infrastructure. The public cannot understand how the Government could justify asking ordinary families to pay more and more for electricity, heating and energy prices while facilitating further subsidies to and preferential treatment of some of the wealthiest and the largest corporate energy users in the whole State. For years we know that ordinary households and small businesses have been shouldering a disproportionate amount of energy taxation, network charges and energy costs, but at the same time the cost associated with expanding and reinforcing infrastructure for large energy users continues to grow. We see the amount of energy in the Dublin area, for example, that the large data centres are taking up. All we are calling for is fairness between the ordinary people who are struggling with their energy bills and the large corporate energy users.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I did make reference to the Bill that Sinn Féin published yesterday. As with any Bill, from wherever in the House it comes, be that Opposition or Government, I will look at it and do so in a positive way.

The network charges are set by CRU. From 2020 to 2026, the data centre sector saw an average increase of 175% in network costs. I do not set the network charges; that is just the reality. There is, though, an overall issue of affordability, which I know we will get to during the course of the morning, whereby we see elevated prices right the way across the developed world, including here in Ireland. That is where the work of the national energy affordability task force, which will conclude soon and report to me, is very important. We have to do our best to soften the blow of increases, particularly for households and small businesses, but how we get to a sustainable way of doing so is by accelerating renewable delivery and delivering the infrastructure projects we need, like the North-South interconnector.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Bogfaimid ar aghaidh go dtí an chéad cheist eile a bhfuil Teachta i láthair di, Ceist Uimh. 3. Tá sí ceangailte le Ceist Uimh. 6.

Deputy Pa Daly: Céard faoi Ceist Uimh. 2?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tá an Teachta as láthair.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Níl sí anseo.

Energy Prices

3. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will report on the recent energy price hikes; the measures he is taking to address this; if he will

reintroduce an electricity credit in budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65939/26]

6. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to discuss energy costs. [66297/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: It is interesting that the Minister mentioned the task force because I wanted to speak to him about the recent energy price hikes and what resources he is taking to address those. What will the budget say? Will there be an energy credit? Will the Minister commit that there will be no carbon tax increases? What other supports will be available for households facing soaring heating costs this winter?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 6 together.

I cannot announce the budget yet but I understand that energy will be an important part of it.

To deal with both the questions, we know the situation in the Middle East. That is having a serious impact on prices. That follows from the continuing illegal war in Ukraine, which has caused significant disruption to energy markets. I and the Government fully recognise the pressures the resulting high prices are placing on Irish consumers and businesses. We have introduced a series of measures to reduce fuel prices and further measures are under consideration through the energy affordability task force and as part of the budgetary process.

Specifically on fuel, the package of Government support measures, which now totals over €1.4 billion and which is the largest *per capita* in the European Union, is helping to reduce the cost burden at the petrol pump and diesel pump and assists key sectors such as agriculture, haulage and the productive sectors that are critical to keeping our economy moving.

A range of measures in budget 2026 also supported households, including the reduction of VAT on electricity and gas to 9% right the way through to 2030; enhanced social protection payments, in particular the extension of the fuel allowance payment to those in receipt of the working family payment, that is, about 468,000 households; and the €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration.

Very importantly, there has been a record allocation of over €640 million for residential and community grant schemes through the SEAI, allowing us to target 73,000 households this year. Why is that really important? It is because when we retrofit homes and businesses, we bring about permanent savings for those households and businesses.

I amended the grants earlier this year. We have seen a really significant increase in the number of applications. In some areas they have doubled because we have broken them down. You do not have to do just one deep retrofit. We brought in windows and doors grants, wall cavity and attic insulation grants and a heat pump grant of €12,500. To the end of August, we got 89,000 applications. That is more than in all of last year, so people are responding to the supports that are there. It is important from a climate perspective that we are reducing energy consumption and emissions from households and businesses, but critically it is decreasing costs. As far as we can estimate, a home retrofit can lead to savings of between €750 and €1,120 per annum on energy costs. These are real measures. If anything, during the course of

the budget I want to accelerate that and look at other areas we can help through permanent changes.

Other areas are under consideration in advance of the budget. The national energy affordability task force, NEAT, will feed into that, and we are in the middle of budget discussions right now. A big focus will be on continuing and accelerating the retrofitting programme. We have done approximately 287,000 homes and approximately €2 billion has been invested there since 2019. That is an area where we need to refocus our efforts and accelerate delivery. There are those who are struggling with energy. While the 90 days arrears figures have plateaued, they are still a concern. I will say to people that if they are in arrears they should ensure they engage with their energy providers and enter into repayment arrangements. No one who is engaging with energy companies will be cut off. We will have protections during the course of the winter. Our disconnection rates are absolutely miniscule, and rightly so. However, we have to continue doing everything we can to work to soften the blow of increases we are seeing right the way across the world and the European Union.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister mentioned some of the schemes like retrofitting and heat pumps. Does he accept that he is way behind on his targets? There is a crowd called Centrica, which, when the State sold off the family silver 15 years ago, bought Bord Gáis Energy. Centrica made a profit of only €814 million last year, which was way down from €1.55 billion the year before. Its energy section, Bord Gáis Energy, made profits of €72.5 million. They are the ones increasing their bills. We know all about the geopolitical conflict and all of that, but the Government has the resources to make extra direct commitments to people who are struggling, such as not increasing, or removing, the carbon tax on home heating oil in particular and dealing with other energy credits. With the windfall profits they are making, there should be extra charges and an extra tax on those windfall profits.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to talk about the price of green diesel. It has gone up to €1.60. There is no package in place for construction works vehicles, even though the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach promised it in early May and the Taoiseach reiterated it where the Minister is sitting now. He said that construction vehicles would be included. They are involved in construction of houses and roads and everything. The vehicles involved include rollers, diggers, graders, dumpers and teleporters. None of those vehicles have been included even though the promise was made. The Minister mentioned it himself. They have not been included. Since 1 September, farmers have been left hanging. That is why I did not vote for what the Government proposed in this Chamber on 28 August. Farmers and agricultural contractors were not included on 28 August. The Government has €100 million left over after some scheme. Where is that now? Who has it? Are they going to spend it and give it out? People have parked bigger machinery because they cannot afford to run it. That is going to have a detrimental effect.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I turn first to Deputy Daly and the area of potential windfall taxes on energy companies. That is something being discussed at EU-wide level. It was discussed in Brussels when I was there earlier this month. If there is an approach on that it will probably be a pan-European approach. The Taoiseach referred to it yesterday. The last time, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, approximately €200 million was collected. It is not going to

move the dial on energy bills, but it might give the State more in its armoury to make permanent changes to households such as acceleration of solar and things we are doing already.

I turn to Deputy Healy-Rae. I will answer the other one, but the scheme I am responsible for is the road transport support scheme, which is for the hauliers. There were more than 4,000 applications. More than 3,000 have been paid out already. We are working through the rest of them and there will be an appeals process once that scheme closes. Agricultural contractors were included in the original scheme managed by the Department and the Minister for agriculture. However, the Deputy is correct to say that the Government did agree on a scheme in relation to construction vehicles. That is being worked through at the moment. Again, that does not fall directly under my remit but as a member of Government, it is a Government decision that has been made. What we have been and are working to now over the coming few weeks are the measures we can take in the budget. One is about permanent changes and the second is on supports and what can be done there. We have to focus it on those who need it most. More than a quarter of Irish households receive direct fuel support payments. It is unquestionably a difficult time across the world with regard to elevated prices. We will do our best, but we are not going to be able to deal with every single cost increase.

Deputy Pa Daly: For the last part of this I want to focus on home heating oil. As the Minister knows, the prices for home heating oil have surged by approximately 60% over the past year. It particularly affects people in rural areas and people in older houses. A lot of those people have not had the resources or the funds to pay for solar upfront or to pay for retrofitting. They feel excluded from this scheme. People in those families need relief, which means reducing or removing the carbon tax on this home heating oil and reintroducing the energy credits worth at least €400 per household. They are the fairest approach. Everybody can benefit from it. Will the Minister commit to looking at that in the budget and making some real difference to the people living in fuel poverty?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Maybe that is what is wrong. If the Minister is not responsible for the construction industry, and Martin Heydon certainly is not because he is the Minister for agriculture, maybe that is where the problem lies. The facts are that the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach promised that construction and the vehicles involved in construction would be covered. Many of those construction companies were locked into prices they had for jobs at the start of the year and locked into contracts. The Tánaiste even mentioned quarries and processing materials. None of those people have got one bob yet. I am asking in the name of God - does the Minister think these people can carry on in the wind?

Green diesel has gone from 90 cent last January up to €1.68 yesterday. Everything I know is using green diesel. The Government has seen after the haulage, but I have to say that is the tax that they have paid. The Government did not find it anywhere else. It came from them and the Government is only giving it back to those people. It is the same with the people who are paying for green diesel. The Government will have to do something for them. Every machine involved in civil works, maintenance of roads and maintenance of waterworks is using green diesel and they have got nothing. How long more is it going to take to develop a scheme for them?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: First, we recognise that €1.4 billion of supports have been brought in already. I do not think anyone will dispute that.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am going to get to it. We have to put it in context. That is not a small amount of money. That is a major support and marked diesel was included in that in the context of the excise reductions.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It was 3 cent.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Actually, when you look at it overall it is approximately 7 cent per litre. In fairness, the question put by the Deputy relates to progress with the establishment of the scheme for construction contractors that are not covered under the other two schemes.

On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will make urgent inquiries with regard to the progress on that scheme. We provided significant moneys to the haulage sector, and rightly so. I was at the Irish Road Haulage Association's conference in Killarney in the Deputy's county the week before last and addressed about 900 delegates there. They are very important to our society and economy, as are construction contractors.

To get back to Deputy Daly's question, home heating oil is an area where we have seen significant increases. We have stated already that, in particular, there is a reliance in rural Ireland - not exclusively but the majority is in rural Ireland - on home heating oil. We are very aware of the substantial increases in that space. I, the Minister for Finance and the Taoiseach are working on proposals around that. We will work through that between now and the budget. The provisions that will be in the budget will be announced on budget day. We have not concluded the work on that. Suffice to say we are acutely aware of the issue around home heating oil and, as I mentioned already, the issue around accelerating the deployment of further grants to make permanent changes to households and businesses.

Data Centres

2. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will commission a report into the number of data centres the Irish energy grid and water networks can handle. [65223/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: My question is very simple. Will the Minister commission a report into the number of data centres the Irish energy grid and water networks can handle? It is incredible we are in 2026 still asking for a simple report on the capacity of the energy and water systems to handle the huge increase in data centres over the past ten years.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I answered Deputy Daly in detail earlier on the importance of ICT to the Irish economy. I want to put that in context. We have about 190,000 people working in the ICT sector, underpinned by data centres. It is an important part of our digital infrastructure and it is part of our large industrial energy use. It has to be managed appropriately.

EirGrid, as transmission system operator, is responsible for the operation and planning of the electricity transmission system. EirGrid balances supply and demand continually while also planning for Ireland's long-term electricity needs. Ireland has attracted some of the best tech companies in the world and some of the best data centres in the world. When considering their impact, we need to weigh wider economic benefits, including tax revenues, employment, broader digital infrastructure value and significant support and linkages provided to other high-value sectors of the economy. The Government and I recognise the need to balance those opportunities with the challenges being faced and we continue to work with the sector towards a secure and decarbonised energy future. The large energy user action plan, LEAP, which we published in January of this year, sets out a plan-led approach to planning to sustainable new energy intensive industrial developments. That is critical. Through LEAP, a range of large energy user development scenarios, including spatial considerations, will be assessed to inform policy choices going forward and to support a more integrated approach to a plan-led energy system across the system operators, the regulator and Government. Water usage management and conservation across commercial and industrial - that is, non-domestic - sectors, including data centres, is under the remit of Uisce Éireann. Uisce Éireann has advised that, overall, data centres are not a major driver of demand on the public water supply network. It is my understanding that they account for, on average, less than 0.3% of the water supplied by Uisce Éireann.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We have seen incredible growth in data centres. In 2015, 5% of our electricity use was by data centres. It is now 23%, is projected to grow to 30% in the coming years and will continue to grow even further than that. I know the Minister's and Government's argument for the red carpet being rolled out for data centres relates to the economic benefits they bring. However, the report the Government came out with in relation to that was essentially a work of fiction. The Minister talks about how many people work in the ICT sector here and says that is why we need so many data centres. That also is fiction because Sweden has the highest proportion of its workforce working in the ICT sector at 9%, yet only 3% to 4% of its electricity use is by data centres. Ireland has 6% of its workforce in ICT, which is significant and I am not understating it, but it does not mean we have to allocate 23% of our electricity use to that sector. Where is the comparability with what is happening in Europe? We are way off the scale with data centres.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: First and foremost, there is no red carpet being rolled out. The Deputy has acknowledged, to be fair, the significant employment underpinned by ICT in this country - high-paid jobs, good jobs and careers paths for many of our people. Ireland is at the leading edge of new technologies and we want to remain in that place. That said, we have to manage demand and supply. That is why the grid investment programme is critical. We have to get ahead of demand projections, and we will do that through renewables. The LEAP and the large energy user decision published by CRU are critical because any new connection will only be provided to a data centre or large user in that space who brings forward 80% of the energy through additional, renewable sources. That will be managed in a plan-led way. We published that earlier this year. That is the policy. It is not that anyone who applies to be connected gets connected. That is not the way it is done. That has been changed.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The LEAP would enable, potentially, 50% of our electricity to go to data centres in the coming years. While the Minister said 80% has to come from renewables, there is a six-year path to that happening. In those six years, they can be based on gas. Data centres are pushing up our energy prices, they are making our grid unstable and they will make it impossible to meet our climate targets, which should be a concern to the Minister. That risks us having to pay €28 billion in fines. There is no point in the Minister shaking his head. That is what will happen unless the Minister knows something different. Has he been told by Europe those fines will not be imposed on countries that have not met their targets? We have to work on the assumption there is a €28 billion fine coming our way in 2030. The Minister is playing chicken with the EU on this. If it makes us pay it, we will be in serious trouble.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The charge that the grid is unstable is incorrect. It is not. We have to be responsible in what we say in that regard.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We have had a series of brown-outs over the past number of years.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It might suit a certain political narrative of large energy users and big corporations against everyone else, eating up all our energy. That might play well on social media. There is a reality to managing economic growth. Why do we want to manage economic growth? For the good of our people, for jobs, for people's livelihoods, so they can pay their mortgages, so they can live well - that is why. This is part of our industrial policy. The LEAP sets out how that is done in a plan-led way. It is not a question of anyone rocking up and, as the Deputy puts it, a red carpet is put out. That is not true. That does not happen. I take it the Social Democrats want to see continued investment in our country. Maybe they do not but we do. We have to accelerate the delivery of grid infrastructure, which we are doing through PR 6. That will enable us to get ahead of demand projections. That is the reality. There is no cost of compliance agreed with the EU and no formula. None of that is agreed. Anyone bandying around figures of €20 billion or €28 billion is just incorrect.

Data Centres

4. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment in light of recent reporting on data centre energy consumption, water use, carbon emissions and their impact on household energy bills, if he is confident in the Government's current strategy and if he is proposing any changes to it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65969/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy should maybe replay my answer to the last four questions but I understand why this is an area of interest.

I thank him for tabling this question.

Our industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. I say this because we are not a large industrial nation. We do not make trains or cars. We do not have heavy industry here. Our heavy industry is ICT. Other countries in Europe have large

heavy industrial bases and use energy for these. Part of our competitiveness as a country, and our attractiveness, is because of the expertise of our people and the digital economy. A critical part of supporting jobs in the economy and future growth is supporting activities such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence and financial services, right down to public sector digital services.

The economic footprint that the ICT sector brings, which I mentioned earlier, and I am talking about ICT in general, is about €104 billion in gross added value. This is about 20% of Ireland's economy. It is significant but it has to be managed appropriately. The large energy user action plan is the way forward. We will always keep it under review. It is very clear now with regard to new connections that there have already been connection agreements. As mentioned earlier, about 23% of our energy is used by large data centres and large energy users. Going forward from the adoption of LEAP, it is very clear how new connection agreements would be granted. I do not grant them; they are granted independently of me, and rightly so. It all has to be balanced.

To answer the question directly, we published the policy and adhere to it. It is constantly kept under review. My big focus as energy and climate Minister is accelerating renewables, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and getting our bills down, while also ensuring that we can continue to attract indigenous investment and foreign direct investment.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: It might be a bit tedious answering the same question three times but there is a reason that the first question asked by each of three Opposition climate spokespeople has been on data centres. It is because of the level of concern that exists in the Opposition. We see around the world that people are waking up to the impact that data centres are having in their communities, from energy use to water use. The Minister spoke about industrial strategy. We hear time and again that we have no heavy industry here and, therefore, we can have a big data centre industry but the Minister for agriculture uses the exact same argument. He used it on the radio the other day when trying to justify no changes to the *status quo* in the agriculture industry. We cannot have it both ways. Even in Germany, where there is heavy industry and a lot of jobs attached to it, it accounts for about 25% of the country's energy use. We are going to exceed 25% over the next few years given the trajectory. This is why we are concerned and we just want to make sure the Minister is staying on top of it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Ahern is perfectly entitled to raise the issue. I welcome the fact it has been raised and note it has been raised by three of the Opposition parties. It is a matter that is appropriate for discussion. This is why, in fairness, when I came into this portfolio we looked at the situation and what existed before and moved forward with the large energy user action plan, which is a plan-led approach, looking at regions also. This is the appropriate way to do it. I mentioned to Deputy Daly earlier the PR 6 capital investment in the grid. This takes into account, over the next five- or six-year period, all of the growth that we need across various sectors. It also shows what we need to deliver infrastructurally, such as the north-south interconnector and the Celtic interconnector. It is a year late because of weather and other issues but it needs to be delivered. The acceleration of renewables is critical. In the first five or six months of this year, about 50% of our electricity was generated through renewables. It is certainly going in the right direction, with solar being a major part of our mix. Offshore will be the next critical part and we are expecting planning decisions over the course

of the next few months to get these projects into construction between now and 2030. It will be a massive game-changer for the country.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Absolutely, and we are all focused on bringing through more renewable energy. Offshore wind is vital. Our issue on this side of the House is that the renewable energy we are creating at the moment is being gobbled up by data centres. We also know the impact this is having on energy bills. We also know how much water they use. I know it is a relatively small percentage but there is an unfairness at the heart of how they are treated, whereby ordinary people were asked to abide by a hosepipe ban this summer whereas data centres actually doubled their water consumption during that time. It is in situations like this that people feel the unfairness. They see they are not getting a fair shake. That is why we are bringing up the issue. We completely acknowledge the importance of underpinning jobs in the ICT sector but, on the other hand, we have to be concerned about some of the types of jobs these hyper-scale AI data centres are going to create and whether it is a good thing. We need to keep this under review. We spend half our time here talking about how we will regulate and rein in these big ICT companies while, on the other hand, we are doing everything we can to facilitate their continued growth. We have to watch this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Any connection application made goes through an independent process and it can be accepted or declined. Not every connection application that is made is approved. That is a fact, and if we look at how many new data centres have been built or delivered in the past few years, there are very few. Someone referenced Sweden. If we look at Finland, it has received extremely large data centre investment, to the tune of about €20 billion. Obvious we have to step through what is appropriate and what can be managed and manage overall demand, while really focusing on expanding our grid capacity for everybody, for the good of jobs and our people and, very importantly, to ensure we have more renewables in our system to reduce bills. This is where the focus is at. Deputy Ahern is perfectly entitled to raise the matter.

With regard to AI regulation, it is a debate that is current and that will continue. It is important that it is done appropriately.

Environmental Policy

5. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the additional measures he is taking to address the fact that the EPA has said that emissions are falling "far too slowly" (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65909/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: What additional measures is the Minister taking to address the fact the EPA recently stated emissions are falling far too slowly? Will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are committed to supporting emissions reductions in the built environment sector across the economy. That is what Deputy Daly specifically asked in the question. We are taking action every day to implement climate mitigation measures, which

also provide warmer and more comfortable homes and support energy affordability, energy security and energy sustainability for households and businesses.

The EPA's latest provisional greenhouse gas emissions inventory, published in July, shows the impact this work is having. Emissions fell in all main sectors in 2025 and emissions from buildings decreased by 4.7%. Overall emissions have fallen for a fourth consecutive year and they are at the lowest level they have been for 36 years. Emissions *per capita* are now at the lowest level since 1990. On foot of these record reductions, we are projected to achieve the first carbon budget and the sectoral emissions ceiling in the residential and public and commercial building sectors.

Looking forward, existing measures and additional measures are projected to improve. They will not get us to 50% by 2030 but the EPA projections to 2030 have improved across most sectors. This is a clear sign that we are making progress.

Very importantly, for four years we have been able to decouple economic growth from emissions growth. We are back to the 1990 emissions level but we have 1.5 million more people in the Republic, 1 million more homes and more than 1 million more cars. We need to accelerate this and try to bridge that gap. A big part of this, and Deputy Daly mentioned the built environment in particular, is made up of the grant schemes and the investment in retrofitting that I mentioned. There have been about 287,000 home upgrades.

We need to do more on the public built environment also. Some very good work is being done in our university sector and in hospitals and local authorities. It is our job to accelerate this. The next climate action plan, which I will publish well before the end of this year and intend to bring to Cabinet at the end of October, will cover this year and 2027. It will be a more focused plan and will identify strategic climate priorities that will shape our approach to closing the gap to 2030.

Deputy Pa Daly: My question was on what additional measures the Minister will be taking. He knows that many people feel excluded. In my view, there is not a just transition because people cannot afford to get on a lot of these schemes. There is the risk of fines from Europe, of up to €28 billion, as has been said. The Minister also mentioned offshore wind.

I spoke with developers yesterday who told me it is unlikely that a turbine will be wet by 2035. We had a target of 5 GW. Clearly, that is not going to happen. Will there even be 1 GW in place by 2030?

We are way behind on solar energy too. The programme for Government outlined that there will be solar guidelines, but we are still waiting for them nearly one and a half years later. Developers, communities and people need to know and have clarity about what is going to be allowed into their community. Some of the solar developers work better than others. Some have better community engagement than others. Does the Minister have any views? Is he going to tell us when those guidelines will come in?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There were a number of supplementary questions there. The Deputy mentioned the accessibility of grants. That is what I changed earlier this year. We do not want to leave anybody behind. There are some questions later about the warmer homes scheme, which is the full 100% grant. We have done full deep retrofits, which are 100% grant-

aided, for close to 40,000 homes for lower income families. That is really important. I changed the grants earlier this year to break them down and I brought in the windows and doors grant. Previously, people could not get these grants unless they did a deep retrofit. The combined grant is €4,800. I doubled the heat pump grant to €12,500. Wall, cavity and attic grants were all increased. These grants are all accessible. It is not necessary to do everything together. With certain BER ratings for homes, it is possible to get the windows and doors grant with only one additional measure, like attic additional insulation. We are seeing people respond to that. I gave a figure earlier of well over 80,000 grant applications.

I always keep this situation under review in respect of whether there are additional supports - not increased grants - we can bring in. That is paid for through the carbon tax, and this is why it is important that the tax is used to make permanent changes for households. I responded to the Deputy earlier in relation to home heating oil. We are looking at it in advance of the budget.

Deputy Pa Daly: I am not going to speak too long about the carbon tax, except to say it does not work. It is also not ring-fenced.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is ring-fenced.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Government gives the impression it is completely ring-fenced, but it clearly is not.

Apart from committing not to have any more carbon tax increases, because people in poorer households are suffering much more than others because of the carbon tax, will the Minister consider solar energy guidelines? I ask him to answer this question because we have not got an answer to it yet. We see what is done in the Netherlands. It has a solar ladder that prioritises rooftop, followed by urban and industrial land, then brownfield sites and then agricultural land as a last resort. There is a more plan-led approach in Denmark, underpinned by strong local engagement, municipal-led site selection and a long tradition of community participation. Some of the solar companies work much better than others with their community engagement. I see that in the various developments happening around County Kerry, but guidelines are needed, as opposed to having communities depend on industry-led guidelines that the companies themselves operate to varying degrees.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the planning guidelines, work is being done on them. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is the lead on that process. Obviously, we feed into it.

I agree with the Deputy. Most companies in the development sector engage well with communities. After these questions conclude, I will be out in my own county, in Ballyboughal, for the opening of a very large solar farm up there. Solar energy is a very important clean resource. There are 3 GW of it in our energy system now. If we go back 11 years, there were approximately 2 MW. It has grown substantially. Households are responding as well. We have over 1 GW of rooftop solar energy installed and it is having a significant impact in reducing people's bills. I want us to do more on this. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Browne, over the next few days and seek an update on the progress being made with the solar PV guidelines.

Deputy Pa Daly: Will they be in place by the end of the year?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not going to give the Deputy a date now, because I will have to talk to the Minister. We are feeding into that process. I ask the Deputy to let me get a timeframe that is realistic and I will come back to him directly.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Climate Change Policy

7. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the assessment his Department has made of the impact of the exceptionally hot and dry conditions experienced in Ireland during summer 2026 (details supplied); the additional measures he intends to introduce to protect and support communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65985/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy very much. The Government is committed to protecting Ireland's present and future generations with a whole-of-Government approach to climate adaptation underpinned by the 2024 national adaptation framework, NAF. This framework, as the Deputy knows, is co-ordinated by our Department via the national adaptation steering committee, NASC.

In 2025, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, published Ireland's first national climate change risk assessment, NCCRA. It identifies national climate change risks and ranks areas where action is needed to be prioritised to make Ireland more resilient to the impacts of climate change. We know from the NCCRA, and from the standardised climate data from Met Éireann, that more frequent and intense storms, longer periods of drought, rising sea levels, heatwaves, floods and coastal change are just some of the impacts of our changing climate to which we must adapt.

It is that data and knowledge which has underpinned the development of ten sectoral adaptation plans, SAPs, covering 13 key sectors such as agriculture, water management, flood risk management and health. Those plans were approved and published by Government in November 2025. In developing the plans, sectors were required to collaborate on cross-cutting issues and with climate action regional offices, CAROs, to ensure a cohesive approach at both the national and local levels.

In 2024, 31 local authority climate action plans, LACAPs, were published, which included adaptation actions to build resilience against flood, heat, and drought in our communities. Since 2022, approximately €19 million has been paid to local authorities by our Department to develop the implementation of their local plans.

A new adaptation taskforce, which the Minister established at the end of last year, provides for senior-level oversight and co-ordination of Ireland's approach to adaptation, including systemic delivery barriers and cross-cutting issues and risks.

In terms of water restrictions, which I know is one of the most important issues and the one that was very much in play during the most recent period of warm weather, reduced rainfall and impacts on ecosystems and river levels, these are matters for Uisce Éireann in the first instance and not ones for which the Minister has any function.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: We had a great summer here. We all enjoyed the bit of heat, but it is the second year in a row where we have experienced our hottest summer on record. Temperatures that used to be anomalies in the past are now becoming consistent. It is that direction of travel that we are really concerned about, because we all know it has such huge impacts on our society. This is the case in urban areas when it comes to a lack of green spaces. Even new apartment designs that are single aspect do not allow for draughts to come through apartments. We have huge societal issues that we have to grasp here. This is aside from the impact it is going to have on our agricultural sector, our growers and all of that as well. There will also be an impact on our biodiversity from the wildfires we saw across huge swathes of our mountains and forests during the summer. In my area in Dublin South-West, this included the beautiful Featherbeds, where we had disastrous wildfires. We need a co-ordinated approach. The Minister of State spoke about local authorities, but what is the co-ordinated approach?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy has got it, as we have. The challenge is real. We have moved to a point where the doubters in relation to climate change are starting to understand that it is real and that it is here. We have to put in place a systemic approach to addressing it in respect of the adaptation and mitigation measures we put in place. As I said, it is co-ordinated centrally. The involvement of the local authorities is the appropriate way. We have the sectoral plans in the first instance across the various areas. The Deputy identified agriculture and the impact climate change is having on that sector. We saw the intensity of that in the south east. There are, of course, issues that will have to be addressed there in relation to winter fodder, etc. It also, however, has implications for cities and towns. The Deputy identified those areas. This is why the local authorities will play a key role and it is why they are being funded by central government to develop their plans. As the Deputy also identified, this will also require a whole-of-Government approach, and that is the strategy we are deploying here.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: With El Niño happening next year, this situation is presumably going to get worse. We are likely to have another record heatwave next summer. Aside from the issues we spoke about earlier, there are also serious health implications here as well for vulnerable communities and older people. The 2023 climate action plan said it was necessary to develop a new public health heatwave plan and to seek to ensure more uniform planning country-wide for heatwaves.

That recommendation was not included in the 2024 or 2025 versions of the climate action plan. I wonder if it will be included this time around. Other things we need to look at are temperature regulations for workers, maximum working temperatures and a legal maximum it is safe for people to work at. Multi-departmental work needs to happen. We want to make sure it is being done.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The health issues are an important area, in particular for people with compromised immune systems or categorised illnesses and the elderly who find themselves depending on their accommodation. That is why, as I identified, there are 13 sectoral plans, one of which is health. That is clearly for the Department of Health and the HSE to work on, developing plans and procedures to mitigate, insofar as possible, the greatest impacts of significant increases in heat. It also has an impact on the supply of food and food security, which is an important component. That is why the agricultural piece is in there.

Local authorities and entities like Uisce Éireann need to be able to ensure that there is a ready supply of water, that we do not have to reduce usage and that we will not be left in a position that there is not a ready supply of clean water. All of the elements the Deputy identified are appropriate and right. A plan is in place. The sectoral approach is the way to do it. We believe the funding to local authorities from central government addresses the concerns the Deputy raised.

Questions Nos. 8 and 9 taken with Written Answers.

Fuel Poverty

10. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he aware of cases whereby people eligible for fuel poverty supports including the better energy warmer homes scheme go through the lengthy application process and are ultimately, on decision, only deemed eligible for minimal upgrading works due building regulations requiring a heating system that they do not have. [65809/26]

17. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Climate; Energy and the Environment if he is aware of anomalies with the better energy warmer homes scheme whereby people who are experiencing energy poverty and are eligible for upgrades, cannot get works done on their house due to current building regulations and heat loss issues. [65826/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Minister will have heard me raise this issue in the past. It relates to the better energy warmer homes scheme. The Government has taken significant steps to increase the number of people eligible for the fuel allowance. However, there will be people this winter who do not have a heating system in their home and have no mechanism to gain one because of recent EU regulations in regard to stand-alone fossil fuel boilers.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 17 together.

The warmer homes scheme aims to improve the energy efficiency and warmth of homes owned by people at risk of energy poverty by providing fully funded retrofits to households in receipt of certain Department of Social Protection income supports. I am pleased to say delivery under the scheme has ramped up hugely in recent years. Just over 3,000 homes were upgraded in 2019, compared with 8,100 last year, or 109% of what we had targeted. Between 2019 and August of this year, we did 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty. Budget 2026 provided €340 million for warmer homes, with a target to complete 11,500 homes this year. We must also remember the scheme has developed over time and it is delivering deeper upgrades that take longer to complete. The average cost per home

under the scheme in the first half of 2026 was €28,500. It is a significant investment, and rightly so.

In addition, under the national retrofit plan, a new, higher fixed-amount grant for attic insulation and cavity wall insulation was introduced for homeowners who are qualifying social protection payment recipients. That allows qualifying homeowners at risk of energy poverty to get these works done using SEAI-registered grant contractors on a shorter timeline. Eligible applicants can keep their place on the warmer homes scheme list. That is a change the Deputy looked for, which we were happy to make.

The success of the scheme has meant a serious increase in applications, with over 10,800 this year, up 52% on last year. A waiting list action plan is being developed. I met the SEAI only last week about this. The SEAI is also engaging with contractors to increase their output. Under the warmer homes scheme, upgrades recommended by the SEAI technical surveyor will depend on many factors including age, size and the type and condition of the property. Heating system upgrades, which the Deputy specifically asked about, can be recommended under the scheme in certain cases where the home is being insulated under the scheme and statutory major renovation obligations are triggered. Where more than 25% of the area of the walls is being externally or internally insulated, the existing heating system must be appraised for replacement.

People with existing boilers, because of EU regulations in place in Ireland under the energy performance of buildings directive, cannot receive a grant to replace it with another fossil fuel boiler. I am looking at measures on that in advance of the budget. The warmer homes scheme is great and we are seeing turnaround times between application and completion of works reduce. I will have an update on that in the next couple of weeks. The number of homes done through the scheme has increased year on year. It will be close to 11,500 this year. I do not have the projections for the end of the year but it will be an increase on last year. On what we can do to help people with boilers that are coming to end of life, I am working on that in advance of the budget.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate that. The Minister is correct that the warmer homes scheme is hugely popular. That and the increase in the fuel allowance are exactly the kind of ring-fenced funding that carbon tax provides. The difficulty is that people who are heading into this winter have either no central heating system, no back boiler system or a broken gas boiler and they cannot get the warmer homes grant because they have no boiler to register the heat loss indicator. They used to be able to get the local council grant but that is gone. As a last resort, I was able to send them to the Department of Social Protection for an emergency payment, but the Department is now saying it will not fund it either. I am aware of people heading into a second winter with no heating system and no way of getting it who also cannot get the warmer homes grant. There is clearly a regulatory gap. It is not an issue of funding but there is a problem whereby people just do not have the €2,500 or €3,000 to get a boiler and they cannot get the warmer homes scheme or any sort of support so they will have no heating this year. That is clearly not Government policy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy. I mentioned in my first response that I am looking at this very issue right now in advance of the budget. I announced earlier this year that we would trial high-temperature heat pumps, plug-in heat pumps, which I think will be an

option. A pilot of about 100 homes is ongoing. I think a number are in the Deputy's constituency. We will get the data from that. It could be a very good near-term solution. We will get the data by the end of the year or early next year. Should the data stack up, it provides us with an opportunity to roll this out at scale. It has the potential to be a really good option.

I am also looking at other measures in advance of the budget, which I discussed only last week with Cabinet colleagues, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in budget preparation, looking in particular at that cohort with end-of-life boilers, where the boilers either are gone or are about to go, and what we can do in that space. The high-temperature heat pump has real potential but we are in the middle of that pilot right now. I met the European Heat Pump Association last week, something I would not often say. We had a good meeting looking at what is being done across Europe. There are some interesting examples, in particular in relation to high-temperature heat pumps. I am focusing on this because it could make a significant difference for many households if the data stacks up that it would work without a major retrofit on top. That is something we want to ensure we can do.

I will keep the Deputy in the loop and come back to him specifically on this issue. I am aware of the cases he has raised with me where people in this bind cannot afford to replace the boiler and are going into their second winter post the European buildings directive, which precludes local authorities from providing grants. I know that some people are trying to see if they can buy a second-hand boiler but that is not sustainable either. I will keep the Deputy in the loop.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister for acknowledging the issue. I have even raised this issue with Michael McGrath, the European Commissioner, because it is a good example of how something intended to have a positive contribution to our environment goals is having a negative impact. These kinds of things undermine confidence in the EU because they are a silly application of something. The problem is the technology does not exist. There is no gap between a €2,500 gas boiler and a €30,000 or €40,000 electric heat pump. The new pilots are welcome.

There is a balance with regard to Exchequer funding as well. I accept that. The SEAI has met me. It has been proactive. It has had the pilot scheme, which was implemented in a number of cases I brought to the SEAI, where compassion was needed. However, we need to put in place a permanent scheme. I welcome what the Minister said about the budget.

The scheme needs to be easy to use. A lot of these people are older people who do not understand all the mechanisms of different grant schemes. I appreciate the Minister's support because there are people who really need it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will conclude our work on this over the course of the next couple of weeks. There will be a lead-in period. If I am able to get approval to do something specific in this space, I will see it implemented in January.

I recognise the costs. We doubled the existing heat pump grants to €12,500. They are significant, but for lower income families, can we go that bit further and just cover the heat pumps? It involves labour costs and installation. The grant covers a significant amount of the cost of the equipment. Where the plug-in heat pump has real potential is that it reduces the

need for a lot of other work, such as radiator replacement and that type of thing, which sometimes puts people off doing the work.

However, I expect to be able to make announcements in the coming weeks. If I get approval, there will be a lead-in period. I just wanted to say that. If I get it, I would love to bring it in in January of next year.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Should I have a word with Jack Chambers?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: You certainly can. All interventions are gratefully received.

Data Centres

11. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the impact of electricity demand for data centres on the public network; and the studies that have been carried out to determine the impact on the householder in terms of additional costs and so on. [65585/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: My question relates to the impact of electricity demand from data centres on the public network. What studies have been carried out by the Department to determine the impact on householders and any additional costs to the public in general? It is not a case of arguing against all data centres. There will be data centres, but the proliferation of them in this country is high and they are having a significant impact on the grid and on costs.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Stanley. Many Deputies have raised this matter today, understandably, and I have answered in detail. However, to answer the Deputy, for fear of repetition, data centres provide essential digital infrastructure for the economy and strengthen our position as a strategic knowledge-intensive location for the digital and tech sectors. As I mentioned earlier, just short of 190,000 people work in ICT, so it is significant. We are not a large, heavy industry country but I would contend ICT is that sector. The digital infrastructure is underpinned in many ways by data centres, which provide significant support to all areas of our economy.

We brought forward the Large Energy User Action Plan, which I published in January 2026. It sets out the plan-led approach to enable Ireland to attract the next generation of investment in strategic energy-intensive sectors in the medium to long term. It will ensure future growth remains aligned with Ireland's green transition, energy affordability and security objectives, as well other strategic Government priorities such as the provision of housing, transport and water. The Government remains committed to investing in critical infrastructure to deliver electricity to a growing population and growing economy, with new housing and expanding businesses. Our grid investment programme provides an historic investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure of up to €18.9 billion, with over 520 capital projects to be delivered over the next five years. They include 29 significant transmission infrastructure projects and 32 distribution substations. I meet every month with EirGrid and ESB Networks about their work programme to monitor that investment.

In the Deputy's area of Laois, in July I was delighted to open the ESB Networks Bracklone 110kV substation, which was the first major substation to be delivered under this capital programme. It will have a massive positive impact on the area and on energy and electricity capacity-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): : Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----in Laois, and particularly Portlaoise.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Significant work is going on to upgrade the network and it is badly needed, but there is a cost to it. The Minister outlined the 190,000 jobs, but very few of them are in data centres. The point I am making is that almost a quarter of the available supply is being used by data centres and there are reports it could grow to more than one third and more. That puts huge pressure on the network. It puts a huge amount of pressure on EirGrid and ESB Networks to upgrade the grid and put significant investment into it. I am in favour of the investment in it because I welcome the opening of the substation in my area, where it is needed for the increased industry and jobs in the area and the increased population, not to mention the housing that is being built, but a recent study has shown data centres are putting an additional cost on householders.

The data centres are getting cheaper electricity than Joe and Mary Public. That is the point. They are getting cheaper electricity while the public is paying for the upgrade. There is now an upgrade levy on everyone's bill. That is the key point the Minister needs to take home. We have a huge proliferation of them compared with other EU states and some American states are saying "No, not on our patch" to them now, but we are accepting everything. We need to have a more measured approach to this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I fully understand why the Deputy is raising the issue and it is important we debate it, but not every application is accepted. I do not just accept every application for connection that comes in. Applications for connection agreements are made and they can be accepted or refused. We have set out how new applications have to be processed in a plan-led way. It is not just first come, first served or that people just apply for a data centre and get it. PR6, the grid investment programme, outlines what we need to do to get ahead of the energy demand projections and it is a big programme.

In response to another Deputy's question earlier, I mentioned network charges, which are set by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. I do not set them. I know the Deputy did not say I do.

Regarding data centres, between 2020 and 2026, the network charges have increased by 175%. That is just to put the facts on the floor of the House. It has to be managed appropriately. I agree with the Deputy about that. That is what is being done and it is a big programme.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There are a number of issues. We are trying to construct 50,000 homes per year and there were reports again this week that the supply of housing is being hampered by the supply of water and electricity connections. There is clearly a pull factor and the Government has to take into consideration that there have to be jobs in other sectors and

homes have to be built. There is pressure here every day with people talking about it. We are putting pressure on the Government about it. The Government is under pressure and is putting pressure on officials and local authorities to step up to the plate and drive on the programmes.

We have to look at things in the round, but we have a habit in this country - and I do not want to give the House a history lesson going back to the crash and so on - of putting too many eggs in one basket. This is a high-profit industry. We are accepting the data centres. I agree that not all of them get planning permission, but the sheer number going in and the supply of water and electricity going into them could throw the economy off to one side and have a negative effect on other sectors. That is the key point.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I responded earlier about water usage. Uisce Éireann estimates that approximately 0.3% of water is used in data centres. They are its figures. I just wanted to put that on the record of the House again. However, I reiterate that it has to be managed and we are doing that. That is why Peter Burke and I brought forward the Large Energy User Action Plan. It sets out how, in a plan-led way, some of the conditions of future connection agreements for data centres are that there must be capacity and 80% of the energy must be brought forward through new renewable sources. We have not seen a large number of data centres being connected in recent years. It is not the case, as the Deputy acknowledged to be fair, that when applications are made, not even for planning but for a connection agreement, they are all granted. We have set down clearly what are now the criteria for getting a connection agreement and that is important. It is important that we manage current and projected demand well and appropriately.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Environmental Schemes

13. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the actions he has taken following his concerns regarding the level of underspending by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland in 2025, the changes to governance, structures and delivery arrangements that he has sought; and the measures being put in place to ensure that allocated funding is translated into increased delivery of home energy upgrades in 2026 and 2027. [65126/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: Earlier this year, the Minister wrote to the SEAI expressing concern that it had left €120 million in capital unspent. Since then, he has highlighted the rising numbers of applications for retrofitting.

10 o'clock

There is a recognition among the public that, to be as energy secure as possible, they need to retrofit. The Government has fantastic ambition in this space but is the SEAI set up for success? Does it have sufficient resources and capacity and the correct skill sets? What are we doing to make sure it delivers on the Government's ambition in respect of retrofitting?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Boland for a really important question. She is right to highlight the fact that the SEAI underspent last year, even though it did more homes

than it had ever done before. That is not a situation that we want. We want this money invested in permanent changes to reduce energy consumption in households and businesses to reduce their costs and reduce emissions. That is why, earlier on this year, I worked directly with the SEAI and instructed it to break down the grants to make them more accessible. We brought forward new windows and doors grants and we increased the fixed grant levels for attic and cavity wall insulation. We put a greater focus on supports for undertaking retrofit measures on an incremental basis as opposed to undertaking just one deep retrofit, the cost of which many households could not meet. A very purist approach was taken before. A retrofit had to cover everything. We have changed that to give people a pathway towards a full retrofit.

I see that Deputy O'Gorman has arrived. I listened to his interview on this issue on the radio earlier, when he said there had been no changes to SEAI grants over the course of the past year, which is not correct. It is therefore timely that he has arrived.

With regard to the take-up of grants, this year we have seen 88,000 applications. We have to watch the spend, however. I do not have the final year projections. Obviously, we will not see what has been expended yet. I know the SEAI is spending and investing more than ever. I expect an element of underspend this year. I do not know what that amount will be. It will be substantially less than last year. It is not something I welcome but I acknowledge the fact that we have brought in a whole suite of new schemes. With the support of Deputy Boland and of the Government over the coming weeks, I intend to seek additional supports. I am not referring to increased grant amounts but to additional things that we discussed here earlier, such as boiler replacements. Frankly, these are things that should have been done before. We are also looking at storage. That is what we are working through right now. We are watching the spend very carefully. I met with the SEAI again just last week. I meet with the authority regularly on this. Real progress is being made on the number of homes being retrofitted and that is to be welcomed but we need to make sure that the moneys raised are fully invested in retrofitting measures for households and businesses.

Deputy Grace Boland: I agree with the Minister that it is absolutely essential that the money Government is providing to the SEAI is actually used and given to people for retrofits. I also very much welcome the improvements the Minister has made in the scheme this year. They have made it much easier and more financially viable for people to put in new windows, doors and so on. I appreciate that.

In terms of the warmer homes schemes the Minister mentioned earlier, the issue has been raised that there are people who are in serious danger of not having heating in their homes this year. What is the SEAI doing to decrease turnaround times and to reduce them from the current 22 months?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not have the figures. I gave Deputy McAuliffe an answer regarding the uptick earlier on. We did 8,100 warmer homes schemes projects in the last full year, 2025, which is a big increase. Overall, just short of 40,000 homes have been done. We will exceed that this year. Obviously, we still have a few months to go. We will exceed the number done the previous year. I have mentioned the issue of those who have end-of-life boilers. There are specific things that we can do. We are piloting high-temperature heat pumps, the plug-in heat pumps, at the moment. That pilot will continue for the next few months. Should efficiencies arise from that, should it be an option and should the data from that pilot

stack up, there will be an opportunity for us to roll that out at scale. That would be a very viable replacement for boilers. However, in the meantime and in advance of the budget, I am working on measures for that particular cohort.

I will get the exact figure but turnaround times have gone from 22 months to 15 months. That is from the date of application to the completion of works. It is still a long time. There is a lag in getting a contractor and so on. However, there is a big focus on that because there are significant savings to be had for people, particularly those in energy poverty.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome that. I had not heard about the 15 months. When I looked at the SEAI's website yesterday, it was still telling me that turnaround time was 26 months. It is important that be updated, notwithstanding whatever we can do to reduce the times.

On actually getting this work done, the SEAI appoints a contractor from its approved list. Is there a sufficient number of contractors on the SEAI's approved list? What can we do to increase the number? We really need to do whatever we can to make sure that people are warm in their homes this winter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the specific question of the contractors, that was part of the discussion I had with the SEAI last week. It went out to public procurement for contractors for the warmer homes scheme and selected a number of contractors. I have asked the authority to review that with a view to adding more. I know of a couple of contractors around the country, very good companies, that did not make the list. I am looking at Deputy Carthy, who might be aware of one such company in his own area. These omissions surprised me. I have asked those questions of the SEAI at our meeting. I met with it on that particular issue the week before last. It is going to come back to me. I think we have an opportunity to get more contractors into the warmer homes scheme, notwithstanding the fact that the authority has awarded contracts only recently. It is about having additional resources to fast-track delivery. Particularly during an energy crisis and when we are seeing such price increases, these really good climate measures and energy reduction measures are also permanent cost reduction measures. We need to treat that appropriately. I will come back to the Deputy to clarify the turnaround time.

Waste Management

14. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if his Department has received any reports from the National Waste Collection Permit Office since March 2025; the issues addressed in any such reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65951/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: Has the Minister of State's Department received any reports from the National Waste Collection Permit Office? I do not know if his prepared remarks touch on the issue of the number of waste collectors in each local authority area but there is a fear around the impact consolidation is having on consumer prices.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The National Waste Collection Permit Office, which the Deputy will know is hosted by Offaly County Council, is the designated nominated authority for the

processing and review of all waste collection permits issued within the State. The Department is, of course, in regular contact with the NWCPO. This contact includes meetings, fora and steering committees to discuss topics including but not limited to the operation of the waste collection market in Ireland, the collection of the waste recovery levy, and the implementation of relevant actions in the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy.

The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy contains a commitment to introduce further measures to incentivise the prevention and segregation of waste. Arising from this commitment, the National Waste Collection Permit Office commissioned an independent study on incentivised waste charging and its potential implementation through the waste collection permitting system. This study, which has been shared with our Department, examines what changes could be made to the permitting system for waste collectors to fully incentivise waste prevention and improve source segregation practices by their customers to minimise their waste collection bills.

Recommendations will be considered in conjunction with outcomes from the recently completed feasibility study into transitioning our national waste collection system from the current competitive licensing system to a franchise model. Both will inform the development of the next iteration of the WAPCE with a view to improving the rates of recycling among households and businesses to meet targets to established by the EU waste framework directive.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The reason I ask this question is that I believe there is a need for a hands-on approach to one particular issue. I do not know if it is the same across the board but in many rural counties we have seen a pattern of behaviour where large multinational waste collection companies decide to come into a county. In the first instance, they try to purchase all the local waste collection services. Where that does not happen, what appear to me to be very aggressive marketing strategies are employed. This can sometimes involve multiple representatives calling to doors and leaflets such as those I have here with me offering knock-down discount prices. The fear is that this is an attempt to monopolise the system outside of the regulations. Is the Minister of State aware of this practice and is he planning to take any action in response?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am familiar with the practices the Deputy is talking about. There has been debate about them for some time. There is widespread concern that, in some places, there is a multiplicity of waste collection trucks moving around the same area one after another.

That obviously has an impact on the environment, traffic congestion and so on. All of these matters are under review under a broader outlook in terms of the circular economy. From a Government perspective, the strategic approach is to try to reduce and minimise the amount of waste that is out there and to try to get greater reuse of commodities that are generated from scarce resources. It is about reducing the impact on our environment - much of that is about behavioural change and ensuring the appropriate systems are there to encourage our citizens to not disregard or dispense with products that have the capacity to be upcycled. That is very much feeding into our strategy.

I know what the Deputy is talking about, which is the operationalisation of that on the ground. However, over time, the ambition of the Government is to reduce the amount of waste that will ultimately be collected.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We all have a shared objective in that regard; we all want to reduce the amount of waste. The difficulty is that in the scenario I spoke about, where these multinational companies essentially secure *de facto* monopolies in local authority areas where they are the only real option, the knockdown prices go very quickly. You are then back to what are eye watering, staggering costs for waste collection that would not be in place if there were local competitors. Will the Minister of State ask his Department to carry out an analysis, in conjunction with the National Waste Collection Permit Office, in respect of how many operators have licences and are operating within each local authority area and what the average costs are? I think the analysis will find a correlation between a reduction in providers and an increase in cost. Ultimately, this is a twin-track approach. I agree entirely with the Minister of State that we need to reduce waste but we also need to ensure that our families are not being fleeced by these large corporations which are knocking out all of their competitors outside of an agreed policy framework.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: What the Deputy is clearly referring to is the need for a comprehensive policy framework in place that looks at, in the first instance, the reduction of waste through recycling, upcycling and minimisation. That is a given and we all support that. In getting to that better place we want to get to, we must still have a competitive edge or a capacity to manage the cost of waste disposal where certain waste products have to be disposed of. I am certainly prepared to ask the Department to have a further look at what that entails. There are different models out there that have been looked at. There is competition for the marketplace. There is the direct competition of a series of local operators. That is challenging because it is possible for others to buy up licences - that is the marketplace - but, of course, we also have to ensure citizens are not fleeced in the event of predatory practices of some large operators.

Electricity Grid

15. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will report on updates to Ireland grid as part of PR6; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65910/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. The system operators, EirGrid and ESB Networks, are charged with responsibility for upgrading our electricity system, including planning and constructing new investments in the grid. They are accountable to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, in that regard. However, investing in and ensuring a fit for purpose electricity grid is an absolute priority for me and the Government. I regularly meet with ESB Networks and with EirGrid - I am meeting with EirGrid later today on its work as well. I meet EirGrid and ESB Networks together every month, specifically on PR 6 and the work programme.

In July, I was very pleased to open ESB Networks' new Bracklone 110 kV substation in Laois. That was the first one of those delivered under the PR 6 programme. There was really good work done. There was also the North-South interconnector, the Moneypoint 400 kV series capacitor and the Letterkenny 100 kV line redevelopment, which are covered under the Critical Infrastructure Act. We saw Moneypoint come through pretty much straight away after

that. The system operators are waiting for confirmation from local authorities on planning conditions for the North-South interconnector. Monaghan County Council is the lead local authority. I hope it discharges its consent without any further delay. The Moneypoint capacitor has now received full consent.

That grid investment programme is unprecedented and worth up to €18.9 billion - it is really critical. When you break down the 520 projects, it is really down to 29 transmission projects and 32 distribution projects. Ten of these transmission projects are already under construction. That is really good. One of the priority distribution projects is already completed and three further projects are in construction.

I meet with them every single month to go through the list of the main projects to make sure timelines are not slipping, to identify any risks that are there and to keep the pressure on. I thank ESB Networks and EirGrid for all they are doing.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply. We saw the Central Bank report yesterday and its concerns that the connection for essential infrastructure like energy and water are clear barriers to the delivery of essential housing, particularly social and affordable housing, and it takes up to four years now. We also saw the impacts of Storm Éowyn, which I saw in my own constituency. Apart from the impact on the grid, there was also flooding in the Listowel area. The Minister mentioned some of the projects that are under way, such as the 29 projects and ten under construction. What are the delivery timelines for them and when does the Minister expect they will be completed?

If we look at some other countries, particularly Denmark, they do not really have an energy crisis. They are totally resilient. The infrastructure is in place there and they are almost completely energy independent. Could the Minister give me some insight into the timelines?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is important there is visibility across the projects and there is. I have no difficulty in getting that information to the Deputy but the operators make public that detailed information on the progress of investments, and rightly so. In December, CRU published the transmission baseline programme, which sets out all of the transmission projects in PR 6, along with the associated delivery milestones. EirGrid publishes updates in respect of delivery against these milestones every quarter. They are available on their website. It is rightly made public. We are not saying every single project will be delivered on time under this massive programme but I have asked it to really identify and focus on the most critical projects under PR 6. I meet them every month together and I am meeting EirGrid again today. Above all else, this provides that resilience for the grid, allows us to increase our capacity, get more renewables into our system and provide more storage - we are third in Europe for long duration battery storage but we still need more. This is the absolute focus of what we do and the real priority area for us.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister says he meets them regularly. Is he saying the delivery of the projects are all up to date and on time?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: No. I said I meet them regularly.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There is an elasticity there.

Deputy Pa Daly: I have two questions arising from what the Minister said. How far behind are some of the projects or what projects concern the Minister? What steps are being taken to get them up to speed? Second, on grid prioritisation, what is the Minister's view on that and will he support the legislation we brought forward yesterday?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the projects that are outlined, from the detail I get as to where they are, a lot of them have already commenced and that is good. There is not major slippage within it. We will get the Deputy some details on that. Not every milestone in every project will be hit but I want the majority of them hit. Already, I have given the example of Bracklone in Laois, which was delivered ahead of time and on budget. We really need to get the North-South interconnector started. That is why it is so important that consent is discharged by the lead local authority.

I met representatives from Monaghan, Cavan and Meath over the summer. They were the three local authorities. That needs to start. Above all else, if I were to pick one project that needs to happen it is the Noth-South one. We will look at the Deputy's Bill, which was only published yesterday. I am happy to see what is in it. We will review it and I will come back to him.

Climate Action Plan

16. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment when he expects to publish the Climate Action Plan 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65428/26]

21. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update on the planned publication of the Climate Action Plan 2026. [65687/26]

45. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update on the status of the Climate Action Plan 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65972/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Today is 17 September and no climate action plan for 2026 has been published. I ask for an update on when the Minister will publish the climate action plan for this year or if he plans to publish one this year.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I propose to take Questions Nos. 16, 21 and 45 together.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Before the Aire Stáit continues, I remind the House that I have to cut the time in a few minutes. He has two minutes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I will always take your direction, a Chathaoirligh Gníomhach.

The Government is committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis and work remains ongoing across government to implement climate mitigation measures every day. We have a robust climate delivery framework and detailed plans in place across all sectors. The priority is driving implementation, particularly of high-impact measures with multiple societal and economic benefits.

The EPA's latest provisional greenhouse gas emissions inventory, published in July, shows that this is working. Ireland recorded overall emissions reductions for a fourth consecutive year. All main sectors saw reductions in 2025. The Green Party's time in government was helpful in ensuring we remain on that trajectory. Emissions from energy industries decreased for the fourth consecutive year, by 7.1% in 2025, to an all-time low as investment in renewables continues to reduce emissions. Emissions from buildings decreased by 4.7% and tonnes of CO₂ per household are at their lowest recorded level. In addition, other sectors also showed reductions with the industry sector emissions down by 3.3%, transport down by 1.5% and agriculture down by 0.2%. Significantly, the EPA's report shows that the first carbon budget has now been achieved on the back of these record emissions reductions.

Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 36 years which is notable given a concurrent population increase of approximately 1.5 million people, more than 1 million new homes and over 1 million extra vehicles on our roads. Given the strong economic growth over this period, we can now see a clear decoupling of growth from emissions which is a key milestone in Ireland's transition to climate neutrality.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: It is 17 September and there is still no climate action plan for 2026. The idea behind the climate action plan was that on the one hand we have the five-year carbon budgets making the big economy-wide changes but on the other hand we had to have accountability for what was being done on an annual basis. Those of us in the Opposition, environmental NGOs and the public need to see on an annual basis if the Government is actually passing the measures and implementing the steps that will make those big five-year economy-wide changes possible. We had a series of climate action plans published annually so the Government could be held to account. That is the fundamental problem with the Government's failure to publish the climate action plan for this year: it cannot be held to account. The Minister of State can give his answers with these great five-year plans for the future but what confidence do we have that they will be achieved when we do not know what is to be done in 2026?

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: We have been waiting for a long time. We were told the plan would be published by the end of quarter 3. I heard the Minister refer to the plan for 2026 being published by the end of October as well as the plan for 2027. It would be very welcome if the Minister of State could confirm that. It is better late than never that the Government is getting its act together. This is about transforming our theoretical targets into practical measures for Departments and Ministers. We cannot hold those Ministers to account unless we know what they are actually trying to do.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Work on finalising the draft of the next update to the climate action plan is currently under way, with the climate action plan programme board providing guidance and oversight of the development of the update. Officials from Departments with responsibility

for key sectors have been actively engaged in the process and are working on finalising the update to the plan.

Public consultation on the plan closed last month, with more than 270 submissions received. Officials are carefully considering the views and priorities raised by the public to ensure that they meaningfully inform the next plan. Publication of the plan is expected later this year. This plan will be more focussed and will identify strategic climate priorities that will shape our approach to closing the gap to 2030 and include a range of new actions to support mitigation in all key sectors.

In the meantime, the roll-out of retrofitting measures, renewable energy deployment and more affordable electric vehicles continues at increasing pace. The climate action plans for 2024 and 2025, which build on the series of preceding plans, remain in place and provide a strong framework for delivery of climate action to 2030. Many of their commitments are multi-annual in nature and we will continue to focus on accelerating their delivery.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Disabilities Assessments

58. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on the progress being made to provide alternatives to assessment of needs. [65850/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask for an update on assessments of need. There are now over 23,000 on the waiting list. This is not working for anybody, particularly families who are awaiting services and therapies. Since August, the autism assessment service has been up and running and the disability amendment Bill has been brought to Cabinet. I ask for an update on how this is going and how we can improve the circumstances for the children and families who need therapy.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputy for his question. I know my office followed up with his office to fully understand where he is coming from on this. I understand he wants an update on the autism assessment and intervention pathways protocol as well as assessment of need, AON, waiting lists.

The autism assessment and intervention protocol is being implemented by the HSE and it will be the preferred assessment route for autism. It will provide a standardised assessment process across primary care, mental health and disability services. This may reduce reliance by parents on the assessment of need process as a means of acquiring a diagnosis. It is important to be aware that children who are managed through this pathway or children managed through any pathway retain their right to apply for an assessment of need.

The protocol and assessments generally will be supported by the creation of 11 HSE in-reach teams, providing clinical guidance and administrative support to staff across the HSE services, delivering assessments and interventions to autistic people. Positions in these teams are

currently being filled, with interviews being scheduled or offers being made to candidates from existing panels. It is anticipated and hoped that all 11 teams will be in place by the end of the year.

As the Deputy said, there are huge challenges arising from this significant increase in demand for assessments of need in recent years and it is clear that change is needed. There has been progress in recent years with a noticeable increase in the number of completed applications. Over 5,900 assessment of need reports were completed last year, which was a 43% increase compared to the previous year. Over 3,343 assessment reports were completed in the first six months of this year. This improvement must continue at a rapid pace. As the Deputy mentioned, significant legislative and operational work is under way to improve the AON process and to reduce waiting times.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I suppose that information is the information that is available, even from the press release yesterday. I would like the Minister of State to get into some detail on what is being proposed in the legislation because we are talking about statutory guidelines that will standardise the assessment of need processes and procedures State-wide. The statutory guidelines will be used by the HSE to ensure consistency in how assessments are carried out across the State. I would like to know how exactly this is going to happen because this is going to come on us very quickly. It is obviously about what exactly is meant by focusing on the needs of the child. Will the Minister of State also give the latest updated number for those who are on the waiting list for reassessment of need?

At this point in time, it is a breach of the law where the State is meant to provide that assessment of need within six months and obviously that has not been happening. I can only assume what we are talking about now is from the point of view of trying to streamline. It is about seeing how that works and how this will improve the lot of those people who are on the waiting list and their families.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy and all members of the Oireachtas committee who were involved in the joint Oireachtas committee, JOC, report on this. As the Deputy is aware, a Bill proposing targeted amendment of the Disability Act went before Cabinet yesterday. The disability (amendment) Bill 2026 will introduce changes to make the AON process more efficient, consistent, fair and transparent while maintaining a person's statutory right to an assessment.

As the Deputy mentioned, this will come at us quite quickly because so much preparatory work has been done in this regard, both on the standardised guidelines that will underpin it but also through the work of the Deputy's JOC. We hope to have this in the House on Second Stage next week. I look forward to being able to discuss it with the Deputy more at that point.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Could we actually see the Bill as quickly as possible?

Deputy Emer Higgins: Yes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Usually, I do not trust myself when I am doing a search online but I have not been able to see the wording of the Bill, so I ask that we ensure copies go out from that point of view.

Deputy Emer Higgins: We will.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I checked it with somebody else because I would never generally trust myself in my ability to search for documentation.

Could I get the updated number of those on the waiting list for assessment of need at this point in time and over the six months? I accept the Minister of State is saying that people are not losing that statutory right so there is a need to deliver on that. I understand she will explain it more next week, but how will this streamlining process work in relation to AON? When will we see the offering of the autism intervention protocol and autism assessment service? When will that improve things and will it provide an alternative pathway so parents and those children can get the diagnosis required for getting the service they absolutely need?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The autism protocol was launched before the summer. Since then, HSE staff have been trained up in it so the anticipation is that this will be formally rolled out next month. We are waiting for a full update from the HSE in that regard, but I know a lot of work has gone into the training since then and the launch has put this into focus in terms of the specific figure the Deputy is looking for. The HSE reports that at the end of June, 23,282 children were overdue an assessment of need report within the statutory timeframe. Obviously, that is completely unacceptable and is something we are very committed to changing. That is why we are bringing in a number of reforms to change that. Part of that reform package will be the Bill coming before the House next month.

The autism assessment and protocol will also be part of how we help address this, as well as single point of access which the HSE is rolling out to ensure there is no wrong door for families. We will also continue our wait-list initiative to ensure we are continuing to supplement our teams and CDNT teams by outsourcing to ensure we can get through those numbers as quickly as possible because it is totally unacceptable. I will point out that an assessment of need is not required to access services and the number on our waiting list for CDNT teams has reduced quite significantly in recent years. Therapies are being provided to many of those children which is very important.

Disability Services

59. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality whether she is aware of the National Disability Services Needs Analysis commissioned by the HSE and undertaken by an organisation (details supplied); whether the final report will be published in full in order to inform the Oireachtas and the public of the scale of unmet need and pressures across disability services, and to support scrutiny of future service planning, funding and capital investment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [65592/26]

Deputy Liam Quaide: The campaign group Before We Die has been seeking access to a report undertaken by Grant Thornton and commissioned by the HSE, under the title of the

national disability services needs analysis. This appears to be a major examination of need across disability services intended to inform future planning, funding and investment. Yet, the HSE has told Before We Die that the report will not be published while at the same time saying the report is not being withheld. Why is a report of this importance being kept out of public view? Will the Minister of State commit to publishing it once it is completed?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Quaide. I am aware the HSE has commissioned a national disability services needs analysis and the publication of this report is a matter for the HSE. The focus on my Department to identify the scale of unmet need is the work that is currently under way on the disability capacity review, which will go to 2040. This is an update to the disability capacity review 2032, a review of disability, social care demand and capacity requirements, which was published in July 2021. It provides estimates of current and future requirements for community-based disability services and supports. It also identifies costings, based on projections of the future size and age structure of the future disability population out to 2032 and estimates of the scale of unmet need. The updated review will extend the horizon to 2040 and work is ongoing. The publication of that report will follow once it is completed. Using updated methodology, it will project future user demand, age structures, needs profiles and required resourcing of specialist disability services.

The service areas and supports covered will include residential day services, respite, home support and personal assistance, children's disability network teams and multidisciplinary teams. The updated projections will use a variety of updated data sources on current and future demand for specialist services among adults, children and young people. These include the national ability support system, the CDNT information management system, IMS, the HSE day services database and the census among others. The update will use the most recent data available where possible. In most cases, this means data from 2025 though the use of data for projections is also governed by technical considerations such as representativeness and availability. Given the extensive scope of the capacity review, expert stakeholder engagement is and has been an important part of the developmental process and the updated review has involved a variety of organisations so far. There will be continued consultation with relevant organisations throughout.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The separation of the Minister of State's decision-making around the publication of the Grant Thornton report from the HSE's decision-making is perplexing because this report seems to span across disability services.

As we all know, there are children waiting years for therapies, families unable to get adequate respite or home support, young people falling into gaps as they reach adulthood, adults living with ageing parents who have no idea what will happen when they can no longer care for them, older adults with no consistent care pathway, and people being placed far from their families because services have not been planned locally. Behind those figures are people living with immense stress, uncertainty and exhaustion. The HSE has commissioned this work to establish the scale of current and future need. The draft material clearly confirms that demand is outstripping capacity and that planning, funding, capital and investment are not aligned with long-term needs. If that is the HSE's own analysis, why on earth would the response be not to publish it?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The information that I have is that the HSE commissioned the report to conduct the national disability service needs analysis in the spring of this year. The HSE stated that the report was intended as a baseline planning exercise rather than a definitive assessment of future disability services requirements. It was designed to identify trends, pressures and areas requiring further examination rather than to provide a conclusive statement of need. The work examined demand, capacity, workforce requirements, service pathways and regional variation with the intention of informing future internal planning, internal policy development and investment decisions. The Deputy is right that it is up to the HSE whether to publish the report and the information I have is that it has decided not to do so due to recognition of the limitations in the underlying data and the significant caveats that accompany the analysis. The findings of the needs analysis will continue to be used internally to inform strategic thinking and contribute to ongoing planning work. However, it is the body of work that my Department is doing that is giving us a more holistic view, a better landscape to operate in and more information.

I thank the Before We Die group, which the Deputy referred to, for its involvement as a stakeholder. The information the HSE has given me is that it received a slide deck of how its contributions were evidenced in the needs analysis.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister of State. I find this rationale extraordinary. For years, disabled people and their families have told us that services have developed reactively, after people reach crisis points, if they are developed at all. The HSE has now commissioned what sounds like a substantial analysis drawing together population data, waiting lists, workforce information and the experiences of families, providers and disabled people. Before We Die participated in that research and is now being denied access to it. The response, as I mentioned, from the HSE was that it is not being published but it is not being withheld. That sounds like a phrase straight out of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is completely contradictory. The context here is one of abject political failure, chronic neglect of services and immense suffering as a result, documented over and over again across the disability sector. We need the figures to set that out systematically and begin addressing it. If the report exposes serious gaps, publish it. If the data have limitations, publish these too. Do not commission a major analysis of what disabled people need and then bury the findings. Who in the HSE decided not to publish it? Will the Minister of State intervene in that decision?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The HSE has decided not to publish it. This is its report and it is not for me to publish it. I will provide the Deputy's feedback to the HSE and I ask that he do the same. It is important to note that the HSE report was baseline to help inform current need and capital planning. What my the Minister, Deputy Foley, I and the team in the Department are doing is working to provide a disability capacity review to 2040 that will look further to the future and will have wider scope. That is the report that is most relevant here. It is important that we publish it afterwards and that we work hard to ensure it gives a holistic and accurate view of the current landscape and future needs. That is why we are focusing on that report. An awful lot of work has gone into it. I have mentioned the national disability support system, the CDNT information management system, the HSE day services and the census. Many data points are going into this. That report will give us the information that we need to be able to plan better. That is the report that I am focused on.

Childcare Services

60. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide an update on the eight locations for State-led childcare facilities. [66144/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I send my best wishes to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and his family. I ask the Minister for an update on the eight locations that will be chosen for the first time for State-led childcare facilities.

Deputy Norma Foley: I join the Deputy in sending best wishes to my constituency colleague, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. We are mindful of what he has had to endure and we wish him the speediest of recoveries. I am also mindful of his family. This is a traumatic time for them too. I know the whole House sends our best wishes.

On the Deputy's question, substantial progress has been made in the State-led early learning and childcare capital programme, which was launched at the end of January. The full business cases are being developed for a number of projects in preparation for final approval, with some of these close to completion now. Projects are developed into full business cases following the approval of a preliminary business case in line with the framework set out in the infrastructure guidelines. The nature and the development of the work required to prepare the full business case varies by project. They are all different and individual. It can include things like independent property valuation, building surveying, due diligence checks on the property, conveyancing, procurement and appointment of technical advisers, detailed design work and associated cost planning and operator selection. This is all required to be underpinned by appropriate legal and contractual arrangements.

In some instances, properties are at the point of being sale agreed. Operator selection has been undertaken in some projects and will proceed shortly in the case of others. A cost harmonisation exercise is being undertaken across the programme to ensure consistency in the reporting of capital costs and inform investment decisions, particularly from a cost transparency perspective. This is due to be completed in the coming weeks.

The projects currently being developed at full business case stage are spread across the country and, combined, would deliver more than 700 new places. I intend to make an announcement in the coming weeks regarding these specific projects following the agreement of sale prices. In parallel, a further tranche of projects has been prepared as preliminary business cases to bring forward to the steering group meeting later this month and I hope further projects will be approved in principle after that.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for the update. It is important that we see that substantial progress as we approach October and come almost to the end of the year. There are many eyes on where the eight locations will be. I appreciate I sound like a broken record about Boyle in County Roscommon. The feasibility study about the need in Boyle in north Roscommon is that there are 20 childcare places per 1,043 households. I have lost count of how many times I have put that on the Dáil record, but the Minister will be aware, or her Department will be aware, of a former childcare building that was available in the town and was made known to the county childcare committee and her Department, the forward planning

unit of which is leading on this. I want to make that case once again. I appreciate and welcome that a decision will be made in the coming weeks.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy is right. I appreciate that there are many eyes on this and there is great interest in this initiative, it being the first time that the State is actually stepping in this area with the State-led early learning and childcare initiative. I intend to make the announcement in the coming weeks. I am conscious of the case the Deputy makes about her own area. She has made it eloquently and consistently. I acknowledge Deputy Martin Daly has also made it eloquently and consistently, as have many local councillors. I am conscious of Deputy Kerrane's and Deputy Martin Daly's interest in this area. We are continuing to take applications. This is a long-term commitment by the Government. It is time-consuming. There is the initial business case, then the full business case and then commercial negotiations, which are sensitive. We are pleased with the progress that has been made and look forward to the coming weeks.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I have raised with the Minister many times the matter of looking at other ways that we can quickly build capacity. The State-led approach is one for sure, but there is also the building blocks programme. I again ask that consideration be given to allowing building blocks capital to be used to buy existing buildings. In many towns, particularly in rural areas like my own, across Roscommon and Galway, there are buildings. It is the quickest way to build badly needed capacity in the early years sector.

The other point that is important to make is that we can forget about capacity if we do not have the workforce. Far too many early years educators are being lost. They are leaving the sector.

Pay is a major issue that needs to be resolved. We will not have State-led services and growing capacity to meet demand or come anywhere close to meeting demand if we do not respect and recognise the workforce. That means paying them adequately and what they deserve and respecting the profession. That needs to be looked at in this Dáil term.

Deputy Norma Foley: I agree with the Deputy on looking at every possible mechanism that we have to extend capacity. The building blocks scheme is one. In terms of it being State-led, the State is stepping in, particularly with the purchase of buildings. The State will continue to purchase buildings or build them, if that is required in an area. There is also the building blocks scheme for extensions. We are looking at a suite of measures that will, in the quickest timeframe possible, deliver availability or additional availability by supporting providers to do that or through the State stepping in.

I agree with the Deputy on the importance of the workforce. There is no point in having buildings if we do not have the workforce. We have a valuable and important workforce currently working in the system and we want more staff in the system. The Deputy will be aware that over two years the Government has invested over €90 million arising from an employment regulation order. The Deputy knows my views on wanting that to be expedited and put in place as quickly as possible.

Departmental Policies

61. **Deputy Ken O'Flynn** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the mechanism her Department uses to assess whether policies developed in the name of equality are having unintended or disproportionate impacts on the rights of other groups, particularly children, women and girls; whether she considers that equality policy should require an assessment of the competing rights, privacy, dignity and safety of those affected before such policies are implemented; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [65690/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy and appreciate the question. As Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, I am always conscious of the potential impacts of the work of the Department and others on the rights of children, women and girls. Indeed, my work has a very strong focus on improving conditions for women and children across this country. Equally, the Department of public expenditure and reform leads on the equality budgeting programme, which seeks to identify the impacts of policies and expenditure across a broad range of equality grounds. The European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE, undertakes an assessment of the impact of actions by governments on gender equality. It has found the Government's action on equality for women and girls to have positive impacts and placed Ireland sixth in the EU on its gender equality index for 2025, up from ninth in the EU in 2024.

Across government, there are established mechanisms in place when formulating new policies, including public consultation, reviewing the available evidence and undertaking further research or legal analysis, where appropriate, and stakeholder engagement. As Minister, I inform my Government colleagues of proposals and, whenever appropriate, seek their agreement. Government approval is required for significant new or revised policies or strategies which must indicate any impacts on equality. Government approval is also required at several points before the publication of legislation.

As the Deputy is aware, the general scheme, or draft heads, of a Bill undergoes scrutiny by an Oireachtas committee before the text of the Bill is finalised. The relevant Oireachtas committee will usually invite stakeholders to participate in this process. A Bill must then pass through five Stages in both the Dáil and Seanad before it can be enacted.

In order to ensure a more inclusive and fair society, policymakers need access to data related to equality. Robust and comprehensive evidence allows the Government to design and evaluate policies and services more effectively. Disaggregated data, or data broken down by characteristics such as age or gender, allows policymakers to compare the outcomes for population groups. That is why we published the National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2031 earlier this year. The strategy provides a framework to support the collection and use of equality data across government.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister for her reply but, with respect, it did not answer the question I asked. I did not ask whether she is committed to equality. I asked for the mechanisms. When a policy or recommendation is made by the Department in the name of equality, what is the actual process for checking whether it takes the rights away from somebody else? In my question, I named women, children and girls. I do not have to look very far for an example of that. We can go back before the summer recess. I trust the Minister is rested and had time to enjoy the summer. In that time, I hope she finally took the opportunity to read the book *What's the T?*, which was recommended for 15-year-old girls by a State-funded body's Pride reading list. Last year, the Minister told the public that she was not familiar with

it, yet the well-respected former Minister, Charlie Flanagan, said he had raised the issue with her and asked her to read it back in 2023. Her own office was emailed excerpts of the book in March of this year. The point is that if a sexually explicit book can be recommended to children in the name of inclusion and nobody in the Department can tell me who checked whether it was safe for those children, the mechanism I am asking about does not exist. If it did, it would be in the Oireachtas Library. Does the assessment exist? It is a "Yes" or "No". If so, could I have an example of that assessment?

Deputy Norma Foley: To reiterate, in terms of the book the Deputy referenced, the Department has no role in the oversight or recommendation of any of the books referenced. There is no role for the Department to do that.

On the Deputy's specific question on what exactly happens regarding assessments that are made of impacts on children, women and girls from an equality point of view, I have made very clear to him that when any Department is bringing forward any kind of policy or strategy, there must be a robust interrogation of it. If anything new is being introduced, it goes before a committee. There is an interrogation at committee level. As I referenced, any policy introduced is also analysed by EIGE, which placed Ireland sixth in terms of equality for women and girls in 2025, up from ninth. I also told the Deputy that the Department of public expenditure leads an equality rights budgeting programme. That also seeks to analyse the impacts of policies and expenditure across a broad range of equality grounds. I have been very clear on the mechanisms that are in place.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The Minister did not answer my question on whether she read the book or not, but she made the statement, in respect of those types of book, that her Department has nothing to do with it. This may come as a surprise to her, but she is the Minister for children and equality. These are recommended books describing sexual acts to 15-year-old children. If the buck does not stop with her, as the Minister, where does it stop? Where is the mechanism that protects those children? That is what I am asking about today.

The Minister's reply was very disappointing. Will she come clean to the House and tell us whether she has read the book or the excerpts? Will she tell us who was telling the truth and who was not telling the truth? Was it her or the former Minister, Charlie Flanagan? What is the story? If the buck does not stop with her, who does it stop with? This is about the protection of children. When explicit books are being recommended to children and placed on a reading list for children, I would think the Minister for children is surely responsible.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be very clear, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has no role in the publication of books. The Department neither publishes the books, and nor does it recommend them. That has nothing to do with the Department.

Deputy O'Flynn referred to an account given by a former Deputy. I have said that I do not share that account. I have a different remembrance of the engagement I had with the former Deputy, and it is completely at odds with what he has suggested. Notwithstanding that, Deputy O'Flynn asked what mechanisms we employ in terms of equality and ensuring that there are not any disproportionate impacts. That is specifically what is written in the Deputy's question. He asked what mechanisms are in place that might protect against unintended or

disproportionate impacts on the rights of other groups, particularly children, women and girls. I have clearly outlined to the Deputy that there are a number of mechanisms in place, including in the Department of public expenditure from a budgetary point of view, the analysis done by the European Institute for Gender Equality, the responsibility placed on every Department to analyse the impacts of whatever policies or strategies it is introducing, or the role played by the wider Dáil in the legislation going through the House.

11 o'clock

Children in Care

62. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of children in Tusla care who have come to the attention of An Garda Síochána in each of the past five years; whether Tusla is adequately providing for children at risk of reoffending; and the number of juvenile detention beds. [66252/26]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is growing concern among many parents, guardians, teachers, youth workers, gardaí and many others across society about the number of young people who are displaying challenging and disruptive behaviour. Some are even going on to commit crimes. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter, please?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Government's youth justice strategy 2021-2027 identifies family support, early intervention and community-based diversion programmes as key components in preventing offending and promoting desistance. Enhanced family engagement through Garda youth diversion projects, Tusla services and reintegration planning is regarded as an essential element of effective youth justice practice in Ireland.

It is important to note that Tusla's remit is primarily focused on child protection rather than on the prevention of crime. That is important. The prevention of crime is a matter for the Department of justice while child protection is a matter for Tusla. Tusla works hand in hand with An Garda Síochána as both State organisations work together to help children and families who need their combined assistance.

Officials from the Department are in regular contact with officials in the Department of justice in particular by way of engagement through the youth justice oversight and youth justice governance and strategy groups. These help to implement the youth justice strategy 2021-2027, which is led by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Under this strategy the Government committed to strengthening family support interventions, including through the Department of justice's youth diversion projects.

At the core of the Children Act 2001 is the premise of detention as a last resort. This is a critical factor to understand in the youth justice system. The Garda national youth diversion bureau's role is to keep young people who offend out of the formal criminal justice system where appropriate and reduce the risk of reoffending.

Although family support is a central pillar of Irish youth justice policy, I am advised by my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, that there remains a need for more robust Irish outcome data specifically measuring the extent to which family support

interventions reduce reoffending among young people. Current policy is informed largely by international evidence and by broader assessments of youth diversion and early intervention programmes.

It is important to recognise that the overwhelming majority of children in the care system will never come into contact with An Garda Síochána, let alone be in conflict with the law. It is important to say that. The vast majority of children in care never, ever come to the attention of An Garda Síochána and it would be remiss of us to suggest otherwise.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Of course, we all want to see the optimal result. We do not want to see any children to be involved in antisocial and disruptive behaviour but unfortunately there are. The Minister gave a nice flowery answer there that she is responsible for the welfare of children and not if they are offending but they are both intrinsically linked. Does the Minister have concern about the increasing number of young people engaging in persistent antisocial and offending behaviour? What does she intend to do about the situation and the cause of that trend? Is she satisfied that Tusla, schools, youth services and other State agencies have the resources and supports necessary to intervene effectively with at-risk children?

We also know a lot of children in the care of Tusla and the State have gone missing in the past couple of years. That is an appalling vista. The Minister's answer here is not really helpful. We need to get to the bottom of this. It is a growing trend and it is worrying. While the vast majority of children do not do this - and we are delighted about that; it is great - we need to have accountability.

Deputy Norma Foley: I absolutely appreciate the Deputy's concern. I think we all share the concern. However, I must also speak to the fact and the fact is the vast majority of children who are in the care of the State never, ever come into contact with An Garda Síochána. In fact, I would say they thrive with positive intervention and it is not appropriate to suggest otherwise. There is a close working relationship between the Department of justice and my Department, with my Department looking at it from a child welfare point of view and with the Department of justice looking at it from a crime prevention point of view.

There are more than 5,000 children in the care of the State. A very small number come from particularly complex and challenged backgrounds and it is for that reason they are in the care of the State but that is a very small percentage. In that respect, I want to acknowledge the work that is done by Tusla in terms of family support. I can list some of the family supports that are there. For example, there are parenting supports, which are overseen by Tusla and its partner community and voluntary organisations. These include parenting supports to help parents feel confident and capable in their parenting role, targeted outreach programmes designed to reach specific groups of families who may be at risk of social exclusion-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I agree with the Minister about the vast majority, thankfully, but it is the minority who are involved in this behaviour. It is also a sad minority who have gone missing in State care under the watch of Tusla. A previous Minister said he did not lose a wink of sleep. Pat Rabbitte is a former chairman of the board of Tusla. I think Tusla is wholly unfit

for purpose. Goodness, accountability is not there. Children can go missing. We saw from the UCD report some time ago how children were being trafficked in hotels in Cork when they were under State care. This is a shocking vista. You cannot just wish it away by saying the vast majority of children are not involved in antisocial behaviour. Thankfully, they are not. We all have responsibilities, including parents, to ensure that. However, the ones who fall through the cracks and who do end up in State care deserve to be minded, nurtured, rehabilitated and taken care of and, above all, the State should know where they are. If they are not with their family and are in State care, the State should know where they are, whether they are accounted for, whether they are missing or whether they are being trafficked or involved in other horrible activities like that. It is a shocking situation.

Deputy Norma Foley: To reiterate, we are all concerned with any young people who find themselves in difficult situations. I am mindful there is a percentage of children, and not just children in State care but children who are not in State care, who find themselves involved with An Garda Síochána or who find themselves involved with crime or whatever. That is not just exclusive to the children-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That was my question.

Deputy Norma Foley: That is not exclusive to the very small minority who are in State care who find themselves in very similar circumstances. Other children outside State care find themselves in similar situations. For that reason, there are significant supports being made available from a family point of view to support families and young people so that they can readjust their lives, whether that is by way of counselling and therapeutic supports, a strengthening of the family resource centres - the Deputy will be aware that service has increased by 15 in the past year and a half to 136 family resource centres - services provided by the 12 area based childhood programmes, ABC programmes, which see parents, as the first and most important carers and educators in their children's lives, can be supported. There are also 121 Tusla child and family support networks and 27 children and young people's service committees. There are a number of support agencies working to ensure that children get the best possible opportunities and supports in life.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 63 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Legal Cases

64. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the amount spent on litigating judicial reviews in Cork for failure to complete AON in the necessary timeframe since 2020. [65644/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister make a statement on the amount of money spent on litigating judicial reviews in Cork for failure to complete assessments of need in the necessary time since 2020?

Deputy Emer Higgins: There has been significant increase in demand for assessment of need, AON, in recent years, reflecting both the increase in population and the number of families exploring all options to access services for their child. Unfortunately, demand has outpaced the capacity of the system to respond, resulting in long waiting lists for children to receive their assessment of need.

The Disability Act sets out grounds under which applicants may make a complaint regarding assessment of need, including completion within statutory timeframes. Over the past years, there has been an increasing amount of litigation seeking enforcement orders under the Act.

It is important to note that if AONs are not provided within the statutory timeframe applicants can use the statutory complaints and redress system. Therefore, they apply to the Circuit Court for an enforcement order as opposed to the High Court judicial review process.

The total legal spend for the period from 2020 to 2025 is €498,072. These are the HSE's own fees and do not include the legal spend of the parties who bring claims against the HSE, which have been paid by the HSE. That is because these are discharged by the State Claims Agency.

Inability to meet the rising demand for AON is resulting in significant financial cost to the State but, more importantly, is causing delay and distress to children and families who should have access to supports as early as possible. It is very clear that change is needed. There has been progress over the past two years with a noticeable increase in the number of completed applications. Over 5,900 assessments of need were completed last year, which is a 43% increase compared to the previous year, and 3,043 assessment reports have been completed in the first six months of this year. This improvement must continue and it must continue at pace.

In addition, significant legislative and operational work is under way to improve the AON process and reduce waiting times.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I want to confirm something. Did the Minister of State say the amount spent in Cork was €4,980? I find that figure unbelievable. I ask her not only to check that figure but also to include the amount that is paid by this State for families to bring these cases. I will tell the Minister why I find the figure unbelievable. Last year, nationally, the State spent €10.5 million defending approximately 1,000 cases of assessment of need that were overdue. This Government is therefore spending more money fighting families in the courts than providing assessments of need for children who desperately need them. Without the assessments of need, those children cannot get the supports they need in the services. They also cannot get the supports they need and the services they need when they go to school. This Government's decision is to fight it. To give the Minister of State another figure, only 7% of assessments of need in Cork were completed on time. These children have rights, and this Government just does not seem to give a damn. These figures speak for themselves.

Deputy Emer Higgins: We absolutely do care. That is why this week, at Cabinet, the Minister, Norma Foley, and I brought forward legislation in this regard. To be clear, the HSE has not contested applications to the Circuit Court. The figure that was provided to me today in response to the Deputy's question is for the HSE's own legal fees, as I have said. They do not include the legal spend of parties who bring claims against the HSE that have been paid to

the HSE. They are discharged by the State Claims Agency. I do not have the figure from the State Claims Agency but I can absolutely request that for the Deputy.

To be clear, significant legislative and operational work is under way to improve the AON process and reduce the waiting times. This includes continuation of the targeted wait list initiative, improved training and guidelines for assessment officers and targeted amendment of the disability Bill, which was brought to Cabinet this week, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the assessment of need process.

I agree that it is unacceptable how many children are waiting on these assessments. That is why we are bringing in these reforms - to help change that situation for people.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State says the HSE is not contesting these cases, but 1,000 families had to bring cases against the State last year, and the State spent €10.5 million then. What was it spending the money on? Why was that €10.5 million not put into assessments of need? To give the Minister of State figures from Cork, there are supposed to be 14.5 assessment of need posts in Cork; there are only eight. In August, 2,000 assessments of need were overdue. The average waiting time is 27 months. It is supposed to be six months, but children are waiting over two years. No disrespect to the Minister of State, and I do not doubt her sincerity, but I come in here every year raising assessments of need and children who need supports and need this done, and every year I fear what the Government will do. These figures speak for themselves. Children are waiting 27 months for vital assessments. This Government has failed the children of Ireland.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Children are waiting too long, absolutely, and it is not good enough. What has got us here is the increase in demand. That is due partly to changing demographics, and that is a good thing, but it is also due to more awareness within families and among parents exercising their right. Parents - I am sure the Deputy is the same - do not want to know the why; they want to know what we are doing. The only way to fix this is to change things, and that means reform. We are bringing in legislative reform, policy reform and budgetary reform. From a legislative perspective, the Minister, Norma Foley, and I brought to Cabinet this week a Bill on the assessment of need, which will be debated in this House next week. It is about making the approach more efficient, more effective and more standardised. From a policy perspective, the HSE is introducing a single point of access and the new autism protocol and pathways initiative. From a budgetary reform perspective, as well as building capacity within the system, we are investing. This year alone we invested €20 million in the wait list initiative. To be frank and honest about this, however, it will take time. These changes will make things better for families and children in this situation but it will not happen overnight. We need to invest in these reforms if we are to change things, and that is something the Minister and I are determined to do - to change things for these families.

Childcare Services

65. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality in the targeted plans to reduce childcare costs for parents, whether there are plans in place to review the Core funding programme to ensure that funding reflects the increasing costs faced by childcare providers and if consideration will be given to increasing funding and, where

necessary, allowing providers greater flexibility to adjust fees to ensure the continued financial viability and sustainability of services. [65960/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: I wish to raise the concerns of some service providers as to whether there are plans to review the core funding programme to ensure that funding reflects the increasing costs faced by childcare providers and if consideration will be given to increasing funding and, where necessary, allowing providers greater flexibility to adjust fees to ensure the continued financial viability and sustainability of services.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for the question on this important matter. Since core funding was introduced in 2022, it has been incrementally increased year on year through funding secured in the annual budget cycle. When first introduced in 2022, core funding had an annual allocation of €259 million, of which €210.8 million was entirely new funding for the sector. That annual allocation has increased each year and now, in the scheme's fifth year, is worth over €482 million. That is an increase of over 86% in core funding over four years, bringing the total to €1.7 billion since the scheme began - an investment by the State of €1.7 billion. This unprecedented increase in year 5 of the scheme includes €21 million in funding dedicated to support partner services in adhering to the core funding fee management conditions from September 2026. The annual budgetary increases to core funding have ensured that the scheme remains responsive, balancing the needs of providers while seeking to meet a range of other objectives.

Core funding has been developed using the various components associated with the cost of delivery of service provision, such as staff pay and conditions, administrative staff and time, and non-staff overhead costs. The base rate calculation also accounts for the increases to the cost of delivering services encountered by providers. These components have been factored into the calculation of the budget for core funding since the scheme began in 2022.

The core funding base rate has increased year on year since the inception of core funding, with a 20% increase in hourly rates between years 1 and 5 of the scheme. Accordingly, this has ensured that the scheme has kept pace with inflation and, thus, has reflected the dynamic costs profile inherent to the sector over that period. In particular, the base rate was enhanced this month to support all providers to keep their fees more affordable for families, through the core funding fee freeze and maximum fee caps, in the face of rising cost pressures.

The Department will explore further developments to the allocation model as part of the 2027 budgetary process.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister but I want to raise the concern among providers about the fee arrangements under the core funding programme and the disparity between long-established childcare providers and numerous service providers entering the scheme. I welcome what the Minister has outlined - the continuous improvement in funding from €259 million when the programme started in 2022 to an increase of over €480 million from September 2026 - but the current fee arrangements have created unintended inequality between service providers. Service providers that have been involved in the core funding programme since its introduction have had their fees tied to a rate being charged in September 2021, while new service providers are able to establish their fees based on current operating

conditions, subject to applicable fee caps, which puts established childcare providers at a disadvantage.

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be clear that I am absolutely committed to continuing to engage with the sector and all concerned to continue to develop the scheme in order that it can support providers to deliver high-quality early learning and childcare to children that is sustainable. I think that is the rub of the Deputy's question - sustainability.

To address concerns surrounding service sustainability, targeted measures including a flat rate for sessional-only services and a minimum core funding allocation were introduced in year 2 of the scheme. These were enhanced in year 4.

The Department also ran a fee increase assessment process during programme year 3 of core funding, whereby partner services charging fees below the county average were eligible to apply to be assessed for a fee increase. I have made the decision to launch a revised version of this process for the upcoming programme year, the sustainability review process.

That is exactly what the Deputy has asked, in terms of those who are having challenges around sustainability. I have made the decision to launch that sustainability review process. The eligibility criteria for the review process have been refined to target vulnerable services where fees have been frozen at low levels since at least 2021. Without such a review, there is a risk that these providers will be unable to continue operating, which would reduce the number of places for children available in the sector. That review is exactly as the Deputy asked, namely to support providers.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I am happy to see this is progressing. Several providers involved in core funding since 2021 have contacted me and they have experienced a considerable increase in their overheads. I would also like to point out the fee payment thresholds table. Can I ask that County Wicklow be aligned with Dublin? At the moment it is in a mid-east bracket, and strangely for some of the mid-east brackets the upper limit on the threshold is lower than for some of the midlands. There seems to be an anomaly there. Another anomaly, which is slightly related, is that if a child moves from senior infants into first class they end up using a facility one hour less per day. That parent contacted me to say they are being charged €93 extra per month. That is because the childcare provider no longer receives the subsidy for that one hour per day. Yet the parent, who is now putting their child in for one hour less per day, ends up being charged the higher fee. These kinds of anomalies need to be looked at.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that there is unprecedented investment by the State in this sector. I think €1.7 billion speaks to the determination of the State to support early learning and childcare provision. That is in terms of supporting providers, the workforce and parents. We are moving into budget 2027 where there are negotiations, which I imagine will be ongoing to the eleventh hour, to see how we can advance in each of those areas. It is unprecedented in terms of this sector to speak even at this point in terms of €1.7 billion. On the issues the Deputy raised around sustainability, that sustainability review is now open to providers to engage. In terms of the specific issues he raised, there are differences between early learning and childcare provision and school age childcare provision. Notwithstanding that, the State is committed to continue investing in the early learning and childcare sector.

Disabilities Assessments

66. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of children on the waiting list for an assessment of need in counties Cavan and Monaghan, by county; and the number waiting more than three, six and 12 months. [65953/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I return to assessment of need, specifically in my constituency, to ask for details of the number of children currently on the waiting list for an assessment of need in those counties, and the numbers waiting for more than three, six and 12 months.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Department and the HSE are working intensively to address delays in the provision of assessments of need to children and their families. There has been significant increase in demand for assessment of need in recent years. Applications have risen from 4,700 in 2020 to over 13,000 in 2025. That reflects both the increase in population and the number of families exploring all options to access services for their child. Unfortunately, demand has outpaced the capacity of our system to respond. While the HSE does not provide assessment of need data by county, data is provided by regional health area and local health office, so I am able to give the Deputy specifics for Cavan and Monaghan. The most recent data for Cavan-Monaghan LHO is for quarter 2 of 2026 and shows that 634 applications were overdue for completion at the end of June. Of these, 543 were overdue for more than three months. Up to June of this year, 123 assessment of need applications were received in Cavan and Monaghan for 2026.

It is clear that change is needed, not just in Cavan-Monaghan but across the country. There has been progress over the past two years with a notable increase in the number of completed applications. Over 5,900 AON reports were completed in 2025, a 43% increase compared with the year previous. Some 3,043 assessment reports were completed in the first six months of 2026. This improvement must continue. Significant legislative and operational work continues to improve the AON process and over time will reduce waiting times. This includes continuation of the targeted waitlist initiative, improved training and guidelines for assessment officers and the targeted amendment of the Disability (Amendment) Bill, which was brought to Cabinet this week, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the AON process.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I hope the Minister of State's voice gets better soon. I know it is difficult when one is in this position with a sore throat. However, I have to say that regardless of the tone in which she is able to deliver it, her answer is incredibly worrying on a number of fronts. First of all, there is now a backtracking. I have a parliamentary question response from the HSE in January where I was given county-specific data. Now, the Minister of State is telling me the HSE does not provide that. Again, there are difficulties in the response with the fact that this Government is breaking the law by failing to provide children with assessments of need they are legally entitled to, within the timeframe they are legally entitled to. Yet, the information the Minister of State is providing in response to that is becoming more limited and restricted. In the first instance, I ask her to get a handle on that. Second, the numbers she has cited from January to now - the most recent figures - suggest to me that there is an increase from 509 children who are waiting for a stage 2 assessment, to over 600. Is that true? Are

there more children currently waiting more than a year for assessment of need in Cavan and Monaghan than was the case at the beginning of this year.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The information I have provided the Deputy is the Cavan and Monaghan figures combined. It shows that 634 applications were overdue for completion at the end of June this year. That is the figure up to the end of June. Of these, 543 were overdue for more than three months. That is the data the HSE has provided to me. Applications received in quarter 1 and quarter 2 this year for Cavan and Monaghan combined are 123. Those 634 applications are the data up to the end of June. That includes the 123 applications received this year but if we are talking about those overdue for completion at the end of June, the figure is 634. That is the information. It is provided by regional health area and local health office area. That is the Cavan-Monaghan combined figure.

Deputy Matt Carthy: To be clear, this is an important point. I asked, through a parliamentary question, as is my constitutional right, for the assessment of need number in Cavan and Monaghan, by county. The Minister of State is telling me that the HSE does not provide that. I am telling her it did provide it, as recently as January. I am aware of that because I have a parliamentary question response. That is telling. If it is not dealing with the Minister of State and sending her into this Chamber with a shortfall in the information she has been asked for, how can she trust it in respect of what I contend is the much more serious matter that just in Cavan and Monaghan, 634 children being failed? They are not only being failed in a moral sense but are being absolutely failed in a legal sense. The Government is breaking the law in respect of these children, and despite the assurances the Minister of State and others have provided to us, this has real-life implications. Many of these 634 children are being denied access to other services because their assessment of need has not been carried out. This Government needs to get a grip on it. I have been here since 2020. I have been listening to the same rhetoric from Ministers about all the measures that are going to be taken to improve matters but it is going to take a little bit of time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Minister of State to respond.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As time passes, the situation gets worse.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will you conclude, Deputy Carthy, please?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am asking the Minister of State to knock some heads together and sort this out once and for all.

Deputy Emer Higgins: With all due respect to my predecessors and the Minister's, while the Deputy may have heard what plans were coming down the tracks, what he is hearing from us is what plans are happening, what changes are happening and what reforms we are delivering. This week the Minister, Deputy Foley, and I brought to Cabinet legislation that will make it more efficient, more effective and will provide standardised guidelines for the entire assessment of need process. That will be in this House for debate next week.

From a policy perspective, the HSE has developed, launched and is about to implement two very significant changes. One is the single point of access, which means there will be no wrong door for any child. I hear this all the time from parents. Someone is on a waiting list for primary care or a CDNT, gets to the top of the list and is told they are on the wrong list. That will be no more. That is a significant change for families. Also, the autism protocol and pathways initiative is being launched. From a budgetary perspective, we are building capacity within our teams. The workforce in disability has increased by 22% in five years and we are investing in the wait list initiative to reduce the number of children in Cavan-Monaghan and across the country who are waiting on an assessment of need. These are real changes that will deliver for children and families. I appreciate it will not happen overnight but these reforms are needed to change the situation for those children and their families.

Parental Leave

67. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she will consider increasing the duration of parent's leave to support more working parents to stay at home with their children during the first year, given her Department has policy and legal responsibility for all family leaves. [65895/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: There have been significant developments in entitlements for parents of working families in recent years. The combined durations of maternity, paternity and parent's leave and benefit now equate to 46 weeks of paid leave for a two-parent family, supplemented by an entitlement to 16 weeks of unpaid maternity leave and 26 weeks of unpaid parental leave per parent.

Under the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019, working parents are entitled to nine weeks of paid parent's leave, to be taken in the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child, as required by the EU work-life balance directive. The entitlement is for each parent in their own right. The leave is non-transferable to ensure that fathers are also supported in their caring roles and to promote women's equal labour market participation. The principle of non-transferability is also required by the EU work-life balance directive.

Under the Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2019, an employee who is a relevant parent in respect of a child under the age of 12 is entitled to 26 weeks of unpaid parental leave for each child. Where a child has a disability or long-term illness, the entitlement can continue until the child is 16 years of age.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 complements existing family leave entitlements and introduces additional flexibility for working parents and carers. Under this legislation, parents and carers have a right to request flexible working arrangements in line with Article 9 of EU Directive 2019/1158. An entitlement to five days of leave annually for medical care purposes was also introduced under this Act. A key priority in First 5, the whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families, is to support parents to look after their babies at home for the first year of their lives, given the benefits of parental care in that first year for children's outcomes. Family leave provisions are kept under review to ensure they respond to the needs of families and are also mindful of the impact of the leaves on workplaces.

Deputy Mark Wall: Paternity leave is a fairly recent policy, introduced in 2016. In 2020, the uptake was 48.6%; in 2023, that increased to 54%. Of those who avail of paternity leave, only 43% go on to parent's leave. Compare that with those who start on maternity benefit, of whom 75% go on to parent's leave. Ireland offers €299 per week. For working families, this represents a 72% drop; that is the figure we have been given, based on quarter 1 average incomes. Other EU countries offer much more to parents. I again ask whether the Government is considering extending parent's leave. When will parents in this country see such an extension?

Deputy Norma Foley: Programme for Government - Securing Ireland's Future commits to examining the extension of parent's leave and benefit and additional flexibilities. The first action plan under the new national strategy for women and girls, published in August, includes measures to support working families in balancing work and family responsibilities, including extending parent's leave. The Department is taking forward work to implement that measure and to look at and examine it.

The programme for Government also commits to introducing pay-related parent's benefit and exploring other payments where a similar model could be applied. A pay-related model was introduced on 31 March 2025 for jobseeker's benefit. The Department of Social Protection will draw on the learnings from that scheme to inform the development of options for parent's benefit and other family leave schemes.

There is a programme for Government commitment to examining the extension of parent's leave and benefit and additional flexibilities. Work on that is under way. Work is ongoing in the Department of Social Protection on pay-related parent's benefit.

Deputy Mark Wall: Will the Minister fill us in on the work under way in the Department? This is a huge issue, as she and everyone in this House knows, for many parents. Nine weeks' parent's leave is simply not good enough for those who have to look after a newborn, particularly in cases where a C-section was involved, which parents have contacted me about. Given the amount of work and care needed to ensure the health of the mother and child, nine weeks does not help the situation. What stage is the work in the Department at? Will the Minister look to a public consultation on this? I am sure she will get plenty of feedback from parents because that is what we have received in our office in the weeks and months since we started raising this issue. Will the Minister confirm her and the Government's thinking on increasing paternity leave to replicate other EU countries, which offer a far better scheme than is available in Ireland?

Deputy Norma Foley: While I appreciate what the Deputy has said about the nine weeks, it is important to reiterate that up to 46 weeks of paid leave is available to two-parent families. The programme for Government contains a commitment to examining the extension of parent's leave and benefit and other flexibilities, as does the national strategy for women and girls. My Department is in the very early stages of looking at that. There will be engagement and consultation on that. The pay-related model is also important. That is to be undertaken by the Department of Social Protection. Between the programme for Government commitment and the national strategy, there is a commitment for this to be looked at.

Childcare Services

68. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to give an update on the sites to be selected for the rollout of the State-led childcare pilot; and if she has considered the inclusion of County Kildare given it has one of the lowest levels of community childcare provision. [65891/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I announced €135 million in capital investment in buildings for high-quality, accessible State-led early learning and childcare up to 2030. This is a ground-breaking initiative for Government and it began this year. Capital funding will be used to acquire and fit out the buildings, depending on requirements. The State-led initiative will provide thousands of places up to 2030, with the funding provided through the national development plan. The level of investment will ramp up over the lifetime of the Government.

The programme was launched earlier this year and has eight objectives, including the delivery of additional supply in suitable locations, cost-effectiveness and timeliness, and supporting improved public management of the sector. A range of tools have been developed to assess projects' alignment with the programme objectives, including a forward planning model to analyse early learning and childcare supply and demand.

The Department has received project proposals from a number of sources since the programme was launched. These projects are in different stages of development. Some relate to existing buildings ready to be occupied or fitted out, while others are longer term prospects for future years. Not all proposals align with the programme objectives. Some projects are proposed by an existing early learning and childcare service provider, while others relate to a building or property only, where a separate process to identify an operator would be required.

The Department has a long list of projects under consideration, including project proposals received through preliminary appraisal forms from city and county childcare committees. I am advised that no formal proposal has been received from County Kildare via a preliminary appraisal form.

The Department is aware that this list is not exhaustive and I reiterate that the scheme remains open. There is an opportunity for people to make proposals at any point and I am very happy to do that. As Deputy Wall is aware, the first point of contact is the local city and county childcare committees.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister for her reply. It is disappointing to hear we have had no proposal from County Kildare. As the Minister is aware, I have discussed with her on multiple occasions in the House the deserts that exist in County Kildare, particularly around towns such as Kilcullen and Newbridge, where parents come to me and say they cannot find childcare. The question I have as a result of the Minister's reply is whether parents can contact the childcare committees. It seems to me that unless a provider contacts the childcare committees we will not get the facilities we need in Kildare. It is parents who are contacting me and it is parents who are facing these problems. I have previously given examples in the House of people who have made a life in Kilcullen having to move back to counties such as Kilkenny because they do not have childcare facilities in that town. This is still happening on a weekly basis in my county. Again, the question I ask is whether the Department will get

involved in identifying these deserts that we and the Minister have spoken about in the House previously rather than relying on childcare committees and proposals that childcare committees might get from providers.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be clear, proposals to the city or county childcare committees are not all from providers. They can be from anyone. Deputy Wall will appreciate that there has to be some form of a process and the first line of the process has been identified to be the local on-the-ground mechanism of the county and childcare committees. It is free to anybody to make a proposal. In the first instance, this year we are looking at provision of buildings and primarily where a building might be available. I am aware that community groups have stepped forward, as have individuals. The proposals can come from anywhere and there is an openness in the city and county childcare committees to look at any proposal that comes their way. Of course we will look at other opportunities as well. There are opportunities through local authorities. We are very open to working with anybody who has a viable proposal. In the first instance a preliminary business case will be made and then a full business case. To assure the Deputy, the process remains open. If anybody wants to step forward we are very happy for consideration to be given to the proposal.

Deputy Mark Wall: By the end of the day I will be sending the Minister a number of proposals from County Kildare because so many families are asking me this question. The problem I have with the Minister's answer is that we are still reliant on viable proposals. Parents are hard-working, as we have just discussed with regard to parental leave, so how are they to come up with premises? I have contacted schools and local sports clubs to try to get them involved in this and they are not forthcoming with the premises. We still have these deserts, as I call them, in Kildare and other counties because I have been contacted by people in other counties. I ask again that when the Department receives these multiple questions from parents it looks at these deserts and works with the parents, who are ordinary decent families working each day but finding it more and more difficult to get childcare places and do not have the time, energy or perhaps know-how to identify places. This is where I believe the Department and the childcare committees come in. I ask that when the Minister receives the proposals from me later today she actively looks at them and at providing childcare places in County Kildare where they are needed.

Deputy Norma Foley: I suggest, as I have already outlined, that the first line of contact is the local city and county childcare committees. That is the process. I would be surprised at this point if Deputy Wall has not engaged with them because I know he is very active on the ground and I imagine he has already engaged with them. If he has not, that is the first line of contact. Whatever proposal Deputy Wall has, it should go to them first. They are on the ground and can discuss with him the potential possibilities or the viability of a particular project he might want to advance. As it stands, this year we are looking at buildings that might be available because this is the quickest access. If opportunities present themselves we will look at building facilities or whatever. Let us be very clear that there is a process whereby a proposal, suggestion, idea or vision can be discussed on the ground with the local facility, which is the local city and county childcare committee. I suggest that if Deputy Wall has a number of proposals he engages with them first and if they are viable they will come to the Department and we will do all we can to progress them.

Public Sector Pay

69. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she will confirm that pay increases agreed under the public sector pay discussions will automatically apply to health and social care workers employed by section 39 organisations. [65462/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: In March 2025, a commitment was given that section 39 workers would be brought into future public sector pay agreements automatically. I accept that budget 2027 is not finalised and that public sector pay discussions have not started but I would like confirmation from the Minister today that the commitment given in 2025 will be upheld for the people and organisations delivering front-line disability, older person and community services on behalf of the State.

Deputy Norma Foley: The March 2025 pay funding agreement for workers in community and voluntary health and social care organisations, whom Deputy Cooney has referenced, represents a significant investment in the sector and provides certainty for workers and their employers on the application of future pay adjustments in the public sector. The agreement was negotiated between Government Departments and unions, with the involvement of relevant funding agencies and employer representatives, with, as always, the assistance of the Workplace Relations Commission.

The agreement includes funding for a 9.25% pay increase for workers directly employed by these independently operated organisations. In funding terms, the deal amounts to an increase of approximately €70 million per annum for the organisations delivering specialist disability services and supports funded by the HSE. Taken together with the earlier October 2023 agreement, which provides for an 8% increase, this amounts to a 17.25% increase in available pay funding over a three-and-a-half year period. The final increase provided for in the agreement, a 2% general round increase, is due to be applied on 1 October. The level of funding increase for individual service providers is assessed and validated by the HSE with reference to the service agreements in place. This ensures the uplift takes account of pay-related costs in each service agreement.

In a landmark step by the Government the arrangements also include automatic linkage for these workers to general round increases in any future public sector pay agreement. This treatment is an important step forward for workers and has been a landmark step forward by the Government and much sought after by workers. It is a huge assurance and reassurance to them that there is automatic linkage to any general round increase, not only in the upcoming public sector pay agreement but public sector pay agreements going forward also.

Deputy Joe Cooney: Section 39 workers have been left behind. After the crash their pay was cut in line with the public service but it has never been restored in the same way. It has taken over a decade, with the Labour Court and threatened strike action, to begin to close the gap. We are still not there. Even the agreement reached in 2023 was not fully honoured because the funding released to the section 39 organisations did not cover the full cost to employers, including pension and PRSI contributions. Small providers without reserves or fundraising capacity could well be pushed towards cutting services rather than staff. Funding levels for

section 39 organisations must cover the full cost of employees' salary increases as well as their pensions and PRSI costs. Has this been raised by the Minister and the Department in the current budget discussions?

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the agreements reached in recent years, including the 9.25% increase and the 8% increase in 2023, are a 17.25% increase over a three-and-a-half year period. This is significant. As always, the Government's priority is to protect vital services for those who rely on them while ensuring sustainable employment for the dedicated workers who provide quality supports and services. The phased increases recognise that staff should be fairly paid for the difficult work they do. Notably, the ability of organisations to actively recruit and retain staff has also improved as a result of these funding agreements.

To respond to Deputy Cooney's point, as part of the agreement a comprehensive data-gathering exercise is being conducted on pay and funding arrangements in the sector. This exercise is crucial in order to create a shared understanding of the sector.

The outcome of the exercise will inform targeted measures on the low pay issues that affect the long-term sustainability of services and it is expected that this work will be finalised shortly. These arrangements relate to services funded through statutory grant aid arrangements, funding for services commissioned through tendering arrangements, which is not covered-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Joe Cooney: The consequences of a failure to deliver a fully funded package for section 39 staff and organisations will, unfortunately, fall on the vulnerable people who rely on them. These organisations operate on a tight service level agreement with the HSE. Pay parity for staff must be supported by a ring-fenced, fully funded package from Government that includes the full cost to their employers, which is important. Anything less will move this crisis from staff and organisations directly onto families, unfortunately. Organisations funded under section 39 already find it difficult to compete with HSE and section 38 pay scales. This will compound the existing recruitment and retention difficulties resulting in increased staffing shortages, greater reliance on agency staff and a higher risk to service delivery. Organisations may be unable to adequately support their existing staff or meet the needs of current service users and their families. We need to fix this issue properly, once and for all.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that this is and has been recognised by all concerned, including the workers the Deputy referred to, as a landmark step by Government that ensures these workers will be automatically included for any general round increases in any future public sector pay agreements. That is very significant in the first instance. In the second instance, regarding the specific issues raised by the Deputy, an exercise is currently under way, which was agreed to at the time, to get a further, clearer and more transparent insight into the issues within the sector because there are a variety of different issues in the sector. That exercise is under way and nearing completion. It is a data-gathering exercise and the outcome of that exercise can and will inform targeted measures on the low pay issues that affect the long-term sustainability of services. The arrangements relating to the workers the Deputy referred to are arrangements through statutory grant aid arrangements. Funding for services in those circumstances is part of that data-gathering exercise.

It is important to say as well that the organisations funded under section 39, while supported by the HSE, are independent entities. They are not public bodies and their staff are not public servants. The terms and conditions of employment for staff in these organisations are ultimately determined by the employer and their employees, notwithstanding the body of work that the State is doing and the commitments that we have given regarding the automatic linkage to public pay.

Early Childhood Care and Education

70. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the measures she is considering in budget 2027 to expand childcare capacity, particularly in rural areas experiencing significant shortages of places; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [65983/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: As the Minister will know, families in Ireland, especially in rural communities, are continuing to face significant challenges, not only in affordability but also in accessing childcare. I know that she is concerned about it, as am I, and I know we have many programme for Government commitments, including the creation of additional childcare places, initiating State-led childcare, especially in areas of unmet need, and getting to that €200 per month. With budget 2027 approaching, will the Minister outline what measures she intends to consider in supporting childcare provision in rural Ireland?

Deputy Norma Foley: I recognise the Deputy's sterling work in a personal capacity as Chair of the children and equality committee, her leadership in that respect and her personal commitment to the issues in relation to early years in childcare. The view shared by the committee that the Deputy chairs excellently, and across Government, is that we should improve access to quality and affordable early learning and childcare opportunities.

Early learning and childcare capacity is increasing. Data from the annual early years sector profile for 2024-25 shows that the estimated number of enrolments increased by approximately 25% from the 2021-22 programme year. A 25% increase in those three years is significant. However, it appears, and I absolutely accept, that demand for early learning and childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children.

The Department supports the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to significant expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced, and this will continue to be the case in 2027. Core funding, which is presently in its fifth programme year, funds services based on the number of places available. This provides stability to services and reduces the risk associated with opening a new service or expanding an already existing service.

Budget 27, as the Deputy is aware, is currently being considered by the Government in the context of the annual Estimates process, which officials are actively engaging in. I have also engaged directly with the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers. The Deputy will therefore appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage other than

to say openly that I am pursuing an ambitious budget package intended to reduce costs to parents, to support providers in the workforce and to increase the availability of places.

In addition to current funding to expand capacity, the Government is also supporting the expansion of early learning and childcare capacity through capital funding. We are doing this through a number of different mechanisms, including schemes like building blocks and the State-led initiative. In terms of building blocks, capital funding schemes have been in operation since 2024. The building blocks extension scheme is currently operating and will deliver quality, affordable, full daycare places for those aged under three across the country.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister. I welcome the increase in enrolments. I am really thinking about my own county of Mayo. Even when we have increases in the national childcare scheme, and I hear about these great subsidies, I know many parents in my county are not able to access them. The last data I got was that we only have one registered private childminder in the whole county. There has been a bit of an uptake on the pre-registration course, with the deadline of September 2027 approaching, but after that course there has not been a sign-up.

I am very concerned that right now we only have one registered childminder. People are already struggling to find a place with a private childminder or within a centre, and now we have this looming deadline coming in September. I am extremely concerned. What I want to see addressed is the potential crisis with private childminders if they do not start registering soon. In relation to State-led childcare, in my own area, because we are focusing more on the voluntary boards of management and the community-led element, we do not have any proposals in that area yet for Ballina.

Deputy Norma Foley: Just to be clear, significant work is under way to encourage more childminders into the registration process. A review is under way in terms of how that is working and what we could do differently in future, including what further supports we could provide or whatever the case might be. I am very pleased to have brought that review forward to give us a clearer line of sight of what we need to do to get more of the childminders on board, recognising their invaluable work and the important contribution they make to early learning and childcare. Specifically, in terms of the building blocks and the scheme that is there, a large proportion of the projects supported through building blocks have been in rural areas. It is important to make that point. The State-led process was announced in January. We are working at speed and I acknowledge the work of everybody involved. In the coming weeks, we are hoping to make announcements around the State-led projects.

Deputy Keira Keogh: State-led childcare will be a game-changer but we cannot just rely on the community and voluntary boards. In cities like Dublin and Cork, the boards may have accountants, HR professionals or solicitors guiding them. In rural Ireland, the same people who are on their GAA board are also often on the board of the community childcare facility, so we need to look at that. I also really welcome that a review is ongoing in relation to how we can better support private childminders to get registered. We need to reach out and allow people, even in a confidential way, to come forward. Good representative organisations are speaking for childminders but a lot of childminders are not even registered with those organisations. I held a public meeting and childminders were nearly afraid to come to it. An

anonymous survey where they can engage in a confident way would be welcome. If we do not get increased registration soon with this deadline approaching, we could be in an even bigger crisis by September than we are in right now.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the process is an open one. It is open to anyone to get involved and to engage in the process. We would absolutely welcome existing childminders, including those who are registered and those who are not registered, all of them, coming forward to share their thoughts and views on what might be done to support it better going forward. I again reiterate that we hope in the coming weeks to make the announcement around eight proposals for State-led childcare this year.

12 o'clock

Including for rural Ireland, opportunities remain open for any group, individual or organisation that wants to reach out to the city and county childcare committees with proposals whether a proposed building, a site, a building that requires purchase or even a building that simply requires fit out. The Department is very flexible in offering any kind of support we can to enhance the availability of the provision of early years and childcare facilities.

Disability Services

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 71 is in Deputy O'Rourke's name. We do not have time but does he wish to just ask the question?

71. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the measures she is taking to increase residential places for adults with intellectual disabilities in County Meath; and the number of new residential places planned for 2026 and 2027. [64790/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will put the question and raise an issue with the Minister. I wanted to ask her about the measures she is taking to increase residential places for adults with intellectual disabilities in County Meath and the number of new residential places planned for 2026 and 2027. Along with a number of colleagues, including Deputy Guirke, I met a number of residential providers, including Clann Mór in Navan, County Meath. It has proposals at an advanced stage in relation to providing additional residential places. It, among others, needs support to do that. I implore the Minister to make that happen as quickly as possible.

Deputy Norma Foley: *Reply not given on the floor of the House*

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality continues to engage with the HSE, to expand and develop residential services for people with disabilities. Engagement is also ongoing to improve the process for service users and families to access these residential services.

HSE Louth Meath disability services advises that it is fully committed to supporting the expansion of residential services for adults with intellectual disabilities, physical and sensory disabilities and autism.

The HSE advises that in recent years, priority 1 placements have represented a significant proportion of residential activity however for 2026 and onwards, the objective, were possible is a reduction in placements provided on an individual emergency basis, with a move towards commissioning placements on a planned basis, prioritising whole house solutions such as four-bed houses, rather than sourcing individual placements.

The aim is to commission placements within the region where possible while working with service providers and on housing solutions to reduce the reliance on emergency and out-of-area arrangements.

HSE confirms that significant progress is being made in County Meath to expand capacity and meet growing demand for planned residential placements. This year, a number of new planned residential placements have already been successfully secured and allocated to individuals across County Meath. HSE Louth Meath disability services is actively working with service providers and HSE National Disability Services to develop further placements. HSE Louth Meath disability services is strategically planning for sustainable long-term growth and is currently collaborating with service providers and HSE national disability services to plan for further planned residential placements in 2027.

Budget 2026 provided approximately €3.9 billion to specialist disability services with specialist disability residential services making up the largest part of the disability funding disbursed by the HSE, almost 60% - €2.2 billion - of the total budget.

Some €65million has been allocated to disability residential services in 2026 for new developments, which includes €40 million of funding that will provide in the region of 199 new residential responses. This includes 152 newly created residential placements consisting of 72 planned placements and 80 - priority 1 - new placements to meet urgent need, as outlined in the HSE's national service plan for 2026.

Funding has also been provided for other residential responses: to facilitate necessary enhancements which enables the uptake of vacant residential places by new individuals and also the additional funding required for individuals already in an existing placement, whose needs have become more complex. In limited circumstances, placements may be funded in nursing home settings.

The 2026 national service plan includes details of a move towards a more planned and responsive system of service provision with progress reflected in key performance indicators, KPIs, to ensure transparency and accountability in meeting service needs. The aim of the planned places funded in 2026 is to assist the HSE to move away from the practice of procuring high-cost individualised unplanned placements with commercial for-profit providers and allow for planning residential placements on a group basis with both commercial for-profit and not-for-profit providers. Work is under way in the HSE on building the capacity of section 38 and 39 providers, to deliver more residential services.

Regarding future funding, consideration of specialist disability services and funding requirements occurs annually as part of the Estimates process. Engagement is currently ongoing between the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in respect of funding for 2027.

Further to the work outlined above, 2026 is the first of a five-year capital investment plan out to 2030, supported by €278 million in funding secured through the national development plan. The HSE are currently working on drafting a disability specific multi-annual capital plan which will strategically plan for the current and future disability capital needs across the 4 pillars: specialist residential care, residential respite, day services and assessment and multi-disciplinary teams, as well as infrastructure risks and climate action out to 2030.

Earlier this year, €43 million in capital investment was announced for much needed disability services in 2026, the first year of the national development plan. This represents a substantial increase in investment when compared with capital expenditure of previous years; €27 million in 2025, €23 million in 2024, €15 million in 2023 and €5.2 million in 2022.

The growth over the last number of years, and the capital secured under the national development plan demonstrates the Government's firm commitment to support and expand disability services.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Aréir, chonaic muid ar an teilifís náisiúnta ceathrar sceithirí de chuid An Garda Síochána. Is daoine iad seo a rinne iarracht inní tromchúiseach a ardú taobh istigh den Garda Síochána. Deir siad gur cuireadh ar leataobh iad, gur cuireadh bac orthu agus gur gearradh pionóis orthu. Tá sé de cheart ag an phobal anois a bheith ar an eolas faoi cé a bhí ar an eolas sa Rialtas faoin dóigh ar caitheadh leis na sceithirí seo agus an gníomh a rinneadh de bharr na himní tromchúisí a chuir siad chun tosaigh.

Last night, four Garda whistleblowers took the extraordinary step of going on national television. They waived their anonymity and told the public their story. These are people who tried to raise serious concerns from inside An Garda Síochána, who have given decades of service and tried to fulfil their duty to challenge wrongdoing. Instead, they say they were sidelined, obstructed and penalised. Anyone watching the programme last night could see they were devastated. It has taken a real toll on all of them and on their lives. Two of them worked in the protected disclosures office itself, the very system established after the Maurice McCabe scandal to protect people who speak out. Last night, they described a system in crisis. We heard about a shotgun that disappeared from Garda custody and 13 years later turning up in the hands of criminals. We heard much more. We heard about the confidential protected disclosure file concerning that weapon that was marked for closure without the knowledge or consent of the person responsible for managing the case. This morning, on Newstalk, deputy commissioner Paul Cleary acknowledged that former Commissioner Drew Harris had intervened in the protected disclosure process. What whistleblowers were telling the public last night as interference has now directly been acknowledged, in respect of the Commissioner's involvement, by one of the most senior officers in An Garda Síochána. That is a shocking development.

One issue brings the human consequences of all of this into particular stark focus, the Garda holsters which were dangerously defective. Just six days before Detective Garda Colm Horkan was murdered, another garda suffered life-changing injuries when his firearm discharged while it was in one of these holsters. Detective Garda Colm Horkan was murdered after his own firearm was taken from his holster and used to kill him. It has been suggested that this was only possible because the holster was defective. The holsters were supplied not by a specialist firearms manufacturer but by a maker of saddles for horses. When the protected disclosure office sought the assistance of retired lieutenant colonel Ray Lane, an experienced weapons expert, Garda management intervened and blocked it. Lane was not appointed and the authority of Rose Sweeney, who had discretion to make that decision, was badly undermined.

Many of these matters are not secret. They have been raised internally, discussed in this House and reported prominently in national newspapers over the years. The Department when the Minister was Minister for justice knew about this. It was informed in August 2020 about the issues regarding these holsters. A protected disclosure was made directly to her that month shortly after she became Minister for justice. I want to ask her directly because she avoided answering some of these questions in the years that have gone past. When was she first made aware of an issue with the holsters as Minister for justice? Was she briefed about the safety concerns surrounding them? What did she do about the treatment of the whistleblowers raising these concerns? When all of this came across her desk as Minister for justice, what did she do about it? Does she now accept given the statement of the deputy commissioner on Newstalk this morning that the former Garda Commissioner in fact interfered in an independent process surrounding the protected disclosure? What does she say about that?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I would like to use this opportunity, because I was not aware of the details last night, to wish our colleague, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, well. Any attack on an elected representative is an attack on our democracy. It is something we all need to condemn and push back on. I wish him and his family well.

Like a lot of people here, I also watched the documentary last night. It covered a wide range of very serious matters over the past several years. Many of them, as was referred to in the programme, related to protected disclosures and investigations, which are still ongoing, related to matters before the courts, both criminal and civil, and before the WRC and related to and subject to investigations by Fiosrú, the office of the police ombudsman. The Deputy knows for that reason I cannot comment. The reason I cannot comment on any of these matters is that we, as a House in 2014, passed legislation brought to the House by Brendan Howlin, which made it very clear that the legislation would prevent any of us, under law, from commenting on or confirming the existence of or details of any specific protected disclosure. Importantly, the legislation----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, the Minister is aware that these protected disclosures are closed so that does not prevent her from answering any questions, just to be helpful. They waived their anonymity.

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

Deputy Helen McEntee: To be very clear - the legislation is very clear - while individuals may choose to talk about it, that does not allow us, legally, to talk about it. That is clearly set out in the legislation. Individuals chose to speak about it last night but that does not enable any other person to speak about it. I want to be very clear about that. The legislation was agreed by this House in 2014 and enhanced in 2022. What is really important about the legislation is that it was put in place to allow whistleblowers to come forward and to make sure there was an independent process that took these matters away from politicians, from myself and from anybody in this House, and rightly so. It was decided this would be the approach because of what happened in the past. That is why this legislation was enacted. I fully support it because we have seen over the years many people who have come forward and highlighted issues in the workplace. We should all welcome this. We should protect whistleblowers, make sure people feel they can come forward and when they do that there is an independent process. We also have to respect that process and make sure anybody who is the subject of a protected disclosure is afforded the protection of that independent process as well.

The Deputy mentioned my time as Minister for justice. The very first thing I did, the very first time I got into my car to go anywhere as Minister for justice, was to go to Castlerea to meet the colleagues of Detective Horkan, who were understandably devastated, and to meet his family whom I know are still going through an unbelievable trauma they will probably never be able to fully comprehend. I made it very clear at the time that my job as Minister was to make sure that gardaí, in doing their jobs, were protected, had what they needed, that the legislation was in place for them and that we provided the resources for them to make sure they were kept safe. I also introduced changes to make sure the oversight within An Garda Síochána was as strong as it could be.

Coupled with that, in 2020, the Garda anti-corruption unit was established in An Garda Síochána. This was to make sure any wrongdoing within An Garda Síochána was dealt with. Through the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, I strengthened the role of the board and the An Garda Síochána audit committee, which now have statutory roles in overseeing the appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of procedures in An Garda Síochána dealing with protected disclosures.

I also produced the legislation that established Fiosrú and the whole reason for that was to make sure that where complaints were made by gardaí about issues in An Garda Síochána, they would be dealt with more quickly. The process was too slow. There were too many elements to it. It was taking too long and not producing effective results-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----so I made sure legislation was put in place to speed up the process. We all want to make sure there is a system in place that protects whistleblowers but we also need to make sure we adhere to the legislation.

Finally, I will come back to the last point. There is an opportunity for this legislation to be reviewed. That will come up soon-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and all stakeholders need to be included in it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: With respect, these are really serious matters. The Minister has not answered any of our questions - not one - and this is not the first time. She has dodged questions from other people in the Opposition previously in the Dáil.

The first question I asked had nothing to do with the protected disclosure. Why will the Minister not tell the public? Let me read it again. When was the Minister first made aware there was an issue with the holsters? It has been alleged the issue with the holsters resulted in the death of a garda. That has nothing to do with the protected disclosure. It is about the Minister being upfront, honest and transparent about when she, as Minister for Justice, was made aware of it. Second, when was the Minister briefed about the safety concerns regarding the holsters? Why will she not tell us? What is she hiding?

On another question I asked, the assistant commissioner admitted on the radio today that there was interference by the former Garda Commissioner in the protected disclosure process. That does not have to do with the protected disclosure itself; it is the process relating to these protected disclosures. What does the Minister have to say about that as a member of the Government and a Minister who was in office-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----at the time he was interfering with an independent and autonomous office? It is earth-shattering that An Garda Síochána admitted blatantly on the radio-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Conclude, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----that it interfered with the process. I will ask the question again and ask that the Minister stop hiding. When was she first made aware of the issue with the holsters? Will she give the date? When was she briefed-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have the questions, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----about the safety concerns? What did she do about it? What does she have to say-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----about gardaí at a senior level saying they interfered with the independent process?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: First, I will not be lectured to by a party whose history when it comes to protecting our gardaí is less than standard.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have done everything in my role as Minister for Justice to protect gardaí and make sure that when they carry out their duties they have the resources they need and that the legislation is in place to protect them. That is always how I have carried out my work. It is how the current Minister carries out his work and how the Minister before me carried out his work. There is a clear process in place. There is a clear structure in place, which clearly outlines that, where matters are a protected disclosure and where issues are before the courts or other bodies, I am precluded from commenting, as are others, so I am not hiding.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are hiding. Just answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, allow the Minister to answer the question.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No, hold on a second, I am not hiding anything.

Let me be clear-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Minister saying she cannot answer the question as to when she and the Department were first made aware? That is just nonsense.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to continue.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy just does not like the answer

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is no answer.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We elected representatives to this House who then passed legislation in 2014. Sinn Féin supported the legislation in 2022, which strengthened-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How can the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, tell us that you were told in August 2020? How can the Minister for justice tell us that when the Minister, Deputy McEntee, will not tell us herself?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Stop interrupting her.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, allow the Minister to respond, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Okay, I apologise, but this is very frustrating, with respect.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have been pretty clear in what I have said. It is a matter of public record that An Garda Síochána changed the holsters. It said that clearly. It is also a matter of public record that the Garda Síochána Act 2005 states clearly that procurement or any of the other matters the Deputy outlined are the role and responsibility of An Garda Síochána and that I had no role as Minister for Justice in that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When were you informed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is also clear-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When were you informed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is also clear - and we have done this for a reason - that there is a differentiation between the roles of An Garda Síochána, the actions and roles of the Ombudsman-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why will the Minister not tell us when she was informed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and those of me or other Ministers. That was clearly introduced and voted for by this House in 2014 and again in 2022.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why will she not tell us?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Stop interrupting.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is ridiculous. It is a simple question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I join Deputies across the House in condemning yesterday's assault on Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. I wish him a speedy recovery and send best wishes to him and his family.

Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme was shocking. It showed that the oppressive and vindictive culture that existed when Maurice McCabe was targeted for speaking out has not been rooted out of An Garda Síochána. We heard credible allegations that Garda personnel who raised concerns were isolated, undermined and penalised. Again and again, protecting the institution appeared to take priority over investigating what had been reported.

The concerns were not trivial. They included firearms and ammunition being stored in appalling conditions, warnings about unsafe holsters being ignored, the refusal to technically examine the holster worn by Detective Garda Colm Horkan when his firearm was taken and used to murder him and alleged interference with a protected disclosure file concerning a shotgun which disappeared from Garda custody and was returned to criminal hands. Most extraordinary, the people working in the Garda office responsible for protecting whistleblowers became so disturbed by what they witnessed that they became whistleblowers themselves.

Deputy McEntee was Minister for Justice while much of this was happening. A new Garda protected disclosure office became operational on 6 January 2025. The establishment of that office was public knowledge, but the public announcement said nothing about what was happening to the existing office. We were not told its permanent and experienced personnel were being excluded, that outstanding confidential files were being transferred to a new team

or what safeguards were being put in place to protect the continuity and confidentiality of those files. This restructuring was directed by the former Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, so my question to the Minister is precise. Before the change took effect, was the Minister or her Department told the existing personnel would be removed from the office and that their outstanding protected disclosure files would be transferred to a new team? If she was told, what questions did she ask? Did she seek assurances that those files would be protected and no member of staff would be penalised for raising concerns? If she was not told, does she believe the former Garda Commissioner complied with his statutory obligation under section 41 of the Garda Síochána Act to keep the Minister and her Department fully informed of significant developments capable of damaging public confidence in An Garda Síochána?

Operational independence gave the Commissioner control of the decision. It did not release him from his duty to account for it or to keep the Minister fully informed. The Taoiseach yesterday suggested he could not comment because these matters involved protected disclosures, as did the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade today, but confidentiality protects the whistleblower, not the Government or senior Garda management, from having to account for their failings. This is not about revealing the context of any disclosure. It is about whether the system established to protect whistleblowers was purposefully undermined.

I do not think anyone who watched the RTÉ documentary last night decided we could continue as we are. What measures does the Government intend to take to ensure this is investigated thoroughly? Not a single person here believes we can just revert the investigation of these disclosures to Garda management. What does the Government intend to do about it? What exactly was the Minister informed of by the former Garda Commissioner Drew Harris about the change in the office personnel?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. There are two parts to what he asked. One is the matter of a protected disclosure and that is the information given by the individual last night. As I said, it is for individuals to disclose what they have disclosed, but it is not for me to discuss it. The matters discussed last night about the office, as the Deputy mentioned, are clearly, as was set out, the subject of an ongoing investigation, so it is not for me to comment on them. That is set out clearly in the 2014 Act.

My understanding of the new unit in An Garda Síochána was that it was a move to enhance the unit. I note it was in January 2025. An election had taken place in November 2024 and there was a change soon after that, but that change in the unit was to move it from being a part-time unit to a full-time unit and to ensure the garda of most senior rank was an inspector, which was not the case before that. That was clearly the intention in establishing a new unit. I am afraid I was not party to whether people transferred over. It is not information I am aware of, but the whole intention of establishing a new unit in 2025 was to enhance it, put it on a permanent footing and make sure the most senior rank in it was inspector, which had not been the case previously.

It is important for me to stress that there is an onus and obligation on each of us in this House, particularly given what we saw in the past, which was the reason for introducing legislation in 2014 and for enhancing it. It is why at the end of this year a review will start to look at the legislation, whether it is operating effectively and whether there are things we need to change. I encourage and suggest, particularly after last night, that all of us and the

stakeholders involved in this need to make sure representation is made to that review because we need to make sure legislation we enact, which has put this into an independent process away from the political system, as it should be, is operating as effectively as possible.

When you put something at arm's length from the political system, you need to make sure it is operating effectively, as it should be, while maintaining that independence. I do not think any Minister for justice should have a role in a protected disclosure. No Minister for justice should be the investigator in something that is brought forward. I do not think anybody in this House believes they should.

We now have an opportunity to review the legislation. I believe it has worked effectively. Again, I commend the many people who, despite great personal impact on their own lives and the lives of their families, have come forward to highlight issues, not just in An Garda Síochána but also in other workplaces. That is the importance of the legislation. It is not just about An Garda Síochána but An Garda Síochána is quite literally charged with protecting people in this country and with the security and protection of this State. We need to make sure the structures within An Garda Síochána are such that, if people are not doing things correctly, there are repercussions. We need to make sure there are oversight structures in place. As I have outlined, many such structures and oversight mechanisms were introduced when I was Minister for Justice and many have been followed up on by the current Minister.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Again, I did not ask the Minister whether she was informed of the details of any protected disclosure. We know that section 41 of the Garda Síochána Act requires that the Commissioner inform the Minister for justice if there are incidents happening that have the potential to undermine public trust in the office. Public trust has been very clearly undermined by any number of issues captured in last night's RTÉ documentary. Those charged with looking after whistleblowers, taking on their files and investigating their claims had to become whistleblowers themselves and were then removed from the protected disclosures office. Does the Minister not believe that is an issue worthy of the former Commissioner, Drew Harris, informing her of as the office was changing over? Does she not feel such an issue was incorporated into that Act? Is she satisfied that the information she was given was enough? This goes to the heart of ministerial accountability and Ministers' role of informing Parliament. It is very clear that there was a gross failure and that people were being penalised. What exactly did Drew Harris inform the Minister of when he was making this change?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I know I sound like I am repeating myself but it is important to say that the Act very clearly states that, under the law, it is not an option to comment on or confirm the existence or details of any specific protected disclosure. What the Deputy is referencing, what was highlighted last night and what was spoken of by individuals clearly suggests that is what is being talked about here. I am not trying to be evasive. I am trying to be very clear. Legislation was enacted that very clearly precludes my commenting on the matter. As for the office itself, I was not aware of how the structure was changing or what individuals were or were not being carried over. That is not something that was brought to my attention because it is a matter for An Garda Síochána. The 2005 Act very clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of An Garda Síochána. My role as Minister for Justice at that time was to make sure that we strengthened oversight mechanisms where we needed to.

To refer specifically to Fiosrú, individuals made a complaint, the complaint went to the ombudsman that existed then and it then went through a process of criminal investigation that might have come to an inconclusive answer. Those individuals then had to start at the beginning and potentially go through a civil process. It took a long time and nobody was getting answers. The process was protracted and was not working effectively. That is why Fiosrú was introduced. It was to ensure we would have a quicker, more efficient and more effective process. That was my priority and focus as Minister for Justice.

I again stress that, at all times, no matter what was going on, I adhered to and followed the rules, regulations and legalities of the 2014 and 2022 Acts. That was my responsibility as Minister. I took it very seriously and still do. I have always adhered to the rules in that regard.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We will look into that. I want to be associated with the Minister's comments about Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. I am thinking of him, his family and his supporters in south Kerry, many of whom I know very well.

Deputy Doherty raised the question of when the Minister first knew about the holster issue. I have the answer. It took three attempts before the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan's Department would tell me, but we now know it was August 2020. It is shocking that it took three attempts.

The whole country is talking about last night. This does not give me any pleasure. Everyone in this House knows that I have been raising these issues for years. It does not give me any pleasure to stand here today to say what I have to say. Luke, Brian, Donal and Rose are incredible people. They are real honest people. Many of these revelations are not new, by the way. There is a man sitting up there in the press gallery, John Lee, who has written about this for years. So has Mick Clifford. They deserve great credit. There are so many layers to this programme and so many issues that have not been covered but the Minister should not worry; we will cover them in this Chamber over the weeks, months and years to come.

The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, as the sitting Minister, will have to answer for how An Garda Síochána and his Department acted. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will also need to outline to the House what she did. I am not talking about the details of the individual protected disclosures. I am interested in process and pathways. Brian O'Reilly sent the Minister his protected disclosure in September 2023 as it impugned the then Commissioner. That was the correct thing for him to do because it was about the Commissioner. The Minister sent it to the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner later that month. That was also the correct thing to do. In October 2023, the OPDC sent its statutory direction that the Secretary General of the Minister's Department be appointed to investigate this. The Secretary General made no objection to this. That is where it sits. What happened next was detrimental to Brian O'Reilly's life, his career, his livelihood and the well-being of him, his wife, his children and his family. As Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee directed that the investigation be removed from her Secretary General and redirected to An Garda Síochána, thereby usurping the OPDC's statutory direction. Giving such direction is that office's role. We in this party know the legislation. Deputy McEntee, as Minister for Justice, thereby revealed Brian O'Reilly's identity, depriving him of the legal protections he was entitled to and exposing the nature of his allegations. In doing so, she acted without legal authority and directly interfered with a serious and significant protected disclosure. She did exactly what the Taoiseach spent all day yesterday lecturing us about, telling us that it would be completely and utterly inappropriate. How does the Minister

explain this? It was either done deliberately - to be fair to her, I actually do not think it was - or it was just incompetence or a mistake.

Everybody in here is talking about this. On 25 March this year, I told this Chamber that the issue of the holsters, one of which I am holding now, and how the Minister handled protected disclosures would haunt this Government, the Minister herself and the previous Government. Last night's programme absolutely confirmed that to be the case.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will start where I finished in answering the last question. In my role as Minister for Justice, at all times and on any matter, I adhered to the law and the structures we have to adhere to under this Act and legislation. The Deputy can look elsewhere, shake his head at me or say that I was incompetent or whatever it is he was trying to suggest.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I did not shake my head.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is exactly what he has suggested. I have adhered to the legislation at all times. At all times, I ensured that everything I did in the Department was to ensure accountability and oversight, even at times when that did not make me popular, which happened quite a lot. How did we make sure there were better structures in place? It was by introducing new legislation, putting in place better oversight mechanisms within the board of An Garda Síochána, making sure the audit committee had oversight of what happened on protected disclosures and introducing Fiosrú so that we would have better protection for those who brought forward protected disclosures. We also amended the 2014 legislation introduced by Deputy Kelly's former party leader. All of this was to make sure that, where people brought forward protected disclosures, procedures were adhered to and that those people were protected, encouraged to come forward and supported, where possible.

I cannot be any clearer in saying that I have always adhered to the rules and the regulations as set out to me. I have always acted in accordance with the law. When it comes to protected disclosures and matters relating to such disclosures that are still before the courts or a tribunal or inquiry, the Deputy will know that this is not something that any of us can talk about. The Taoiseach was very clear about that yesterday. I have repeated that many times this morning. As I have already said, we have an opportunity to review the legislation. There is a legal requirement in the Act to ensure that a review will start by July of next year. I am informed by the Department of public expenditure and reform that this review will start by the end of this year. There is an onus on all stakeholders to participate in that.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have laid out the facts. I have the documentation here in front of me. I am not interested in the details of the actual disclosures, the pathway and the process. I know what happened here. The Minister will have to explain it, despite everything she has said there, because the way the Brian O'Reilly case was managed by the Minister simply was not appropriate. Most of all though, today, I am thinking of the family of Colm Horkan. I have met them several times, and I know others here have too. They are broken. They are devastated. He should never have been wearing that version of this holster that night. The State let him and his family down. Someone has to stand up for them. Collectively, as a Chamber - Opposition or Government, it does not really matter - we all have to stand up for them.

Will the Government - I mean this - finally do the right thing and sanction an independent investigation into everything to do with how faulty holsters like this were given to our brave men and women serving as gardaí across the country? I know that is what the family wants. I know that is what they deserve.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I too have met the family, and not just on that occasion I mentioned. It was the very first thing I did as Minister. I met them subsequently and I know how difficult and traumatic this is for them. I know they never want anybody else to go through that. The death and the murder of any individual is traumatic enough but for this to happen to somebody who is tasked with protecting each and every one of us is reprehensible. We all agree on that. I do not think anything we can do will ever take that away from the family.

It is very clear that we have a number of different investigations and processes still under way. That might not suit what people want to say here today but that is a fact. It is the case. There is an obligation on each and every one of us to make sure that any independent investigation is adhered to. Beyond that, and the Taoiseach asked this question yesterday, we must ask ourselves what do we want to do and how do we respond. We have an opportunity to review the legislation to make sure it is acting in accordance but we have to make sure any independent process that is under way is allowed to continue. It might take longer than any of us would like, as is the case in many instances, but we have an obligation to ensure any process under way is allowed to conclude.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Every TD in this House knows Irish Water is not fit for purpose. Every day, an Opposition TD or a Government TD raises an Irish Water issue in this Chamber. Every day, Government and Opposition TDs are on local radio criticising Irish Water. It beggars belief that despite water shortages, hosepipe bans and future and continued scarcity of water due to climate change, Irish Water would decide to close down and decommission a perfectly good water treatment system plant and reservoir. That is exactly what it proposes to do with the Poulavanogue water treatment plant, serving the town of Clonmel. This is one of the plants currently serving the town and has done so for the best part of 100 years. Irish Water also proposes to decommission the Ragwell reservoir, a facility that can hold up to two days water supply for the town.

At the same time, it is bringing very hard water into the town. This supply already supplies part of the northern part of the town and has created huge financial problems and pressures for families who are already hard pressed. It damages white goods, electric kettles, dishwashers, washing machines and showers, forcing families to replace these on a regular basis. Many families are being forced to install water softeners at considerable cost and to pay for the maintenance. Now, Irish Water proposes to impose this very hard water on homes and businesses in the town. Irish Water refuses to even consider softening this hard water at source, something which is done routinely throughout Europe and in the United States. Irish Water has also refused to mix the soft water supply at Poulavanogue with the hard water supply from Monroe to reduce the hardness. South Tipperary TDs have asked for copies of the various reports Irish Water have relied on when making these decisions. We have not received those reports.

I am asking the Minister to immediately and urgently intervene with Irish Water to stop the closure and decommissioning of the Poulavanogue water supply, maintain the Poulavanogue supply for the purpose of a backup water supply for the town and for mixing with the hard water from Monroe and make available to TDs and public representatives all reports pertaining to the closure of the Poulavanogue supply and Ragwell reservoir. Irish Water must be made accountable on these issues and others. I ask the Minister today to make sure that happens by intervening with Irish Water on these issues.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. While I do not have the specific details of the case he outlined, I will bring this and all of the challenges he outlined directly back to the relevant Minister. Unfortunately, we still have a number of communities that are impacted by water infrastructure, much of which is decades old. It is important that the Government ensures that the significant amount of funding we have put directly into Irish Water is invested in communities and spent as quickly as possible and that the upgrades to our water facilities, treatment plants, piping and infrastructure that is decades old happen as quickly as possible.

From July of this year, Uisce Éireann marked a commitment to invest in the reimagined water infrastructure right across Tipperary, the Deputy's county. There was a €16 million upgrade in the Rossadrehid water treatment plant, the construction of which is now under way and will provide a safer, more reliable water supply for homes and businesses right across the region, originating in the Galtee Mountains. It is obviously an important source of water for the plant and it provides services to thousands of homes and businesses across the region.

This is about making sure every part of the county has access to that type of supply of water. It is about making sure the investment and significant funding that have been provided by the Government, through the national development plan and directly to Uisce Éireann, is invested as quickly as possible and people see the benefit. One of the biggest challenges we have, and I see this in my county as well, is that our population has grown very significantly in a short space of time. It is about making sure we can keep up with that growth, keep up with the delivery of houses and make sure that, at the same time, we are not just investing in new infrastructure but also replacing old and outdated infrastructure, in particular.

The specific issue the Deputy raised is one that many people deal with in their communities. There is then the impact it has on their appliances, which means they have to change them or invest in softeners. That is a frustration and something people do not need to deal with. That is why we are investing this significant amount of funding overall. On the specific cases the Deputy mentioned, I am happy to bring them back to the Minister to see if more can be done to speed up the process and address the concerns raised by the Deputy's constituents.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Irish Water is an unaccountable quango. It has absolutely no respect for TDs or public representatives. Every TD in this Dáil can speak directly to every Government Department, including every section in the Department of Social Protection. TDs can contact county council staff at management, engineering and administrative level. They can speak with HSE staff at all levels. They can talk to Garda officers at local and national level. In fact, every TD in this House can speak directly to any organisation that deals with the public. Why is Irish Water different? Why does Irish Water refuse to deal directly with elected public representatives? That is the case. There is no way Irish Water will speak directly with

Members of this House or members of local authorities. Why is Irish Water the only organisation that does this?

We are elected democratically and Irish Water should be available to every TD in this House through a nominated local official who can deal with issues arising locally and nationally. I ask the Minister to intervene directly with Irish Water in relation to stopping the closure and decommissioning of the Poulavanogue treatment plant in Clonmel.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree with the Deputy. Irish Water should be and is accountable to every single person in this House.

Deputy Seamus Healy: No, it is not. That is the problem. It is not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to respond.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There is a process in place and it should be the case that the Deputy can access and can talk directly to people. I am not saying that it is working effectively; it is clearly not if the Deputy is raising this here.

Deputy Seamus Healy: We get put talking to a call centre.

Deputy Helen McEntee: However, it is absolutely essential that an organisation that has been provided with €12 billion, as it has been in a revised national development plan, and that has been provided with billions of euro to support the delivery of homes and to invest in our capital infrastructure is accountable to every person in this House.

Deputy Seamus Healy: It should be but it is not. We can only call and talk to a call centre.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy, please allow the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Seamus Healy: It is frustrating.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand that, but the Minister has the floor. I ask the Minister to respond.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am agreeing with the Deputy. I am saying very clearly it should be the case. Deputies should not be standing up here saying that they cannot access or engage with people. I will again raise this directly with the Minister. We have spoken of it. I have spoken of it. My party colleagues have spoken of it. Any organisation that receives billions of euro of taxpayers' money from the Government should be and is accountable to every Member in this House. It is not acceptable if the Deputy is not able to access, talk directly to or get answers from people. I fully agree with him. I am very happy to raise the concerns he has raised here today. I am very happy to relay that back to the Minister. I expect that, as a public representative, I should be able to speak to and engage with officials on the ground when it

concerns billions of euro of taxpayers' money and I am elected as a people's representative to monitor where that goes. I fully agree with the Deputy and I will raise his concerns directly.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy John Connolly: Ba mhaith liom inniu ceann de phríomhchuspóirí oideachais an chláir Rialtais a ardú; is é sin an gealltanas an cóimheas dalta agus múinteora a laghdú agus plé a dhéanamh ar an deis atá ann tús a chur leis an ngealltanas sin a chomhlíonadh i mbuiséad 2027. I wish to discuss one of the key educational commitments of the programme for Government, specifically the one to reduce the general pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools to 19:1. The opportunity afforded to Government to contribute to fulfilling that commitment should be utilised as part of budget 2027. As I said, the commitment aims to bring the general pupil-teacher ratio down to 19:1 over the lifetime of the Government and it is time we started looking at that given that we are now in the second budget of five of this Government.

The primary staffing schedule furnished to schools for this current academic year, 2026-27, advised schools that they will operate on the basis of a general average of one classroom teacher for every 23 pupils. We know that there are schools where there are children in classes of greater size. Yesterday I spoke to a parent of a child in senior infants where there is a class of 29. While the trend is going in the right way, Department of education statistics highlight that in the last academic year some 39,000 school children were in classes of 30 or more.

I acknowledge there are local-based factors that contribute to that and it is not all simply down to the primary teaching schedule. However, in comparing 23:1, as it is for the next academic year, and 19:1, where we hope to get to, we have some distance to travel in the fulfilment of the commitment. I think everyone can appreciate the benefit to a pupil's learning to be in a class of a smaller size.

My own professional experience was that within the schools where I was privileged to work, wherever we encountered a challenge in the progression of a pupil, be that an academic challenge, behavioural challenge, social challenge or communicator challenge, the best resource that we could make available to try to meet those challenges and to work with the pupil was to increase discrete pupil-teacher time. That is at a premium and it is at even more of a premium when we consider the broadened curriculum, the new curriculum framework that is going to introduce new subjects. This is an issue that is pressing and pending. Schools are inundated with people selling online tools, schemes and programmes to try to help with the issues that pupils encounter. However, without a shadow of a doubt, all of those fall into insignificance when compared with the progress that can be made by providing additional discrete pupil-teacher time.

The Minister will be aware that more children are undergoing NEPS and, indeed, non-NEPS psychological assessment. The outcomes of these assessments are generally the formation of a report where a number of recommendations will be provided to the class teacher that they should incorporate into their teaching for the benefit of a specific pupil. It is simply impossible for a teacher to do that when they are teaching a class of 25 or 26 pupils. The issue is pressing. It is a commitment of the programme for Government and I hope that we will start to try to fulfil that commitment in the upcoming budget.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. At the outset, I commend the fantastic job that all of the teachers and staff within our schools do. While I take the opportunity whenever I can in my role, particularly last year as Minister for education, I had an opportunity to travel right around the country to meet with many teachers, SNAs, secretaries, principals, caretakers and assistants - everybody who plays a significant role in the education of our children. The work they do is absolutely phenomenal and I want to acknowledge that here. That is why Government is investing a record €14.1 billion in education and the intention very clearly is to continue that investment.

We can look at the number of people employed in our schools, which is important for the question the Deputy has asked. Teacher numbers at primary level increased by almost 6,000 between 2019 and 2025. We have seen a massive increase in the number of teachers who have been employed. During that time, we also saw a massive increase in the number of SNAs and the number of assistants who have been employed. Over 24,000 are now teaching in our schools, supporting our teachers and most importantly supporting our children as well.

In terms of the overall staffing schedule and the overall ratio, based on that investment we have gone from 26:1 five years ago down to 23:1 for the current school year. When the number of SNAs and assistants within a classroom is taken into account, it brings the overall number down. At the same time, I appreciate that for some classrooms the numbers are much higher. I appreciate that for some schools, while they might be around the average, some classes are much higher and we want to try to bring the numbers down as quickly as possible or in the most stable way possible.

There is a clear commitment within the programme for Government that we would bring that 21 number down to 19 and it is a commitment that we have said we will reach within the lifetime of the Government. The Minister for education will obviously be engaging with the Minister for public expenditure and reform. How that is decided and what priorities are set this year are matters for the Minister, but I know that she will be seeking to get as many resources as possible and to provide as much support as possible to our teachers and importantly to our children as well.

As the Deputy knows, we have more favourable ratios implemented for the DEIS urban band 1 schools. We have again seen the highest level of investment in our DEIS schools, making sure that those who need our help the most, particularly because of perhaps their family background, because of where they are from or because of instances that have happened in their lives, are provided with as much support as possible.

I fully agree with the Deputy. My own little man went off to school this year and I see the impact that a teacher can have on the environment in a classroom. That can have a long-lasting impact on a child, whether they like school, whether they want to go to school, the dynamic in the classroom, but also how they learn and how that then sets them up for later in life.

We need to do what we can do to reduce the numbers to provide as much class time as possible between students and their teachers, their SNAs, their assistants. That is our objective and our goal. It is why the money allocated to education has increased and why I hope in this year's budget we will see a further increase again.

Deputy John Connolly: The last point the Minister made is relevant today in particular. This morning, we heard and read of a new ESRI study produced in partnership with Tulsa that highlights that school attendance rates are dropping. In recent years, we have seen a decline and it is pertinent that there is concern about that. In schools with higher levels of disadvantage, attendance rates are not as good as in schools that do not have that same level of disadvantage. However, it is important to point out that there is a level of deprivation in every school. Certainly, in DEIS and DEIS plus schools, there is a greater concentration of that deprivation but all schools have pupils whom staff will recognise as being deprived. As the Minister pointed out, one of the things that increases the chance of that child attending school is a good relationship between the pupil and the teacher. That is easier to build when there are fewer pupils with whom the teacher has to work. That is a very pertinent point the Minister made.

The Minister is right in saying that in recent years the Government has significantly increased the number of teachers. They have not all been applied in the mainstream setting, and I am talking specifically about the mainstream setting.

We have also seen an increase in the diversity of pupil profiling and an increase in pupil needs. It is important that we try to achieve that 19:1 ratio and that we start to work on that as soon as possible.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree there are lots of things we need to focus on to make sure children are going to, staying in and progressing in school. When I was Minister of the Department, following on from the work of the previous Minister, Deputy Foley, before me and work the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is now carrying on, there was an action plan put in place specifically looking at attendance and how we can ensure children come to school, particularly where the levels within DEIS bands and primary schools were increasing at an astronomical rate. I think one in four was missing more than 20 days throughout the year, not including weekends and bank holidays and everything in between. There is a huge amount of work we need to focus on to ensure children are going to school and that parents are supported. In particular, for those who need that extra bit of help, the hot school meals are essential to that. It is making sure children have food and are able to focus and concentrate in school. The books we have introduced take an additional cost off of parents when they start school or at the beginning of any year. We also provide funding and supports to make sure uniforms can be bought, that the resources can be provided and that schools can get what they need. I appreciate that is something else in the budget that we need to keep increasing to ensure schools have the resources they need.

Again, I appreciate there is a lot of work we want to be able to do, but we have fantastic schools and teachers in this country. Our objective as a Government has to be to continue to invest in both.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: People are being hammered by the rising cost of fuel. The price of petrol and diesel has increased sharply in the last while. In some forecourts across the country this morning - I do not know if the Minister has seen it - people are being asked to pay €2.20 for a litre of diesel. People have seen these prices go up day after day. They also know

that when these prices go up, the Government rakes it in with regard to additional VAT it charges on these high prices. It is not just petrol and diesel; home heating oil has skyrocketed. The price of 1,000 litres of home heating oil has gone up hundreds of euro in the last two weeks alone and households cannot take any more of this. I am asking the Minister serious questions here because people need action right now. They do not need commentary; they want to know what is going to happen.

Is the Government willing to further cut excise on petrol and diesel? That is exactly what needs to be done to help families and workers at this time. Will the Minister implement the legislation I am bringing before the House today, which removes carbon tax completely from home heating oil, a fuel that people need to keep their homes warm this winter? The Government has not removed a single cent of excise from it up until now.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy is right; people need action, not words. That is exactly why, at this time and at this moment in the year, €1.4 billion has already been provided to people to try to assist with what is a very challenging time - I fully agree with the Deputy - much of which has been caused by the conflict in the Middle East, where we need to focus our efforts as well. While we are a small country, we still have a voice and we need to use it to ensure every effort is made to end the conflict because that is the first and quickest way in which we can see a reduction. However, we have expanded the fuel allowance, and the tax reductions on energy and fuel have been extended to October, which the Deputy voted against in the Chamber, so that we give people that bit of a break and make sure there is certainty in the time ahead.

On top of that €1.4 billion being provided in supports and reductions in tax, we have a budget coming up. On both a permanent and temporary basis, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, have all said they want to do something on home heating oil and will do something in the budget to assist people in both the short and long term. The Deputy can be assured of that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Increasing the cost of using public transport by an average of 15% is a political decision. It is happening because this Government refuses to invest in the National Transport Authority, NTA, in the expansion of the network and ultimately in its passengers. We now know this is only the start of the fare increases. The Government intends to raise them again and again. While Government backbenchers love the photo-op of opening a new bus stop, what people who stand at those bus stops need the Government to do right now is to demand that these fare increases are reversed and that they do not happen. The Government is making this decision during a climate emergency, when we should be doing everything in our power to incentivise the use of public transport, not disincentivise it. It is making this decision amid an affordability crisis where 15% will become 30%, which will become 50%. I have a very simple question: Will the Minister, her Cabinet and their backbenchers reverse this decision?

Deputy Helen McEntee: As the Deputy said, the National Transport Authority made the decision to publish the new fares on 3 September of this year, with the revised fares taking effect from January 2027. This was a really important step in standardising the national fares structure. It is in line with a strategy that was published back in 2023. Since 2022, we have

seen inflation of almost 21%, which has of course driven up the cost of operating our public transport. The public transport network is not immune to this inflation, in the same way that people getting into their car and driving to work are not.

At the same time, in that period, we have seen costs drop, specifically by 20% in the cost-of-living fares reduction, the young adult card discount of 50% and the extension of free travel to children under nine, so we have seen reductions in costs for all people outlined there. It is about getting the balance right and being able to invest in the network to expand it so that more people can access it while also taking into account the fact inflation is impacting that sector. At all times, and to reassure the Deputy because we are all impacted by this and have significant public transport in our constituencies, we want to make sure it is affordable for people. All of this has to be kept under review and we have to make sure we are doing everything possible to ensure any of the changes and the €1.4 billion I mentioned are passed on to our public and private transport operators.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Labour Party and I want to raise with the Minister the compounding crisis year on year for school transport. It is impacting every constituency. I represent a largely urban constituency, yet I am dealing with ten families in Swords who are unable to get school transport up to Coláiste Ghlór na Mara in Balbriggan. This is happening every single year; kids are being left at the side of the road. My party colleague Deputy Wall is dealing with over 100 families across four routes in Kildare South and Deputy Eoghan Kenny, who is sitting behind me, is also dealing with over 100 families in his area of Cork. Leitrim County Council, Cavan County Council, Galway council and the Minister's own county council in Meath - everywhere - are saying school transport is not working and kids are being left at the side of the road. Can we have a solution, not only for this year but a proper plan for school transport so that we are not back here next year with more kids being left at the side of the road?

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We do have a plan. Every year, more and more children are getting access to school transport. I appreciate not everybody is getting access and there is more work we need to do. I think the figure was 181,000 young people who had access to school transport this year. We have to acknowledge we only have so many buses and drivers, but we also need to make sure we have a system that works effectively.

One of the most important things we will work on in the time ahead is a new ticketing system. We know there are buses where not all of the tickets are being used. There are people who are taking up tickets and then not using the bus. We need to make sure that if that is the case, the seats can then be provided to somebody else who needs the bus more. We can only do that if we have an automatic ticketed system whereby people can monitor who is getting on the bus and who is not. That will be one of the most important things we do in addressing some of the issues and challenges. That work is under way and is happening through the Department.

I appreciate it is a challenging issue. We all deal with it in our constituencies, but importantly, it is extremely stressful for parents. Again, I stress that more money is being spent - significant amounts, hundreds of millions - every year on school transport. More children are

accessing it, but we need to make sure we have the buses, the drivers and the appropriate system in place to monitor who is on it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: With huge numbers of households struggling with the hikes in electricity and energy costs, how does the Government think it is okay for ordinary working people and householders to pay twice as much per unit of electricity as the billionaires who own the data centres in this country? Now that it is clear it is not going to do so, how can the Government honestly justify not supporting imposing a levy on those billionaire owners of the data centres so that we can give a serious break, €500, to every household to help them with their energy bills and to all those with disability, yet oppose that and defend the *status quo*? Is that not the reason people will be marching again this weekend on the Affordable Ireland demonstration in advance of the budget, because the Government is protecting the interests of the billionaire owners of data centres that are hoovering up our electricity while ordinary working families are being hammered with increased energy and electricity bills?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am pretty sure no matter what we did in this House, the Deputy would be encouraging people to protest either way and that is people's right. That is something we must protect, but he cannot ignore the fact that as a Government, this year alone, we have introduced supports of €1.4 billion.

1 o'clock

In other parts of Europe and the world, very few governments have been able to introduce that type of funding and support to assist people at what is a really difficult time. The debate will take place later this evening-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not for the data centres, it is not.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and obviously the Deputy does not acknowledge that data centres represent critical infrastructure, that they are central to our modern economy and that significant work was being done through the large energy user action plan, LEAP, which is the new strategy looking at large energy users. A main focus of that is how we can introduce more renewable energy and how we can reduce the energy needs of those large data centres. We do not have any other large industries that are drawing on our grid but I fully agree with the Deputy that we need to make sure that individual homeowners are not paying for larger businesses and their energy costs and their needs.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There is a clear plan in place, which is already happening because I have seen it in many businesses, to make sure that where possible, businesses put in place their own measures to make sure they are focused on a zero-sum approach and can produce their own electricity and their own grid through renewable sources. That is where we need to get to and I agree with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As we come to the beginning of this term which will bring the Government to two years in office, are we finally going to see some joined-up thinking? The Government has asked councils to rezone additional lands for housing in unsustainable areas when we do not have the infrastructure in place already, in places like Clonburris and Adamstown. They are areas with no electric vehicle charging infrastructure for a domestic tariff and inadequate parking, where people are fighting in Kilcarbery, Seven Mills, Adamstown and Citywest for spaces. The Government is saying this is to encourage a greener society and get people to use public transport but the public transport does not exist. There is an inadequate train network and the buses keep being missed. The P29 express service, for example, was missed four times out of four two weeks ago and twice today and yesterday. There is No. 13 and the C-spine routes. All over my constituency, the buses are not turning up. The National Transport Authority is not accountable to anyone and is not fit for purpose. If the Government is also increasing the fares, it is giving a big middle finger to people in my constituency. Where is the joined-up thinking that says if more housing is going to be put in, it will have facilities and infrastructure alongside it and buses that actually exist?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Every local authority is probably conducting the review of their own county development plan at the moment. It is important in that review that we are all increasing our housing targets and the allocations that we have been given, and that we are making sure land is zoned on land that is appropriate, but also that land can be opened up where it needs to be. To support that, there is a significant fund that has already been provided. More will be provided at a later date but money has already been provided to local authorities to open up lands to provide infrastructure, whether roads, electricity or water, in the right place and where it is appropriate. Then our towns and our cities can grow and expand because that is where we have a lot of the infrastructure while at the same time making sure that in rural communities, people can build homes on their land, whether they live locally or are born locally. It is about getting that balance right. We have a national development plan of over €100 billion and much of that is to make sure we are delivering houses in the right places and the infrastructure is there so that people can access them and the local authorities can deliver them.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The programme for Government commits to improving cancer care and access to treatment in the regions. Cork University Hospital stopped carrying out stem cell treatments in 2009. Since then, blood cancer patients from Cork and the south west have had to travel to St. James's or Galway at the most vulnerable time of their lives. I know a number of people who have had to travel to Galway and recuperate there after their treatment. A €27 million stem cell unit at CUH has had a project team in place since 2024. The HSE's own tender notice admits that CUH is not providing optimal treatment for stem cell and CAR-T therapies. Patients' advocates and clinicians will be in Leinster House on 7 October in a meeting organised by the Minister's own party's Senator, Eileen Lynch. To be fair to Eileen, she has advocated for this for a long time, as well as others in Cork and Kerry. I have written a number of letters to the HSE about this and I get the same old gibberish responses. We just want a definite answer. Can the Minister confirm the funding is there, the timeline for its delivery, since, as I said, the project team has been in place for a number of years, and if CAR-T therapies would be part of that as well? If the Minister does not have a response today, she might provide it in writing afterwards.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Unfortunately, I will not be able to give the Deputy a direct response today. I hope the Deputy would agree that this Government, the previous Government, and governments before that have placed a huge emphasis on investment in cancer care, prevention and on identifying it at the earliest stage possible, then providing the treatment, and also investing in new therapies. I know the CAR-T therapy that the Deputy referred to, which is a breakthrough, its significance, and making sure that every patient across the country has access to it, which is near their home, given the circumstances that they are going through. While I cannot give the Deputy the exact answer today on timelines, figures or funding, I will bring it directly back to the Minister and ask her to respond. I have no doubt that she will engage with the Deputy and Eileen.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Roche.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The fifth-class-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

Deputy Peter Roche: Wrong one.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Roche, not O'Rourke.

Deputy Peter Roche: Last weekend, I happened to be out doing some community events and on three occasions I met three different individuals who are representative of the men's sheds. They all came with the same story about the threat to the funding model that they had and the fear that maybe the funding has ceased for this year. I know that some works were done in the interim but what I want to do, given the outstanding commitment that they make to the men's sheds and the community effort that they are involved with in tackling loneliness and promoting well-being, I want us to be sure that the funding model that we put in place is fit for purpose and does not threaten those very schemes into the future.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I met a number of members of men's sheds at the National Ploughing Championships this week and they raised this matter with me directly. I have known and worked with men's sheds locally and at a national level for many years. As the Deputy said, I can only commend the position and role that they have in our communities in addressing the well-being of older men and health issues, and bringing people together in a way that simply did not exist before they were put in place. I commend the teams that operate, deliver, expand and manage them. I have no doubt about the commitment of the Department responsible. At this stage, it crosses over a number of different Departments naturally. That commitment to funding will remain but we need to ensure that where they are growing, which they are, and to open up in different counties that the funding can grow and expand with them. I will raise this directly with the relevant Ministers and bring back the Deputy's comments.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister is familiar with this issue, and I call on her to intervene personally and urgently. The fifth-class students in Gaelscoil na Ríthe in Dunshaughlin are currently being accommodated in a small library room in an old prefab.

Support hours are being provided in the staff room. This is because a promised prefab that should be in place is not in place and they are being told that it will be the end of quarter one 2027 when it is delivered. This was a positive news story with an additional junior infants class and it was welcomed. The school has gone above and beyond to facilitate additional students. It is incredible to me, and to all of Ireland, that it would take the guts of 12 months to deliver a prefabricated modular unit to this school. The Minister knows well as I do, the factory is literally a couple of hundred yards up the road. I ask the Minister to please intervene personally with the Minister and the Department. Get this done. The problem is with the Department. Get it resolved. It is unacceptable that they have to wait that long. This should be delivered in the next handful of weeks, in my firm opinion.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As the Deputy outlined, this is actually a really positive story. We have all, the Deputy included, worked closely with parents over the past number of months to make sure that the additional classroom that was needed to ensure that children going from naíonraí were able to go into a Gaelscoil in their local community. That happened. I welcome the work by the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, to support us in making that happen. My objective now, the same as the Deputy, is to make sure that the classroom, is provided as quickly as possible. A commitment was given and I have been speaking directly with Rónán, the principal, but also with the Department, to make sure that we can provide that as quickly as possible. We do not want any child to be in a classroom or an environment that is too small or that is not necessarily as appropriate as it should be. We are doing everything that we can to make sure that the classroom is provided as quickly as possible.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Sligo University Hospital will shortly submit its options appraisal for formal capital approval for the replacements of its orthopaedic theatres. This project will provide two new replacement orthopaedic theatres, essential storage facilities and additional beds. I appeal to the Minister for Health and the Department to move swiftly in approving this critical development. The existing orthopaedic theatres are no longer fit for purpose.

Over the past 18 months, numerous operations have been cancelled due to leaks from roofs, radiators and humidifiers, resulting in breaches of theatre sterility. Six orthopaedic surgeons have been unable to perform scheduled procedures while patients face unacceptable delays and prolonged suffering. I urge the Minister and the Department to please prioritise this capital project as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I acknowledge the work that has been done to get to this point in trying to make progress on this capital investment. I will raise this directly with the Minister and highlight the Deputy's representations on behalf of the local community and those working in the hospital in ensuring that these type of services can be provided. Again, while I cannot give the Deputy a commitment today, I will raise it directly with the Minister.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I will raise how badly newly qualified student nurses have been treated by the HSE in Cork. In June, these students interviewed for posts and were offered jobs in named clinical areas in CUH. In September, the HSE tried to row back on this decision in really shoddy terms. It organised two meetings with the students that were cancelled and then, at short notice of just five hours, it called the students before it and said that instead of getting

jobs in named clinical areas, they would be placed on the bank. We accept and welcome the bank. It will reduce the cost spent on agency staff, but it is not appropriate for newly qualified student nurses who want to be part of a team, want to expand their skills and want to expand their practice.

Ultimately, these students were offered posts and accepted them. They had offers and accepted them. Does the Minister accept that the HSE is in breach of contract to these newly qualified student nurses by trying to row back on this? Why have student nurses in other parts of the country, including Galway, not been offered permanent posts? These are badly needed across the country. We need to hire these students and offer them permanent contracts and jobs in the health service. It is so badly needed. Staff morale is on the floor and is getting worse with the way the HSE is treating its staff.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Without knowing the details of the contract or what happened, I take what the Deputy is saying. I am not contradicting that, but without knowing the details of what has happened, the timelines and why it has happened, I do not want to comment on something I do not have information on. The Deputy is right. In any business, if somebody is offered a contract and they have signed it, an agreement is in place. It is important that this is followed through on. We also want to make sure for anybody entering into a workforce for the first time that their first experience is a positive one. It is the role of the HSE to work with and to support our newest staff, whether they are nurses, doctors or people working in specific fields. Again, while I do not know the details of what happened in this specific hospital with these specific nurses, I am happy to take it back to the Minister and highlight the fact the Deputy has raised it. If she is not aware of it, I will ask her to engage with the Deputy directly on it.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The decision made by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to scrap the men's shed grant for 2025-26 has shocked the 500 men's sheds across the country and their local communities. The grant, small as it is, helps toward basic things like rent, insurance, ESB, heating and water. The withdrawal of the grant will have serious consequences for the sheds. Many will have to cut opening hours or reduce activities and some will face closure. As the Minister knows, men's sheds are at the heart of local communities. Of course, they are non-profit. They are places where men can gather to socialise, share skills, build friendships, combat isolation and loneliness and support each other in mental and physical health. The withdrawal of this small grant, which does so much good, beggars belief. It is not good enough. I am asking the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to restore this grant immediately. It is a vital grant. It is a small grant but it does exceptionally good work. It should be restored immediately.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Deputies Healy and Roche have referenced, and I reiterate, the importance of our men's sheds. I acknowledge the significant contribution they make within our communities, particularly for the men who avail of the services. I do not think they see it as services; it is a place for them to go to engage, address and talk about issues that are important to them, as well as engaging in activities. I will raise the Deputy's concerns directly with the Minister. I have no doubt, as there are various strands of funding that have been allocated over the years, particularly in the Department of Health as well as the Department of rural affairs, directly to the men's sheds, that we will continue to support and fund men's sheds and support their growth. How that is done and what funding stream will be decided in the

upcoming budget, but I will raise the Deputy's concerns directly with the Minister, Deputy Calleary.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The Tánaiste recently echoed his predecessor as leader of Fine Gael, Leo Varadkar, in saying that this Government will provide a budget for people who get up early and go to work. Was the Tánaiste thinking that this includes the tens of thousands of workers who stand at 7 o'clock every morning at bus stops and in train stations across the country five days a week, who are now facing an average increase of 15% in their costs to get to work? Many of them are facing increases of up to 33%. These planned fare hikes are an attack on workers and people who get up early in the morning. This is a political decision. This is a direct result of this Government changing the 2:1 ratio of investment in public transport to roads-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: That is not true. It is still 2:1.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: ----- which was trumpeted at the start of this Administration. The NTA does not have the money to do things right because it is not getting it from the Government. The Government is throwing commuters under the bus. The Government was able to find almost €1.2 billion behind the back of the couch to subsidise diesel and fuel. Why can we not look after commuters in the same way?

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is simply not the case. I outlined in a response to a previous Deputy that we have seen costs reduce. We have a 20% cost discount in terms of a living discount. The young adult Leap card is a 50% discount and we have allowed children under nine to travel for free. We have tried to put in targeted measures over the years, while at the same time recognising that the cost of fuel is impacting our public transport sector in the same way it is impacting everybody else. We also want to ensure there is investment in our public transport, that more people can access it, that we are encouraging more people, whether it is through buses, trains or cycleways, and that we are able to provide that investment as well. There is significant investment, through the national development plan and the Department of Transport, but we have to get that balance right. It is about making sure we have those targeted measures for younger people and students and discounted measures for people who might need them most, while at the same time trying to get that balance right. I appreciate that nobody wants to see their fares going up, but in a review of some of the rail lines, what we have seen - even in my own constituency - is that fares have gone down. We will see fares go up and down depending on where they are and what type of investment is happening. It is always about getting the balance right and trying to make it as cheap as possible for people.

Deputy Seán Kyne: While solar energy has an important role to play in achieving Ireland's renewable energy targets, there is growing concern across Galway about the scale and location of proposed solar farm developments. Many constituents have raised concerns about solar proposals, including the projects being pursued on productive, top-tier agricultural farmland and in close proximity to rural homes and communities. The closest panels in the case of the

Lackagh proposal in County Galway are within 50 m of some homes and within 100 m of other homes in a local estate. Councillor David Collins held a meeting last Tuesday regarding local concerns, including the impact of construction traffic on the local school, the proximity of the proposal and the future expansion of Lackagh village, which I attended. In line with the commitment contained in the programme for Government, will the Minister provide an update on when the solar energy guidelines will be published and commenced? Will we see guidelines this year, or will they be put on the long finger, as the wind guidelines were? Does she accept that clear planning guidance is required urgently? Will the Government consider a temporary moratorium for large-scale solar projects?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy on both fronts. I think we all agree that we need to invest more in renewable energies. We need to invest more in offshore wind and in solar of all types, not just on land but on roofs and on our public sector and service buildings. We also need to engage with communities and make sure that we get this right. What the Deputy has outlined in his county is a similar concern that I have in my own county where a huge number of solar farms have been approved and more applications are coming in. It is important that we get that balance right. We all support the expansion of renewable energy. We know we need more of it given all of the discussion we have had this morning on fuel prices, the increase in prices and how we reduce our reliance on fossil fuels but, at the same time, we need to make sure that there is guidance. I know the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is leading on this and he is working closely with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Department of housing. The intention from the Department of housing is to issue the national planning statement specifically on this, akin to guidance, and that work is under way. I do not have a direct timeline for the Deputy, but like him I would like to see it happen as quickly as possible. I would like to see it to continue to engage with communities so that any expansion can be done in a managed and appropriate way.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raise the issue of trees that have been planted by local authorities in roadside pits in the 1970s and 1980s. In many instances, they were very welcome at the time, but a lot of the trees planted at that time - over 50 years ago - were clearly the wrong species. Some of them have grown hugely and they have huge root systems. The root systems have uplifted footpaths and private boundary walls. They have invaded front gardens and done damage to driveways on private properties. When residents raise these issues with their local authority, they are given a claim form, told to fill it in and send it to the council.

It is then passed on to Irish public bodies. Irish public bodies routinely denies liability, saying "It has nothing to do with us and there is no negligence to see here". I have a letter from IPB to a constituent, saying that while it notes their allegation that the damage was caused by the roots of a nearby tree, the cause of the cracking was yet to be established definitively. What else could possibly have uplifted a wall? It is utterly ridiculous and dishonest.

Can the Government intervene in this? It is not fair that elderly residents are left to foot the bills for repairing private property damaged by the State.

Deputy Helen McEntee: While I cannot point to something specific to this at the moment, I do know a body of work is being done, looking at trees planted along our roadside. That is specifically following Storm Éowyn and some of the recent storms where the trees have

become a danger during the storm, including taking down electricity wires and by causing danger on our roads. Unfortunately, we know a young man was killed in one of the recent storms because of a falling tree. A body of work is being done through the Minister, Deputy O'Brien's Department, engaging with the ESB and local authorities to assess where trees need to be taken down and that they can be taken down and that that body of work can start as quickly as possible. Whether what the Deputy raised can be included in those discussions or conversations is something I will bring back to the Minister. I think we are all very conscious of the need for us to be clear about where we are planting our trees and the implications that may have, whether on our roads, for our electricity grid or for residents as the Deputy outlined.

Deputy Brian Brennan: My question is on dereliction and how we can get county councils to enforce current Government policies. Dereliction is a plague on most cities, towns and villages in Ireland. I commend the Government incentives to bring properties back into use such as the vacant property refurbishment grant, and the vacant above-the-shop initiative. Local authorities have the tools to deal with dereliction with the first step being simply to register derelict properties but I am simply astounded why some councils do not see fit to embrace these policies. If you look at the derelict site register today, there are 154 sites registered in Waterford and 367 sites registered in County Limerick and only four sites registered in the whole of County Wicklow. Why should hard-working businesses and communities in Carnew, Shillelagh and especially Arklow have to accept less dereliction enforcement than any other county in Ireland to the detriment of these town and villages?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It is really important that we do everything in our power to bring derelict properties back into use, that we use every lever available to us and where local authorities are not responding that we look at what other levers are available. It is a priority for this Government, and a priority in the Government's housing plan. The Derelict Site Act contains a number of actions and powers that can be provided to the local authorities. There is a derelict site register, statutory notices requiring remedial works, annual levies and compulsory acquisition powers. However, as the Deputy said, we have seen that some local authorities are much better at this than others. He rightly said the number of properties in Wicklow on the derelict site register is far too low at four so much more needs to be done. I understand the Department of housing has recently met Wicklow County Council to highlight this and to be clear that more needs to be done on its part. The Minister, Deputy Browne, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and particularly the Minister for Finance are looking to bring in a new derelict property tax. That would be an incentive to make sure that all parties move on this matter.

Deputy David Cullinane: I recently met the parents of children with disabilities where the children are either on a list or attending the Waterford south city children's disability network team. I find these meetings very difficult because the story is always the same, unfortunately, with parents battling for access to services and children missing out on developmental supports. What they told me in relation to this team is shocking. We know there are staff shortages across many CDNTs but this CDNT has no psychologist, has had no nurse – or at least the parents have not had access to a nurse for over a year – no dietician and the number of occupational therapists has reduced from two to one. Even the most basic supports like incontinence pads were not being made available to parents for those children. It is truly shocking that parents

have to battle for the most basic services. I ask the Minister to look at what is going on in that particular CDNT. It is obviously a problem across all CDNTs. They are not fully staffed. We have children across Waterford city whose parents are battling. Those children are missing out on developmental supports because the staff are not there. It is not good enough and I ask the Minister to raise it with the relevant Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to raise the specific cases and specific area. I know it has been a challenge over the years to fill all the teams across the country but there has been a huge focus and a huge investment specifically in disability funding to try to fill the particular places the Deputy mentioned. There has also been a look at restructuring and how the teams work so that you are not dependent on perhaps the senior clinical officer to be able to sign off on various different strands of support that might need to be provided. I will raise the Deputy's concerns directly with the Minister.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Yesterday the Cabinet approved going to tender with the Metro project. It is the largest investment in public transport the State will ever see. When I went to the pre-tender engagement in DCU I saw the global nature of this project with potential suppliers from right across the world. The reality is the global nature of the project will hit the ground from next year with enabling works and for the next ten years, at the very least, my community will face many of the challenges of Metro as well as its benefits. We absolutely welcome Metro - it is a really important project - but we need to get out now and start telling communities what this will mean for them in terms of construction, traffic disruption, engagement with genuine concerns and so on. I urge the NTA and TII to start that work now and engage with local residents' associations. They want to be part of the process and be part of the success of this project. Inevitably, they will have concerns and questions as with any project. I urge that we ensure that everyone is part of a project that will be with us for a long time to come.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is right. One of the biggest barriers or things that slows down projects is a lack of engagement and at the earliest stage possible. I fully agree with the Deputy and support the need for the NTA and TII to engage directly. I know the Deputy will do so himself in his own capacity and to highlight what is happening and the benefits and the challenges that will arise as is the case with any development of this size or significance. This is a massive investment in the Deputy's community and in our communities in Dublin, in particular. It is really important that we can move this project along as quickly as possible. It is really important that we bring people with us and that they are aware of everything that is happening.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I must say to the Minister as Minister for foreign affairs it is an appalling situation that on the one hand, Ireland goes into the EU Council of Foreign Ministers to advocate for the cause of Palestinians and yet here at home adopts a mean spirited and hypocritical approach with regard to refusing so many Palestinian students visas. There is a 70% refusal rate this year. It was only 15% last year.

My specific question relates to the EU Digital Omnibus package, Ireland's position and the Minister's role in that. Effectively, the direction of travel is to loosen the protections in the AI

Act. Last week, alarm bells were sounded by the developers of AI. AI has enormous potential for positive impact, particularly in the area of health, but we know for workers, consumers, for our security and democracy there are particularly terrifying prospects. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we have much better AI regulation in the European Union and that we are not going to diminish the existing standards and protections there already?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Digital Omnibus package is one of perhaps 12 pieces of legislation we are bringing forward at the moment under the simplification objective we have during the Presidency. I want to dispel the myth that might be out there that changing legislation in some way weakens or loosens it a bit. The whole objective is to make it more straightforward and simplify it where we can while, at the same time, protecting people's rights and making those responsible and accountable for protecting consumers too. Like the Deputy and everyone here, I am also concerned at the pace and speed at which AI is moving. We need to make sure that in the EU, the appropriate regulations and rules are in place but that we also do not stifle growth and innovation. We need to make sure we are embracing and enhancing our day-to-day lives with the technology as it is evolving. We also need to monitor and manage it. What you will see during the Presidency is Ireland taking a very central approach and making sure we get the balance right. We are not trying to have fewer rules; we are trying to make sure they are better and that we can apply them better as well.

Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the temporary reduction of mineral oil tax on home heating oil (kerosene used other than as a propellant) for the purpose of alleviating cost of living pressures; to provide for the extension of such reductions by order of the Minister for Finance; and to provide for related matters.

Tá mé ag iarraidh go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun laghdú éigeandála a dhéanamh ar cháin ola mianra. Is reachtaíocht éigeandála atá sa Bhille seo chun costas teasa tí a laghdú anois go díreach. Tá sé seo ag goilleadh go holc ar ghnáthdhaoine na tíre seo toisc go bhfuil praghas ola chun teach a théamh ag dul in airde. Bhí a fhios againn ó thús an tsamhraidh go dtí anuraidh go ndeachaigh sé suas €500. Má amharcaimid ar an méid a tharla le trí sheachtain anuas, tá an praghas ola faoi choinne teach a théamh imithe suas €300 in aghaidh 1,000 lítear. Is ardú millteanach é sin atá ag cur brú millteanach fud fad an Stáit seo. Seo an t-ochtú huair atá moladh tugtha chun tosaigh agam ó mhí Aibreáin ag éileamh ar an Rialtas an cháin ar ola chun tithe a théamh a laghdú agus a ísliú. Seacht n-uaire i ndiaidh a chéile, vótáil Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael agus na Neamhspleáigh in éadan seo, siocair gur cáin charbóin atá ar an ola seo. An uair dheireanach a rinne siad é ná coicis ó shin. Tá an Bille seo tagtha os comhar an Tí. Beidh vóta ann an tseachtain seo chugainn. Mar gheall air seo, chímid go bhfuil brú anois á chur ar an Rialtas feidhmiú agus é ag caint ar rud inteacht a dhéanamh sa cháinaisnéis. Cuirim fáilte roimhe sin, ach níl a fhios againn go fóill cad é atá sé i gceist aige a dhéanamh.

This Bill is very simple. It is a response to the fact that people right across this State feel as if they are being fleeced in relation to the cost of home heating oil, and why would they not?

The fact is the cost of home heating oil has gone through the roof. This has happened not just in the past couple of weeks, which I will discuss. The cost of home heating oil from last year to the start of last summer increased by over €500 for a fill. This is the eighth occasion on which I have brought forward either a financial resolution or legislation before this House demanding that the Government respond, demanding that it have ordinary workers' and families' backs and demanding that it get rid of carbon tax on home heating oil while people are just trying to keep their homes warm. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, along with her Cabinet colleagues, those in Fianna Fáil, the Independents and some in the Opposition, like the Soc Dems, vote to continue to place these taxes on home heating oil and to place additional burdens on people out there trying to keep their homes warm.

When I say this is the eighth occasion, the reason I keep bringing this back is that I have stood in too many houses and had too many conversations with people who tell me they are pushed to the pin of their collar just trying to keep their homes warm. I told them I would have their back and would not give up. This is why we introduce this legislation now, demanding that the Government respond, demanding that the Government see sense and demanding that the Government get rid of carbon tax on home heating oil while these prices go through the roof, and by God they are going through the roof.

In the past three weeks alone, the price of home heating oil, according to the forecourts buying it, has gone up €300 for a 1,000 litre fill. That is on top of the fact that it already went up €500 compared with where it was last year. Yet, the Government still argued and voted two weeks ago not to reduce a single cent of tax on home heating oil. Worse than that, and you could not make this up, the Government's plan is, on 14 October, to increase the cost of home heating oil. Lo and behold, Sinn Féin produces this legislation and then Simon Harris has an epiphany: "Oh, maybe we need to do something in the Finance Bill and in the budget." As I said earlier, talk is cheap. What people want is action. What people want are results. This legislation gives them the results they are demanding: reduce the cost of home heating oil and get rid of carbon tax on it. The Government can do that with the stroke of a pen. It does not need approval from the European Union. That is what a responsible government that has the back of ordinary workers and families would do.

It is not just home heating oil that tax needs to be cut on. The Government needs to cut the tax on petrol and diesel. What is happening out there is madness. Right across this State, people are driving up to their forecourts and seeing prices of €2.14 and €2.15. In places like Limerick we are seeing prices of €2.21 for a litre of diesel. It has gone through the roof. In the past three weeks alone, the price of diesel being sold to our pump operators has gone up 30 cent.

What is the plan from the Government? Again, the law states that on 14 October it will put the price of diesel up another 2 cent by increasing carbon tax. Hopefully, it will see sense and not proceed with that madness, but that alone is not enough. The Government needs to reduce taxes on petrol, diesel, home heating oil and green diesel, and that can be done. We have the resources to do it. It is what needs to be done. This legislation is the first step in getting the Government to get its head out of the sand, to understand the pressure that ordinary Irish people are under every single day of their lives and, instead of making things harder, to make sure that it lifts some of the burden. It is not lost on anybody that when the price of home heating oil goes up, more money goes into the Government pockets in the form of VAT. When the price

of diesel reaches €2.20, it should be remembered that 23% of that increase goes into the Government's pockets in the form of VAT. Hundreds of millions of euro is flowing into the Government because of these price increases. It is time the Government gave it back to the people, cut the taxes, abolished carbon tax on home heating oil and removed further taxes on petrol and diesel to get these prices back down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Helen McEntee): No.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.36 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.36 p.m. and resumed at 2.17 p.m.

National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Before I start, I wish Deputy Michael Healy-Rae a quick recovery from the horrible attack yesterday evening in Dublin. I spoke to him last night. He was in good form and on his way back home. He and his family need time for him to recover. It has been such a harrowing experience. I am delighted to see that an arrest has been made, and we will leave that with An Garda. It is very concerning for everybody that something like that could happen in broad daylight in our capital city.

I am pleased to bring the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026 before the House. This is a practical Bill but its purpose is significant. It is about making sure that the law that supports road safety, vehicle compliance, enforcement and public administration is modern, clear and fit for purpose. The policy rationale is straightforward. The State must be able to use accurate vehicle and driver information lawfully and responsibly. Local authorities must have the collision data they need to identify risks and target action. Enforcement systems must work efficiently. The Bill also advances the Government's digital agenda and improves the efficiency of public service delivery. The law on motor tax, vehicle records and speed limits must reflect how services are now delivered and how road safety decisions are now made.

There is also a practical necessity. Much of the legislation being amended was designed for a paper-based system. It assumed the display and surrender of discs. It contains data provisions that predate the general data protection regulation and does not fully reflect current systems for vehicle licensing, compliance checking or the use of road safety information. The Bill updates

that framework. It gives public bodies legal certainty. It also gives the public confidence that the system is operating properly.

Above all, there is a road safety imperative. Better information supports better decisions. Better enforcement supports better behaviour. Easier verification supports better compliance. Road safety is not secured by one measure alone. It depends on safer behaviour, safer infrastructure, effective enforcement, reliable data and clear responsibilities.

In practical terms, the Bill does a number of things. It modernises the national vehicle and driver file; underpins the Check My Vehicle service; removes the need to display a paper motor tax disc; allows open-ended declarations for non-use; supports more flexible and evidence-based speed limit management; provides a statutory basis for sharing collision data with local authorities; clarifies the operation of penalty points in multi-offence incidents; and makes targeted improvements to court and enforcement procedures.

I will deal briefly with each Part of the Bill. Part 1 contains the preliminary and general provisions. It provides for the Short Title, commencement, collective citation, construction, definitions and repeals. These are technical provisions but they matter. They give the Bill its legal structure. They also remove provisions that are obsolete, superseded or no longer consistent with the policy changes being made. Part 1 repeals older provisions on the display of vehicle licences, non-annual payment of motor tax, obsolete notification arrangements and the offence of failing to display a motor tax disc. It also amends a provision of the Road Traffic Act 2024 so that the approach to special speed limits can be adjusted later in the Bill.

Part 2 deals with the national vehicle and driver file, NVDF, and the Check My Vehicle service. The NVDF is the State's central database for vehicle and driver information. It supports vehicle registration, driver licensing, motor tax, enforcement and road safety. The current statutory framework is pre-GDPR and general in nature. Part 2 modernises that framework. It sets out more clearly the records and data held on the file. It includes appropriate data protection provisions for personal data. Part 2 also places access to NVDF data on a clearer footing. Where bodies need information to carry out their functions, access can be provided for in secondary legislation. The legal basis and purpose can then be set out clearly. This includes bodies such as An Garda Síochána and the Revenue Commissioners. The objective is simple: access must be lawful, transparent, proportionate and linked to the function being performed. This Part also underpins the Check My Vehicle website. A person will be able to enter a vehicle registration number and check certain information held on the NVDF. That includes the status of motor tax and roadworthiness tests. It will not disclose the owner's name or address. As paper discs are removed, this service will provide a clear way to verify compliance. That will be useful for car buyers, driver testers, driving instructors and others who have a practical need to check relevant information.

Part 3 removes the requirement to display a paper motor tax disc and makes the related changes needed across older legislation. This measure forms part of the wider paperless discs project, under which physical insurance and roadworthiness discs will also be abolished. The requirement to display a disc belongs to a paper-based system. Compliance can now be verified through electronic records. The law should reflect that. The Bill therefore repeals the offence of failing to display a motor tax disc. It does not remove the obligation to have motor tax. The offence of not having motor tax will be capable of being dealt with as a fixed-charge offence. Part 3 also removes outdated references to surrendering, taking back or displaying paper discs.

This includes references to refunds, bouncing cheques and driving tests. A vehicle licence will be deemed to be issued when the owner receives a receipt for payment, either in a local authority motor tax office or through the online motor tax service.

Part 4 deals with declarations of non-use of a motor vehicle. At present, a vehicle can be declared off the road for a period of between three and 12 months. This can create unnecessary administration where a vehicle remains off the road for longer or where the period is uncertain. Under this Bill, a declaration may be made in the last month of motor tax and may continue indefinitely until the vehicle is brought back into use. This will simplify the process for vehicle owners and reduce avoidable renewals. It will also prevent arrears arising simply because there is a gap between the end date of a declaration and the next taxing of the vehicle. The Bill makes clear that arrears will not apply to the first application for motor tax following an open-ended declaration of non-use. The integrity of the system is also protected. It will be an offence to use a vehicle while a declaration of non-use is in effect. The Bill also provides transitional arrangements. Declarations already in force will end on the date specified in the declaration. If the vehicle remains off the road after that date, a new open-ended declaration will be required.

Part 5 concerns speed limits. This Part makes targeted amendments to the Road Traffic Act 2004. The purpose is to make sure that road authorities retain the flexibility they need within the national speed limit framework. It allows local authorities to set a special speed limit of 60 km/h on local roads in built-up areas where that is appropriate. This is necessary because the Road Traffic Act 2024 changes the default speed limit position. Without this amendment, local authorities could lose the legal power to apply a 60 km/h special speed limit to certain local roads in built-up areas, even where road circumstances and traffic planning justify it. That was never the policy intention.

Part 5 also allows for a special speed limit of 100 km/h on national secondary roads, including national secondary managed roads. This supports the next phase of speed limit reform. Under that phase, the default speed limit on national secondary roads is to be reduced from 100 km/h to 80 km/h. Where a road authority considers that a particular national secondary road meets the criteria in the speed limit guidelines, it should be able to retain a 100 km/h limit through special speed limit by-laws. Speed limits are among the most visible parts of road safety policy. They influence behaviour. They affect stopping distances and the severity of collisions. These amendments do not weaken speed limit reform. They help ensure reform can be implemented sensibly, lawfully and consistently by the authorities best placed to understand local road conditions.

Part 6 contains a number of important road traffic and roads amendments. The first allows a jury to consider the lesser charge of careless driving where a defendant is acquitted of dangerous driving. This amendment arises from Mr. Justice Haughton's report on the death of Shane O'Farrell in 2011. Where the evidence may not establish dangerous driving to the required standard but may establish careless driving, the court process should be able to reflect that.

Part 6 also provides a legal basis for local authorities to receive and process road traffic collision data from An Garda Síochána or the Road Safety Authority. The data may be used for specific road safety purposes. These include identifying and assessing safety risks on public roads, targeting maintenance or construction, and supporting the proper allocation of resources.

This Part also provides for nominated local authorities where two or more local authorities agree that one authority should perform a specified executive function on their behalf. This is a central road safety provision. Local authorities require robust information to identify collision-prone locations, assess emerging risks and target engineering interventions. Collision data helps them move from reacting after incidents occur to identifying patterns and intervening earlier.

The Part also clarifies the application of penalty points in multi-offence incidents where a driver is disqualified. Recent legislation introduces the concept of a multi-offence incident. That means that where several penalty point offences arise from the same incident, more than one set of points may be endorsed. A practical difficulty can arise where fixed-charge notices from the same incident are paid at different times and a driver has already been disqualified before a later, higher set of points is notified.

The Bill makes clear that the swapping-in of penalty points will not apply where the driver has already been disqualified. This avoids having to dismantle and reconstruct an existing disqualification. There is no appropriate legal basis for doing that. It could also unfairly advantage or disadvantage the driver, depending on the sequence of notifications.

Part 6 also provides for operators of mobile safety camera vans to give certificate evidence in court where a fixed-charge notice is not paid. This means they will not have to attend in person to give testimony in every case. It is a practical enforcement measure. It supports the efficient presentation of evidence and helps ensure road traffic enforcement can operate effectively.

Taken together, the Parts of the Bill form a coherent package. Part 1 clears away obsolete provisions.

Part 2 modernises the NVDF and supports public access to defined vehicle information. Part 3 removes the paper motor tax disc requirement while maintaining the obligation to have motor tax. Part 4 simplifies declarations of non-use and Part 6 strengthens court, enforcement and evidence-led road safety functions.

The Bill is technical in places but its public purpose is clear. It makes dangerous behaviour easier to detect, it makes lawful compliance easier to verify, it gives local authorities better information for road safety work and it ensures that the legal framework keeps pace with modern systems and modern expectations. It also supports the Government's Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030. This strategy aims to reduce deaths and serious injuries by 50% by 2030 and move Ireland towards Vision Zero by 2050. Strategies must be matched by practical action and this Bill is one such action.

The Bill asks the House to support measures that are reasonable, targeted and necessary. It allows data to be used lawfully and responsibly where it can improve road safety. It modernises a motor tax system that should reflect the digital age. It gives local authorities the information they need to make roads safer. It supports speed limit reform and strengthens the practical operation of enforcement. Above all, it asks us to recognise that road safety is a shared responsibility. Every death on our roads is a life ended. It is a family changed forever and it is a community left to ask whether it could have done more. We cannot normalise poor road-user behaviour and we cannot allow outdated systems or avoidable legal uncertainty to stand in the way of road safety. The Bill is a necessary step in reversing current trends, strengthening

accountability and building a more modern, evidence-led and future-focused road safety system. I commend the Bill to the House.

I acknowledge the officials in the Department who have worked tirelessly on this. I also acknowledge the work of the Ministers, Deputies Lawless, Naughton and Chambers, previous Ministers of State in this position who helped to formulate the Bill in their time at the Department. I thank everybody for their support.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Daly, there was a request for copies of the Minister of State's speech and I am not sure whether they have arrived. We have an agreement at the Business Committee that speeches are provided. I take it that what has arrived for Deputy Daly is not the speech.

Deputy Pa Daly: No, it is documentation for me.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is something different. We are still waiting for the speech but it is on the way. That is fine.

Deputy Pa Daly: At first glance the Bill appears to be technical and administrative, dealing with databases, record keeping, data sharing arrangements and, as the Minister of State said, motor tax and various amendments. I know that other amendments are to come on Committee Stage and we look forward to hearing about them. Following the M9 crash, the Minister of State said legislation is being prepared, following discussions, and we look forward to seeing what the amendments will be.

A lot of elements in the Bill are sensible and long overdue. It modernises the national vehicle and driver file and introduces open-ended non-use declarations. The legislation finally delivers on a commitment to introduce provisions to facilitate the sharing of collision data with local authorities and this is also welcome.

While the Government asks us to focus on the administrative reforms, there are families throughout Ireland facing a different reality in the midst of the growing road safety crisis. Road death numbers are going in the wrong direction despite what is happening across Europe, where deaths are decreasing. Dangerous driving is becoming increasingly common. Communities see less Garda traffic enforcement and we know that since 2009 the numbers in the Garda road traffic unit have decreased by about 600. Last year, they went up by five or six but clearly this is not enough. No more than in dealing with public order on the streets, we need visibility to deter people from breaking road traffic laws. Too many families are suffering and, at a time when people are deeply concerned about safety on our roads, the legislative priorities should be stronger enforcement, policing resources and investing in black spots and rural road safety. This administrative Bill is focused largely on databases and processes, and motorists are entitled to ask the simple question as to what problem it actually solves. That is why we look forward to seeing what amendments will come on Committee Stage. At the moment the Bill will not stop reckless speeding or dangerous overtaking, put more gardaí on the roads or make junctions safer.

Some of the people who came before the transport committee emphasised the importance of proper design in towns and villages, in particular to ensure road safety. They also

emphasised the importance of the visibility of gardaí. These are the ways in which we can save lives on the road and make sure the trend in road deaths starts to decrease or at least halt. Vision Zero by 2050 seems an awful long way off. The truth is that the Bill does little to address the issues that are keeping communities worried and anxious. This year has been the deadliest year on our roads since 2010, with 120 people already having lost their lives. This should set off alarm bells because every road death, as the Minister of State mentioned, is more than a statistic; it is a son or daughter whose future is cut short, a family grieving and a community traumatised.

Road deaths are not inevitable. They are not unfortunate accidents. They are often the consequence of a lack of investment, policy failures, enforcement failures and investment failures. For years road safety campaigners, communities and Garda representatives have been warning that visible traffic enforcement is declining. An awful lot of money has been spent on a lot of road safety campaigns, which some experts who have come before the committee have said do not work. Visible enforcement is one of the strongest deterrents. When drivers believe there is little chance of being stopped, compliance declines and risk-taking increases. Communities throughout the country are reporting growing levels of dangerous behaviour on our roads.

When Sheila Gilheany of Alcohol Awareness Ireland came before the committee, she showed us statistics and compared the likelihood of being stopped by the police in Australia with the likelihood of being stopped in Ireland. The statistics showed that when people in Ireland go out to drive at night, they do not think they will meet a garda, whereas in Australia the opposite is the case and there is a much higher rate of random stops by police. If my memory serves me correctly, the number of people who die on our roads with alcohol in their system is way higher than it is in Australia because the deterrent effect is there with far more random stops. The number of people stopped on our roads has collapsed compared with 2009.

The Minister of State mentioned the non-display of road tax. I ask him to encourage the local authorities and the Garda not to prosecute people any more for failing to display a tax disc on their car.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This legislation is long overdue to address a number of technical issues and, in particular, to legislate for the sharing of collision data. Since late 2023, local authorities have been unable to receive vital Garda collision data. While the Department did provide for the partial sharing of this data, there is a legitimate question to be asked as to why it has taken nearly three years for the issue to be resolved. Without all of this data, local authorities, which are responsible for maintaining the majority of the State's road network, face significant barriers in implementing road safety measures. This clearly should have been an urgent priority for the Government, yet it has taken years to get to this point and it has caused delays to many road safety measures.

On the broader issue of road safety, the latest road fatality statistics show that 2026 is likely to be the deadliest year on Irish roads since 2010. Road fatalities are up 17.8% so far in 2026 when compared with the same period last year. This demonstrates that Ireland's roads are becoming more dangerous. Each road fatality statistic represents a life lost and a wider family devastated, and it demonstrates the constant work needed to make our roads safe for all who use them. The Government's target of halving road deaths by 2030 is moving further out of

reach. Despite these trends, the Government has ignored the overhaul that is needed in road safety policy and governance, which was recommended in the 2024 Indecon report.

This failure in road safety is seen at a national level. In my constituency, many towns and villages across Galway have seen road safety projects delayed and this is having a significant impact on the people who live in these areas.

One example I would like to raise is that of Kilmeen Cross in County Galway, which the Minister of State will be familiar with. This is an area where there have been a number of serious accidents. A road safety scheme was first proposed there years ago, including lights and a roundabout, but it has been left in limbo for years. It has been passed back and forth between the council and TII, with no clarity as to when it will be progressed and no funding allocation to begin construction works. That needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We also have the example of pedestrian crossings and traffic calming on the national road through Kinvara, which has been held up for 20 years. We have the example of Bridge Street in Dunmore. This is also a national road where there has been a failure to progress the regeneration and road widening project. Residents have again been left waiting years for that to happen. These are the basics that we need to get right to prevent tragic incidents from occurring on our roads. It is not acceptable for crucial schemes, like the ones I outlined, to be left stuck in limbo for years. The Government and TII need to get their act together and get these schemes progressed.

Another aspect I would like to raise is the failure of the Government to adequately resource the Garda roads policing unit and the poor level of speed limit enforcement. I have raised many times with the Minister of State that there are only 58 speed camera vans responsible for monitoring speed limits across 1,900 camera zones. Likewise, only a handful of fixed speed cameras are operating across the State. We cannot say that this is effective enforcement, especially when we know that speeding is one of the leading causes of road collisions. The Government cannot continue to treat rising numbers of fatalities on our roads as isolated incidents. The reality here is that rising numbers of fatalities reflect fundamental failures within the Government's approach to road safety, including the failure to adequately resource the Garda roads policing unit, the failure to invest in road safety measures and the failure to reform wider road safety policy and governance. The time to act is now to save lives on our roads and ensure that our roads are as safe as possible for all who use them.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an ábhar seo. There are sensible provisions in this Bill that Sinn Féin can support. Giving local authorities access to collision data from An Garda Síochána and the RSA should help to identify dangerous locations and target investment. Allowing a jury to consider careless driving where there has been an acquittal on a charge of dangerous driving is also reasonable. Modernising the national vehicle and driver file and removing unnecessary bureaucracy also makes sense, of course. I have to say, though, that legislation alone will not make our roads safer. We can pass new laws, create databases and introduce enforcement mechanisms, but none of that will make a blind bit of difference if there are not enough gardaí in our communities and on our roads to enforce the laws.

The justice committee, which I chair, heard evidence this week from Garda management and the Garda representative bodies on Garda pursuits and roads policing. This followed some

horrific incidents over the summer, including the tragedy on the M9. What we heard should be of concern to everyone in this House. There are serious deficiencies in the number of gardaí trained to undertake vehicle pursuits, while roads policing numbers have actually declined by 40% since 2009. How did we reach a situation where gardaí encountering someone driving a stolen car recklessly, potentially putting innocent lives at risk, have not been given the specialist training and resources needed to respond? We know that a pursuit will not always be the safest response, and public safety always has to come first, but gardaí need to have options. They need the capacity to close roads quickly, to deploy stinger devices where appropriate, to co-ordinate air support and, where necessary and proportionate, to conduct a properly managed pursuit. That requires training and equipment, but above all, it requires gardaí, and we still do not have enough gardaí in our communities. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have absolutely failed in that regard, and they are still not going to reach their too-low targets. Communities see the consequences of this. There are restricted Garda station opening hours, insufficient community gardaí and reduced Garda visibility on our roads. This all needs to be addressed.

I want to speak briefly about the whole issue of speed vans. I meet people daily who tell me that they believe that speed camera vans are positioned not where they will be most effective in saving lives but where they are most effective in revenue raising. The perception exists that the vans are located in places where the highest number of fines will be raised. That undermines confidence in road safety enforcement. Speed enforcement has to be about saving lives, not raising revenue. Camera deployment should be transparently based on collision risk, road design, speeding patterns and road safety evidence. If this Bill improves collision data sharing with local authorities, then that information should also guide enforcement towards where it saves lives.

We also need to have confidence in the national car test, NCT, system. In 2025, the latest figures we have, approximately 58.4% of vehicles that were tested in Cavan failed their NCT, which was the second highest percentage in the State. In Monaghan, there was a failure rate of 57.8%, the fifth highest nationally. Of course, there might be some legitimate explanations, including maybe vehicle age and mileage, but motorists and people in my constituency deserve more than assumption. The principle has to be that the same car should have the same prospect of passing its NCT whether it is tested in Monaghan, Cavan, Dublin or anywhere else. I have asked the Minister for Transport to investigate the disparities in the NCT pass rates and to compare like with like in respect of vehicles of similar age, make, model and mileage, as well as the defects recorded and outcomes at different centres.

I say this because in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, like many rural constituencies, a car is not a luxury. It is essential for work, school, healthcare and everyday life. An NCT failure can have quite profound impacts. It means repair bills, retest costs and serious inconvenience, and that needs to be dealt with. Many people would attribute any NCT failure they have had to the state of the roads they are forced to drive on daily. I again put on the record that it is inconceivable and inexcusable that the Government has again this year allocated less money to Cavan and Monaghan to fix local roads, at a time when costs are increasing and when roads are in the most deplorable state I have witnessed in all my time in politics. I am referring to local tertiary roads in particular.

Let us modernise the national vehicle and driver file and improve collision data sharing, absolutely, but it has to be recognised that legislation is only one part of road safety. We need

an NCT system that people can trust, roads that are fit for purpose, speed enforcement targeted at dangerous roads, and, arguably most important, we need enough properly trained gardaí with the equipment and resources necessary to actually keep those roads safe. No database, speed camera or new law can replace trained gardaí on the ground and that is, above all, the challenge that this Government must finally address.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the opportunity to speak on road safety. It is an issue and concern for so many people. We have seen the recent horrific incidents on the M50 and the M9. Such is the fear in this regard that we have had reports since then of 75,000 fewer people taking the motorways in recent weeks.

I too am a member of the justice committee. This week, we heard from members of An Garda Síochána. They confirmed to us that there is not one garda in the State, as I speak here today, who is trained in pursuit. If I know this, and we all know this, we had better believe that criminals out there know this too. It is 2026, and not one garda in the State is trained to pursue a vehicle that drives away at speed or refuses to stop. This is absolutely shocking. Any member of the public I have spoken to during the last couple of weeks, since this information got out, has found this unbelievable. People want to know, and it is a legitimate question, how this has been allowed to happen. I spoke at another debate yesterday. At that same meeting, a member of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, brought out a document from 1988 that said gardaí were going to get pursuit training. It has not happened. That is 38 years ago. I think I used the analogy of 1988 being the year in which Ray Houghton stuck the ball in the England net, and we still do not have a garda trained to pursue any fleeing vehicle.

There is also the issue of e-scooters and scramblers being used to terrorise people on our streets. The Government brought in legislation to tackle the use of scramblers after the tragic death of Grace Lynch, yet people in my community, and in communities across Dublin and across Ireland, will tell you they have not seen any change. Gardaí need to be trained and resourced to tackle this problem. Gardaí cannot safely intervene if doing so is a danger to the public, but it is also a danger to the gardaí if they have not received the proper training. We have been telling the Government from this side of the House for years, for decades, that there has been a problem with scramblers, yet it took the death of a beautiful young girl for the Government to act.

It is being reactive again to a situation and not proactive. The Government also brought in regulations in relation to e-scooters to deal with the number of young people suffering from acquired brain injuries but it was another reactive response. We have been telling the Government for a long time that this has been a problem in our communities. What we heard this week in the justice committee was shocking, coming from the Garda itself. It told us we will see an increase in the number of people having scramblers and e-scooters taken off them or being prosecuted for either not wearing high-vis clothing or a helmet. It told us they are the people probably using them in a legitimate way, going to work or for legitimate business. They are the people who will feel the full weight of this law because they might have forgotten their helmet or high-vis. This is because, generally, these people are compliant and law abiding so if a garda asks them to stop, they will, but the lads running amok in my community and others across Dublin using e-scooters for drug dealing or intimidation will not stop; they will flee. The problem then is the gardaí do not have the training to then pursue them. It is a catch-22.

The Minister said in relation to pursuit training that the Government would make it a priority to get gardaí trained. We heard at the justice committee this week - if the Minister of State gets a chance, he should listen back or read the transcript - that by the end of this year, despite the urgency, only six gardaí will have the proper training.

Another issue in the news this week involved a high-profile English football player who was arrested for dangerous driving and possession of nitrous oxide. I have raised this before. I have heard anecdotally from people contacting me that this is an issue in our areas. Young people have been seen driving around with balloons, which contain nitrous oxide. It is a dangerous situation. Anybody doing this is reckless and they need to stop. I said at the time we need to bring in roadside testing for nitrous oxide so if someone is under the influence of nitrous oxide, a roadside test can be undertaken. That might deter people from taking nitrous oxide and driving. We do not need a situation where we name another law after another fatality. We have a chance to bring in this testing. I urge the Minister of State to have a look at that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I welcome the opportunity to debate this Bill on Second Stage. I look forward to tabling amendments on future Stages. Any debate such as this is always emotional because we often think of somebody we know who has been hurt or whose life has been prematurely lost on our roads and we automatically assume the legislation and enforcement are in place to ensure our safety on the roads. This is a welcome step but as the Minister of State accepted in his opening remarks, no one law or policy will be robust enough to ensure our roads are safe.

I place no personal blame on anybody for this but it is intriguing that while we are, in comparison with our EU colleagues, quite below the average as regards road fatalities, I am concerned, as a youth worker and a dad of young people considering entering the roads as drivers, that for the age cohort of 16 to 25 years, we are disproportionately represented in fatalities. Our policy, training response and legislative response need to be evidence based and must have that in mind. Over the summer, I launched the idea of a driver theory test programme that would really look at that evidence and robustly engage with the next generation of road users, whether drivers, cyclists, e-scooter users or pedestrians. For a very small sum of annual funding - it is fully costed at about €5.5 million - 50 development officers could be hired in the RSA and sent out to schools to give a universal driver and road user training programme that would culminate in a fully funded driver theory test. We all know in this Chamber that to take control of a vehicle of any type is to take control of a significant weapon, yet what we have seen in cultural norms and behaviours that have evolved online or in person is that sometimes reality and perception are very different in that generation. This initiative would provide universal training in transition year or fifth year, in youth services or youth clubs to ensure young people can see, feel and learn the realities of what it is to be a road user behind the wheel of a car, as a pedestrian or a cyclist. I ask the Minister of State and his officials to consider that as part of budget 2027. It already happens *ad hoc*. I accept the RSA has a training programme but we are relying on teachers and gardaí in the community who are already overburdened with work and cannot do it robustly and universally across the State. This is an attempt to offer that.

As part of the legislation, the Minister of State spoke about removing the need for physical tax discs in vehicles. I have had a bone to pick with this Government since I was elected a couple of years ago. I have always felt irked that I pay 13% more each year for my road tax if I do not have the funds to pay for it annually versus paying for it every three months. That is

punitive. The costs are not representative of that punitive damage of 13%. It is certainly not 13% more in administrative costs to produce the discs, send a reminder email or post it out every three months. The Government now has an opportunity and I am offering something of a political win for the Minister of State. If there are no more hard copies of tax discs, that negates the need for any discrepancy between the cost of taxing your car every three months and doing so every 12 months. Only a certain cohort can pay upfront for 12 months. A lot of people cannot. We want people to continue taxing their cars and paying the tax. Let us do away with the 13% difference because all that does is punish people who cannot afford it.

I was a councillor for a few years before I was elected to the Dáil. I could never understand how the body responsible for designing our roads never had access to collision data. I welcome that this is part of the legislation. It has the potential to ensure real-time engineering solutions are provided in hotspots or prevalent collision areas. I am worried it could become a bureaucratic mess to access data. While there is a legislative route, will the Minister of State provide more detail as to what that will look in practice for local authorities? Will there be a live interactive map updated consistently? Will there be certain thresholds of collisions? I will give the example of the R403 in Kildare. It is probably the longest stretch of straight road in the country. I have yet to find someone who disagrees with me. It is about 10 miles long, possibly even more and it is ruler-straight. At certain times of day, people are driving into stark sunshine at sunrise or sunset. It is also collision-heavy at crossroads. There have been tragedies along that road very recently and throughout the past decades. That the council did not have access to that information in a timely way to bring in engineering solutions does not make sense. I welcome this measure but I ask for further information as to how that communication will be conveyed between the Garda and the local authority.

The Government has missed a trick in some ways. I commend the response with regard to e-scooters over the summer.

3 o'clock

The Social Democrats had a different proposal, which was to register e-scooters. People would have had to register those vehicles in the same way as a car or anything else. We could still go a way towards doing that as part of this review. If the Minister of State is considering that, he has my full support because it is as dangerous a weapon as many of the other weapons we ask be registered in the State. That is another consideration.

I do not want to repeat the points already made but I attach myself to the sentiment that even with the best will in the world of all of us here, including the Minister of State's officials in the Department who put together this strong legislation, proper enforcement and education are needed. The legislation is only one part of that jigsaw. I have put some proposals on education before the Minister of State that I ask him to consider. Equally, I ask him to convey that message on enforcement to his colleagues in the Cabinet. The gardaí we have are doing what they can, but we can all agree that the bodies on the ground are not there, the training is not there and ultimately the back-up from society is not there to support them so that when they need to intervene, we will back them as opposed to them being prosecuted for trying to get involved in these incidents.

I look forward to contributing to this discussion further on Committee Stage and commend the Minister of State on the work so far.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I also welcome the Bill. It is important, as my colleague said, we empower local authorities and the Road Safety Authority, RSA, to enhance their data-sharing arrangements. There are also other welcome aspects to the Bill.

I will pick up where my colleague left off and speak about my constituency. There is a serious crisis with the lack of enforcement. We have met and engaged with the parents of Grace Lynch, Martin and Siobhán, and I still engage with them on an ongoing basis. What is clear from speaking to them and constituents who contact me, and from speaking to people living in Ballymun and Finglas this week, is that despite the introduction of Grace's law, things are as bad as ever. One resident from Finglas I spoke to today said that every time they leave the house, they encounter a scrambler or a scrambler-type e-bike travelling dangerously on the roads, paths, green areas and parks. Last week, while they were on their way back from Tolka Valley Park on the Cardiffsbridge Road near Dunnes Stores, an individual wearing a balaclava came across the road in front of the traffic from Deanstown Avenue and onto the green opposite. The resident said it is intimidating and people in their cars look fed up. It is utterly unacceptable that this is still the case.

I met one of the assistant commissioners in An Garda Síochána last week who confirmed there is an issue around the EU Presidency with Garda resources being diverted away, that it does not have sufficient resources to implement and enforce and that is frustrating. It is accepted that communities such as Ballymun and Finglas need high-visibility policing to enforce these rules to ensure the communities are safe but it is not being delivered. They also need youth diversion programmes and support in that. It is frustrating that the issues of road safety in relation to e-scooters and scramblers in the community are as bad as ever and it is not right. It is not acceptable.

The concern is, as has been said, that this involves more promises without delivery. Injuries continue to happen. We have seen the figures from the hospitals. Grace Lynch's parents plead with us and the Minister of State to try to avoid another tragic death but it is still happening. We need to see more action and resourcing and, as my colleague, Deputy Farrelly, put forward, the idea of registering e-scooters seems like a sensible proposal. We need action on that and we need enforcement because every community has the right to be safe. Tá sé tuillte ag gach pobal a bheith sábháilte agus tá gá acu leis sin. Tá níos mó gardaí ag teastáil ó Bhaile Munna agus Fionnghlas chun é sin a chinntiú.

We need more gardaí on the ground to enforce but they need training. It is absolutely scandalous that only six gardaí will receive pursuit training before the end of the year. That is absolutely not acceptable. I will continue to push on this to ensure gardaí have sufficient resources and are trained and that our communities are safe. We know e-scooters and scramblers are being actively used in drug dealing and intimidation by drug gangs and the most vulnerable disadvantaged communities are bearing the brunt of that. They have as much a right to be safe as everyone else in the country so we need to see serious action on that.

Deputy Grace Boland: Every one of us knows families and communities who have been affected by serious road traffic collisions and behind every statistic is a person, family and community whose lives have been changed forever. That is why we have a responsibility to ensure our laws, enforcement systems and road infrastructure are as effective as possible in preventing collisions and reducing harm. That is why I welcome the Bill. While much of it is

technical in nature, its purpose is straightforward. It is about making our roads safer, ensuring public bodies have access to better information, modernising how key road traffic systems operate and strengthening the legal framework that underpins many aspects of our road safety policy.

One of the most important aspects of this Bill is the provision allowing collision data collected by An Garda Síochána to be shared more effectively with local authorities. Too often we hear concerns from local communities about dangerous stretches of road, recurring collisions or persistent safety issues. Residents know there is a problem but decisions can be delayed because the necessary data are not readily available. That is why provisions relating to speed limits are important. Speed limits are among the most important tools available to improve road safety data. They influence the likelihood of a collision occurring and the severity of its consequences when it occurs. The flexibility provided under this legislation in speed limit implementation is sensible. However, these decisions must remain firmly evidence-based and factors such as road design, collision history, traffic volumes, nearby development and the presence of vulnerable road users must continue to guide decision-making.

When we discuss road safety, we cannot focus exclusively on motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. Children travelling to school, older people and people with disabilities also have a right to use our roads safely. For those road users, even relatively small reductions in vehicle speed can make a significant difference and that is why ensuring speed limits are applied appropriately and consistently remains such an important part of our broader road strategy.

While I am speaking about speed limits, as the Minister of State will be aware, our local authorities have been tasked with examining local roads and implementing 30 km per hour speed limits where appropriate. I would very much like the Minister of State to give an update to the House on its status in each of the local authorities and if he does not have up-to-date information on the status, for him to engage directly with local authorities as I am hearing that there are some difficulties with local authorities moving that process forward. We all want our roads to be safer. Speed is a huge driver in that and it is important we see that process concluded as soon as possible.

I also welcome the provisions relating to dangerous and careless driving offences. At present the situation can arise that a jury does not consider the threshold for dangerous driving has been met, but cannot consider whether the evidence supports a conviction for careless driving. That means we get outcomes that do not accurately reflect the facts of a case. Allowing a jury to return a verdict of the lesser offence of careless driving, where appropriate, is a common-sense reform and I welcome it.

It will help ensure that accountability better reflects the evidence presented while maintaining the rights and protections that are fundamental to our justice system.

I also welcome the measures relating to mobile camera van operators. Requiring operators to attend court in very routine cases is not always the best use of limited resources. At the same time, efficiency must never come at the expense of fairness. Where a genuine dispute exists, defendants must continue to have the opportunity to challenge evidence and to seek the attendance of a witness. It is important that public confidence in road traffic enforcement is maintained alongside any efficiency gains.

The national vehicle and driver file sits at the centre of many of the systems that people interact with every day, whether renewing a driver's licence, taxing a vehicle or complying with road traffic regulations. Maintaining the accuracy, effectiveness and legal robustness of that system is essential. I welcome the decision to remove the requirement for a paper motor tax disc. It is a sensible modernisation of a system that has changed very little despite the widespread digitalisation of our public services. Most motorists now expect to access information and complete transactions online. I welcome that our legislation will reflect that. The key requirement is now that the electronic systems underpinning all of this are reliable, accurate and easy to access. Gardaí, local authorities and members of the public must be able to verify a vehicle's status quickly and with confidence. We must also ensure that people who are less comfortable using digital services are not left behind as these changes are implemented. I very much welcome the statutory basis being provided for the Check My Vehicle service. This service gives members of the public access to important information and helps support transparency, compliance and consumer confidence. Modernisation of systems does not always attract headlines but it can save people time, improve their experience of interacting with the State and reduce the State's administrative costs. As services continue to expand and evolve, privacy considerations must remain to the fore. Public confidence in the State's digital services depends on people knowing their information is protected and that sensitive personal details cannot be disclosed.

Communities across the country want to see tangible improvements in road safety. They want safer junctions, safer routes to schools, safer town centres and faster action where risks are identified. The measures contained in the Bill may appear technical but their purpose is anything but. Better data sharing, more effective enforcement, appropriate speed limits and modernised public services all contribute to one common objective - preventing collisions and saving lives. I share my colleagues' concerns in relation to enforcement. That is also a huge piece, as is training and education, where there is scope for improvement. Ultimately, the steps we take with this legislation and with regard to enforcement and awareness and education campaigns will all be measured by one statistic. Is the number of road deaths and pedestrian injuries caused by vehicles falling? I very much hope this legislation passes swiftly through the House and that the various sections are commenced as quickly as possible.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: As we deal with a largely technical Bill related to various areas of Road Traffic Acts, websites, databases and day-to-day administration relating to driving, I want to touch on something else that is viewed by many as a glaring omission in the delivery of policy and that I would say is an error in policy. For many years, members of the diaspora have been pointing out the administrative burden associated with returning home to Ireland. Given that we are crying out for healthcare professionals and that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is actually advertising in Australia to lure Irish people, including construction workers, home, one could be forgiven for thinking that this could be a moment and an opportunity to be seized to actually progress long-standing recommendations to address the challenges faced by returning Irish immigrants. Unfortunately, for this Government, that does not seem to be the case. The pace of progress in obtaining reciprocal agreements for the recognition and exchange of driving licences between Ireland and other countries and US states has been far too slow.

I commend those who have long campaigned on this and on other diaspora issues, especially Safe Home Ireland and the Irish-US Driver's License Exchange campaign group, the latter of which last year published a report on this very matter. It brought forward proposals to allow for the simplification of the process. These warrant serious consideration. That is why there has been so much frustration at what is reported in the diaspora media as a slap in the face over the last few days.

The crux of the issue lies in respect and prioritisation. On respect, to use the words of one campaigner, "No reason is given, no explanation made to those affected and their families, who have and continue to be impacted emotionally and financially by an unintended consequence of what we believe is just poorly worded legislation." On prioritisation, we see what the Government is capable of when it prioritises a matter. When it prioritised this matter, the programme for Government committed to working on reciprocal arrangements with countries with large diaspora populations. It committed to prioritising such arrangements as would benefit the commercial sector. I welcome the progress made with regard to the commercial sector early this year but my simple ask of the Government is to ascribe equal priority to Irish citizens who wish to return home to Ireland. This is clear-cut. Deputy Canney can either be a Minister of State for whom the diaspora are simply a photo opportunity or a handshake on his St. Patrick's Day jollies or he can be a real friend to our brothers, sisters, sons and daughters who live abroad and who want to come home. He can be a Minister of State who does all he can within his power to help alleviate the administrative burden of returning home if that is their wish. I ask him to commit to making this a priority for his Department and to getting it done.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The Labour Party absolutely supports the main thrust of this Bill, which is to improve data sharing between the State bodies responsible for road safety, that is, An Garda Síochána, the RSA and our local authorities. At present, the information exists but the people who need that information to make our roads safer do not necessarily have access to it. That situation has been allowed to persist for too long. Nevertheless, I welcome the Bill being introduced at Second Stage today. If a person is seriously injured on a road, if there is a collision at a dangerous junction, if gardaí repeatedly attend the same stretch of road or if local residents have been reporting a danger for years, that information should not disappear into the database of one public body and become inaccessible to another. It should be shared across the competent and relevant authorities to inform what happens next.

The purpose of road safety data is not just to produce statistics; it is to prevent the next collision from happening. My Labour Party colleagues and I are very supportive of the provisions in this Bill that allow road authorities to request and process collision data to identify and assess safety risks to plan for road maintenance, junction redesign and so on and know where the resources need to be targeted. The Bill specifically provides that An Garda Síochána or another public authority may disclose collision data to a road authority or nominated local authority for those purposes. It also provides safeguards around the processing of personal data.

That is all very welcome but we have to ask why it has taken this long. We have known for years that there is a problem with the fragmentation of road safety data. Road safety campaigners have been banging this drum for a long time. In a previous debate on road safety in this House, I spoke about the frustration of public representatives who know the dangerous

locations in their communities but who cannot always access the data necessary to understand the full picture. I know of several in my constituency and I am sure my constituency colleagues would point the Minister of State to the exact same spots. The issue is pretty straightforward. A local authority cannot properly redesign a dangerous road if it does not have information about what is actually happening on that road. It cannot always accurately identify black spots or junctions that are particularly dangerous for vulnerable road users like pedestrians or cyclists. It basically cannot identify patterns because the information is sitting in a different organisation.

That is why this part of the Bill is really important. We should be moving toward a system where collision information is routinely used to identify locations of interest, where local authorities are able to intervene quickly and where the State has national oversight of dangerous locations.

Fatalities are the most visible part of the road safety crisis but we also need to look at serious injuries that are happening on our roads. My colleague and the Labour Party's health spokesperson, Deputy Marie Sherlock, has done some important work in this area. There is a gap between Garda collision statistics and hospital data. Thousands of people are hospitalised following road collisions whose injuries are not necessarily reflected in the same way in the national collision statistics. What this means is that, once again, we risk making decisions based on an incomplete picture. This also needs to be addressed. If a person is seriously injured because of the way our road system is designed, that information should be available to help us make the system safer. In May, the RSA published an interactive map of road traffic injury collisions covering fatal, serious and minor injury collisions between 2016 and 2024. This is a really useful step towards transparency and evidence-based decision making. However, that information has to lead to action. We need local authorities to have the power, the resources and the obligation to act when the evidence tells us that a road is dangerous.

That brings me to the wider context of this Bill. Road traffic legislation is not merely an administrative exercise. Ireland is in the middle of a road safety crisis and I do not think any of us are being hyperbolic when we say that. The RSA figures tell us that very clearly. There has been enormous progress over the longer term; we should acknowledge that. Ireland has gone from hundreds of road deaths a year to figures that, for a period, were among the best in Europe. That progress is not something we should take for granted, but I fear that the eye has been taken off the ball. The RSA's long-term figures show a rise in road deaths from 134 in 2018 to 185 in 2025. The Garda figures report 190 deaths in 2025 as they include deaths in public places such as car parks and private roads. The Bill does not address this but we also need to clarify which are the more accurate figures when it comes to deaths as a result of cars. I would argue that the Garda figures are more complete in that regard but that is a discussion for another day.

Tragically, regardless of whose figures we use - those of the Garda or the RSA - the trend of increasing fatalities shows no signs of reversing this year. At the end of July, 105 people had already lost their lives on Irish roads, or 13 more than at the same point in 2025. More than 40% of fatalities occurred on Saturdays and Sundays. The RSA reports that 57% of fatalities occurred on roads with speed limits of 80 km/h or higher, while 27% of those killed were aged between 16 and 25. Every one of these road fatalities and every life lost will have left devastation in its wake for the thousands of people grieving the loss of their loved one. We

have all seen the consequences in our communities. In February, a man in his 80s, Frank Daly, was killed when a Bus Éireann double-decker bus struck pedestrians not far from here on North Earl Street. Three other people were taken to hospital. In June, a man in his 30s died following a three-car collision on the M21 between Abbeyfeale and Newcastle West. His death brought the number of people killed on Irish roads at that point in the year to 75, six higher than in the previous year. In July, three men were killed in separate collisions in Donegal, Cork and Kildare in the space of a single day. In August, we witnessed an absolutely devastating collision on the M9 in Kildare, where five teenagers lost their lives in a head-on collision after a car travelled on the wrong side of the motorway. Four other people, a family including a child who were on their way to Dublin Airport to go on holiday, were seriously injured. I am so glad to have seen an update from the three sisters yesterday to say they are getting stronger each day, and I wish them the very best as they continue their recovery.

These sorts of devastating events stay with communities. They stay with the emergency workers who respond to them - the gardaí and anyone who happens to witness them - and above all, they stay with the families who are impacted by them. The barometer against which we have to measure every piece of road traffic legislation, such as this one, is whether it will make our roads safer. On the data-sharing element of this, I am confident this Bill will do that. On the speed limits element, though, which comes under Part 5 of the Bill, I cannot say I am quite as convinced. In fact, I find this part of the Bill a little concerning. Section 21 provides for local authorities to be able to continue to set a special speed limit of 60 km/h for local roads in built-up areas. The Minister will be aware there is a long-standing campaign, with many different advocacy groups calling for a default urban speed limit of 30 km/h. I support this campaign. At the very least, the sensible approach would be to standardise urban road speed limits. At present, a road speed limit could be 60 km/h but if you were to transplant that exact same road into a different area, it would be 50 km/h. It creates ambiguity, and when it comes to road safety and the rules of the road, ambiguity poses a genuine danger. It also sends the wrong message about allowing higher speeds in built-up areas. Drivers could legitimately ask why it is okay for one road to have a speed limit of 60 km/h but another road to have one of 50 km/h in very similar areas. They may be tempted to put the foot down a little bit more as a result, seeing a sort of unfairness there.

My clear position is that we should be reducing urban speed limits to 30 km/h. It is increasingly becoming the international norm. It is also the policy direction that this State has already legislated for. The Road Traffic Act 2024 provided for a default 30 km/h speed limit in built-up areas. The ink was hardly dry on that Act, though, before the Government started to roll back on it. I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions to try to ascertain why the Government was effectively moving away from the national default approach and instead instructing local authorities to introduce 30 km/h speed limits through special speed limit zones. I have never really received a satisfactory response. Generally, all I get is that it is too difficult. Once again, that is not good enough. The question should not be about whether moving from 50 km/h to 30 km/h speed limits in built-up areas is difficult or not. It should be about whether it would save lives and prevent serious injuries. The relationship between speed and the severity of pedestrian collisions is well established. Around 5% of pedestrians would be killed at an impact speed of 30 km/h, compared with approximately 50% at 60 km/h and 90% at 80 km/h. There is an extraordinary difference there. At 30 km/h, we give someone a

fighting chance. At higher speeds, the consequences of a mistake become drastically, dramatically more severe.

Speed limits are not about how we get drivers from A to B most efficiently. They are about what happens when something goes wrong, like a child running out onto a road, a cyclist falling off their bike in the middle of traffic or a driver getting distracted for a second or two. We cannot build a road system around the assumption that everyone will behave perfectly all the time. Our road system should be designed so that those mistakes do not automatically become fatal or risk life-changing injuries for those involved. The case for reducing urban speed limits to 30 km/h is clear, based on the evidence from places where this has been done. Wales, for example, introduced a default 20 miles per hour speed limit on restricted roads in built-up areas in September 2023. Early evidence showed average speeds falling by around 4 miles per hour on a sample of main roads. In 2024, casualties on roads in Wales with 20 miles per hour and 30 miles per hour limits combined were almost 20% lower than in the year before. It is a relatively short period of data but the direction of travel is encouraging. It is certainly a lot better than the direction we have been heading in for some time now here. The Welsh Government has also estimated that the introduction of 20 miles per hour limits could prevent deaths and serious injuries while delivering wider economic and public health benefits.

We can also look to Spain. They introduced a nationwide urban 30 km/h limit on streets with a single lane in each direction in 2021. Urban road deaths fell by 20% in 2021 compared with 2019. Their directorate general for traffic specifically linked the reduction to a package of urban road safety measures, including the 30 km/h limit. Pedestrian deaths fell by 26%, cyclist deaths by 34% and deaths among people over 64 by 31%. Five years on, Spain continues to see a positive trend, with urban fatalities in 2024 5% below 2019 levels, while cyclist fatalities in cities were almost 19% lower and pedestrian fatalities more than 16% lower. The case for reducing urban speed limits as a default is not theoretical. This is what happens when governments decide that speed in urban areas should be designed around the safety of humans rather than the convenience of the fastest possible journey.

I pay particular tribute to the Love 30 campaign group, which has been to the fore in calling for 30 km/h to be the default speed limit in built-up areas in Ireland, particularly in town centres, residential areas and around schools and places of public assembly. I had the pleasure of hosting Love 30 here in Leinster House for an audiovisual room briefing on the campaign, alongside other organisations including the Dublin Commuter Coalition, Irish Doctors for the Environment, Cycling Ireland, An Taisce, the Irish Road Victims Association and community groups from around the country, all of which support the default urban speed limit of 30 km/h.

Whether it is pedestrians, cyclists, children on their way to school, older people going to do their shopping, people with disabilities navigating pavements and crossings, commuters waiting for a bus or teenagers hanging out with friends, we have to design our roads and institute a road safety system for all of these people. We also have to keep an eye on enforcement.

That is the other side of this debate. A speed limit that is not enforced is just a number on a sign. There was a 23% increase in motorists caught speeding last year. I do not know if we have got better in terms of enforcement or if just more people are speeding; I suspect the latter. We need to take a holistic approach to enforcement.

The obvious place to look is the decline in the number of gardaí involved in roads policing and our failure to address that despite several promises over the years. We have the authorities, the strategies, the targets, the awareness campaigns and announcements but the gardaí tasked with enforcing the law on our roads are being asked to do more and more with too few resources. In May 2024, we were promised an additional 150 gardaí specifically for roads policing by 2025. We got 15. If we go back further, the picture is even worse. There are almost 400 fewer gardaí working in roads policing today than in 2009, while there are more than half a million more cars on Irish roads.

I do not believe the roads policing position will get any better this year given the increased demands on our gardaí due to the hosting of the EU Presidency and the circus around Donald Trump at the Irish Open last week. Enforcement has become so much more difficult as a result and the odds of being caught for those who break the rules of the road are increasingly in their favour. Driver behaviour naturally adapts to this new reality. We have also been incredibly slow at rolling out stationary speed cameras and traffic light cameras. I was very pleased to see Deputy Shane Moynihan raising this with the Taoiseach yesterday; maybe he listened to him. It beggars belief that we still only have nine fixed speed camera sites in the country.

Road design should also form part of the overall enforcement strategy from a proactive preventative perspective. I hope that the data-sharing element of this Bill will have a positive impact in that regard. We need to redesign the dangerous locations identified through collision data and crucially we need to give local authorities the resources to do so. The Government's own road safety strategy has a target of reducing road deaths and serious injuries by 50% by 2030. The baseline for that was 144 deaths per year and a target of 72 or fewer and yet we recorded 185 deaths on public roads last year. We cannot look at these figures and conclude that the current approach is working; much more needs to be done.

I want to briefly touch on the RSA given its role as a competent authority when it comes to road safety. The Minister of State will know that I have my concerns about the apparent rollback in the Government's commitment to reform the RSA and split it into two separate bodies as recommended in the 2024 Indecon report. As I have said on many occasions, there is an inherent conflict at the heart of the RSA in that it is both poacher and gamekeeper when it comes to vehicles on our roads. On the one hand it is tasked with making our roads safer and sometimes that can mean fewer cars on the road but on the other it is incentivised to keep adding more and more cars onto the road because it administers and is funded through driving tests and the NCT. Those functions need to be split. Let one body deal with driving tests and another deal exclusively with road safety.

I support the concept of an independent commission for safety with real powers to intervene and to take politics out of our decisions on road safety. Whatever model it takes we need a much more active authority in the road safety space. South Dublin County Council recently ran a consultation on proposals to install large digital advertising boards in various locations around the county. It was really welcome to see the RSA make a submission detailing the potential hazards that these huge electronic billboards would cause in terms of driver distraction. At the same South Dublin County Council and local authorities all over the country have been carrying out a speed limit review but the RSA has not given any comment to my knowledge on any of those speed limit reviews. That is exactly an area where the RSA should be using its expertise and experience, and advocating for what it thinks is the safest thing for

our roads. We need a much more active authority, an authority that will work with local authorities, engage in public consultations and share its expertise.

The vast majority of the Bill represents a positive step. I have spoken about the data-sharing piece but the provision around multi-offence incidents which were introduced in the Road Traffic Act 2024 is also a move in the right direction, as is the provision concerning careless driving which as the explanatory note to the Bill states arose from the report on the tragic death of Shane O'Farrell. However, the Bill could have gone further particularly with respect to the speed limit issue. I want to see the evidence lead us in the right decision on this. We should not use 60 km/h as a convenient compromise simply because it is already familiar. If a road is genuinely a major arterial route, we can assess it on its merits but in built-up areas the starting point should be 30 km/h. That is what the evidence tells us will prevent collisions and fatalities. If an exceptional road needs to be treated differently, there should be a process for that exception. That is a much better system than beginning with a higher speed and asking communities to fight their way down to something safer. The principle should be the opposite: start with safety then justify any departure from that. We cannot legislate our way out of every collision but we can design a system that makes collisions less likely and makes the inevitable human mistake less likely to result in death or serious injury.

I welcome the Bill insofar as it finally recognises that road safety depends on information being shared between the organisations responsible for our roads. Local authorities, the Garda and the RSA all need to be on the same page and working from the same evidence in terms of black spots and what needs attention. I sincerely hope that will have a positive effect. I urge the Minister of State to reconsider the approach on the speed limits. We should start with a default 30 km/h limit for built-up areas. We know that lower speed limits save lives and prevent life-changing injuries. The case has already been made by Wales and Spain, and the Road Traffic Act has already pointed us in that direction. I urge the Minister of State not to roll back any further on what was legislated for in that Act.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Road safety is incredibly important and too many of the important indicators are going in the wrong direction. In Meath, for example, people are telling me the same thing again and again, and I know it myself: you never see a roads policing unit. Motorists can go for months or more likely years without encountering a Garda checkpoint or traffic control. That absence has consequences. When there is no fear of getting caught, dangerous driving becomes normalised. Behaviours such as speeding, mobile phone use, dangerous overtaking, and drink and drug driving thrive in the vacuum left by declining enforcement. The road safety experts are clear, as I heard when I was a member of the transport committee. Visible enforcement is one of the most effective deterrents we have and the Government has failed to resource it.

There is also the state of our roads. Across Meath, motorists are navigating broken and deteriorating surfaces, dangerous junctions, inadequate signage and long-standing black spots. Rural communities in particular carry a disproportionate burden of serious and fatal collisions yet they are expected to live with roads that are themselves a hazard. The road maintenance backlog is growing. Local authority funding is stretched beyond breaking point and this Bill does not address any of it. There is not one measure to fix a dangerous junction and not one euro for road repairs. Where is the alternative? For too many people in Meath there simply is not one. We have a complete lack of appropriate, sufficient and working public transport.

Towns, including very large towns and villages, are left without reliable bus or rail connections, forcing people into cars often on roads that are neither safe nor fit for purpose. We cannot talk to people about road safety while offering them no viable way to leave the car at home.

While I welcome a number of the sensible and long-awaited provisions of this Bill, we have to look at the issue of enforcement. We need more roads police and roads policing. We need greater funding for roads maintenance and repair. Systems, of course, should talk to each other, and that is welcome. Of course, personal responsibility is hugely important in all of this. Some of the issues I have mentioned do not fall under the Minister of State's remit but I would ask him to work with his ministerial colleagues, particularly in the Department of justice, on these areas.

Another area that falls under the Minister of State's remit needs direct attention. As my party's spokesperson on education, I want to talk about the need for a standard and proactive approach to traffic calming at schools. When I was my party's spokesperson on transport, the safe routes to school programme was introduced. While it is excellent and very welcome, it is too slow and it is underfunded. Different schools have different approaches. Too many schools are left without important, and I would say essential, traffic-calming and child-protecting infrastructure. Dealing with local authorities is infuriating. There appear to be huge discretion and flexibility but there is no rhyme or reason when going from school to school.

One school has huge intervention, while another school in a similar or even worse setting has nothing at all. The local authority, in my experience, defends that position and contradiction. It makes no sense to me. We need guidelines and design handbooks for traffic calming at schools and we need a comprehensive plan for every single school. This, along with some of the measures the Minister of State is proposing here, will help.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will say at the outset that it is good we finally have this Bill before the House. We have been waiting for it for a while now. A number of its provisions represent real common-sense reforms. They look at the modernisation of the national vehicle and driver file, the removal of outdated paper motor tax discs, improvements to collision data sharing, which I will speak more about, and measures designed to strengthen road safety enforcement and planning. These are all positive, but we have to understand this Bill is coming forward in the context of wider road safety issues and the real carnage that is taking place on our roads at the moment. There were 190 people killed on our roads last year and, according to An Garda Síochána, 134 already killed in 2026. Many of these deaths are preventable but all destroy families. Everything we do in this Bill and everything we do in the Oireachtas transport committee has to be with a view to getting us closer to the objective of Vision Zero, which is eliminating deaths and serious injuries on our roads. The Green Party and I have continually highlighted the need for stronger and more focused road safety responses, including better enforcement, safer road design and improved collision analysis. I might come back to enforcement at the end.

One of the strongest elements in the Bill the Minister of State has brought forward today is the provision allowing local authorities to access and process collision data for road safety purposes. For too long, local authorities have been restricted in their ability to analyse collision patterns and particularly to identify dangerous locations in their road network. The ability to access this information will enable evidence-based interventions, better targeting of safety

investments and earlier identification of high-risk locations. At the moment, when the RSA and An Garda Síochána go through their analysis of collisions in an area, let us say in my home area, they might say there is a bad bend or junction in Blanchardstown and there have been six crashes there over the past three years, but because of GDPR right now they cannot convey that information to the local authority, Fingal County Council. That is going to be resolved in this Bill and it is something I welcome.

While the Bill creates the legal basis to share collision data, it does not require systematic collision analysis, a publication of findings or safety action plans arising from that data. As this Bill goes through, I hope the Minister of State will look at the data sharing being brought through, which is valuable, being supplemented with regular reporting on collision hot spots, publication of anonymised datasets, and the integration with the Vision Zero targets and commitments that identified high-risk locations receiving funding priority. There is no point in Fingal being able to say, "Yes, there is a really dangerous bend in Blanchardstown", if it does not have the money to actually do something about it. We have to have joined-up thinking here. We are solving one problem here but more has to flow from that.

The Green Party has been a consistent supporter of more appropriate speed limits because we know, and we have heard this at the transport committee from experts who have come in, that speed remains one of the principal factors determining both collision risk and collision severity. This Bill allows local authorities and Transport Infrastructure Ireland to set 60 km/h limits on certain roads in built-up areas and provides additional flexibility regarding national roads. There is a potential risk that the legislation as it is currently drafted could be interpreted as creating opportunities for higher speeds in urbanised areas at a time when national policy is and should be moving us towards lower speeds and a safe systems approach. Will the Minister of State give an assurance that these amendments will not undermine the intent of the 30 km built-up area policy and the wider speed review? If that assurance cannot be given, I will struggle to support this Bill, notwithstanding the other positive elements I see within it.

The abolition of the paper motor tax disc is overdue and is something I welcome. As we know, the Garda is now relying on automatic number plate recognition systems and access to digital databases. The paper disc requirement does not serve any meaningful enforcement purpose any more and removing unnecessary bureaucracy while retaining enforcement capacity is good public administration. The expansion of the level of information available through the check my vehicle service for consumer protection is a positive step. Providing greater information on things like tax status, roadworthiness certification and vehicle characteristics will assist buyers in the second-hand market and may help combat vehicle fraud and cloning. However, I should emphasise the data protection safeguards must remain robust and GDPR compliance must be fully maintained as the database functions expand.

Beyond the items currently in the Bill, I argue that the Government should move more quickly on additional road safety measures. I will highlight a few of these. The implementation of the national safety camera strategy took a long time to be published. It is now published but when we asked the NTA and others about it at the transport committee, there was a real lack of clarity on when we were going to see outputs. I think only one meeting of the oversight body has taken place so far - maybe it is two at this stage - but how are we going to see this delivered? How are we going to see in our local authorities those red light cameras that would provide such benefit in catching motorists who are breaking red lights and are dangerous to cyclists,

pedestrians and other motorists? Camera enforcement of mobile phone and seat belt offences, stronger road safety governance and the reform of the RSA have also been spoken about before. No doubt, we will come back to our difference of opinion on that again. It is also about improving regulation of dangerous vehicle use, including scramblers and high-powered e-scooters.

The Bill to date contains a range of practical reforms that will modernise transport administration and strengthen aspects of road safety policy, but we should also recognise that legislation of this kind must form part of a wider commitment to Vision Zero. Every death and serious injury on our roads is preventable. I passionately believe these deaths are preventable. The objective has to be not just the removal of outdated, bureaucratic processes or the simplification and opening up of databases but actually saving lives. That is what we have to be about here. In this regard, there is so much more to do.

The issue of enforcement is not directly within the Minister of State's remit but I am sure he has seen the discussion about the number of gardaí available for roads policing. This has been in the media in the past week. Commissioner Kelly came into the transport committee in the last sitting at the end of July and spoke about his position on roads policing. There are 660 gardaí assigned to roads policing right now. The Commissioner emphasised it is the largest stand-alone unit within An Garda Síochána but it is also significantly smaller than it was - 40% smaller than it was 15 years ago. We have a new Commissioner, whom I asked if growing the number of gardaí in roads policing was one of his objectives, to which he said it was not. In fairness to him, he made the point he believes there could be more efficiencies and more done among the 660. However, I want to put it on record that I do not believe that 660 gardaí on roads policing is enough, not when we had 190 people dead on our roads last year and 134 dead this year.

In particular, there were two pieces of agreement that every organisation that came before the transport committee in the past six months on the topic of road safety outlined to us. The first was that the RSA was not fit for purpose, which we have spoken about before. The second was that enforcement was the key, but we are not seeing adequate enforcement. I understand in the Minister of State's role of overseeing road safety that he has regular engagement with his own senior Minister and the Minister for justice. I ask that he take the message of enforcement back.

I welcome what the Commissioner said in terms of his approach to road safety on a general basis, but I do not believe we have enough gardaí focused on this crucial part of their role.

I call on the Minister of State to be an advocate to the Department of justice to get more gardaí on our roads saving lives.

Deputy Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille. Is Bille mór atá i gceist: tá a lán rudaí tábhachtacha ann. There is a lot in this. It is a timely update of many of the rules around driver and vehicle licensing. I might touch on a few points of the Bill. The first relates to the check my vehicle facility provided for in section 7 of Part 2. It is important to make that information available publicly. Somebody who works in my office bought a second-hand car recently and used the private vehicle checking websites, which cleared the vehicle. He subsequently found out there was a problem with the vehicle. If we make this information publicly available, as is provided for in the Bill, we avoid the possibility of private rogue traders essentially

circumventing the information that consumers think they are getting about a car they are buying, and avoid the situation where they buy something and do not realise there may be a history that makes it questionable. Things like that are steps forward and progress that is necessary.

Regarding the paper disc, the Roads Act 1920 established the requirement to have a tax disc on the car. That is a long time ago. It is over 100 years since 1920 when that was put in place. The reality is that we must be ready to move beyond paper discs on windscreens to establish whether car tax has been paid or not. My understanding, and I am open to contradiction in this regard, is that gardaí already have the power to check whether car tax is paid up to date or not. The slightly ridiculous thing is section 69 of the Road Traffic Act which provides for the requirement to display the disc and makes it an offence not to display the disc. It is preposterous that somebody could in theory be prosecuted for failing to display a disc when the car might be taxed already. Let us move with the times and move to a stage where gardaí can check through their automatic number plate recognition systems, which they are already using in relation to insurance and other things, and having that include road tax. I welcome the notion that we do not have to go through the sequence of events of putting the tax disc on the window. There are times when vehicle discs get damaged, or maybe a window leaks, and getting replacements for them is an additional charge on consumers. I welcome those provisions regarding road traffic discs in Part 3 equally.

As I said, this is a large Bill. Part 5 deals with special speed limits. I would like to sound a note of caution in this regard. We have on the M50 this rolling speed limit, which changes according to the weather conditions, the volume of traffic and so on. The standard speed limit on the M50 around Dublin is 100 km/h. It may increase when you get to the south or onto the M1. That 100 km/h speed limit is variable, with signs sometimes telling people that it is 80 km/h or 60 km/h. In theory that sounds like a good idea. If it is a particularly cold day when there might be black ice or frost, or a particularly wet day or there could be substantial traffic, I see the rationale behind it but I will say two things. Having a variable speed limit like that which changes all the time creates a difficulty for motorists. They might be on a road they use all the time and they might be familiar with the speed limit, but now they have to keep an eye out for what it is. It can change from one part of the M50 to another, which makes it difficult for motorists.

Beyond that, there is a broader point. Motorists need to take responsibility for assessing themselves what the appropriate speed to travel at is. Of course we should have speed limits, but we are allowing motorists to abdicate responsibility for making the judgment themselves that 80 km/h or 100 km/h on a particular day or in particular circumstances might be too fast. I do not think we need to do that. We are much better off to trust people. My experience with driving on the M50 is that very often the speed limit bears no relation whatsoever to the weather or traffic conditions. You will often find yourself on the M50 with an 80 km/h speed limit on a dry, bright day when the traffic is relatively light. From everything I can see, there is no need for it. I sound a note of caution about the special speed limits.

On the broader issue regarding road tax, I said I welcome the provisions relating to the removal of the requirement for the paper disc. It is budget season. I do not whether we will have a chance to do it this year or not, but we should look at the manner in which we tax cars generally because the system, again, has not changed for a long time. We put in place incentives

for electric vehicles. That is as may be. It is appropriate to incentivise that. As we move more towards the more cost-effective electric vehicles, and while we move towards the target of having more and more of them in the road, which have benefits in a whole range of different areas, is it the case that we are going to create a taxation deficit relating to road tax? If every car on the road, for example, benefits from a preferential tax rate, how will we ring-fence money for the upkeep and maintenance of roads and the safety systems that go with roads? The time has possibly come, even outside the context of a budget, for a review of how road tax is calculated and what the appropriate amounts are to be.

In the context of the vehicle and driver file, it would be remiss not to mention the issue around driver testing waiting lists. This is an issue we have talked about in and outside this House. There remains an unacceptably long waiting period for people who want to have a driving test. Young people going to college or getting a new job that might require them to drive now have to wait an unacceptably long time to get their driving test to make them a legitimate and fully qualified driver, which means that progress is delayed, particularly for young people, and there is a situation where more and more people on the roads are unqualified or not fully qualified to drive. They cannot use motorways, for example, and there are other restrictions that apply to them.

In my constituency, Dún Laoghaire, we have the second-longest waiting list for driving tests. We waited a long time for the Sandyford driving testing centre, which we were told was going to be a pressure valve on those waiting lists. We now understand that is not going to proceed because of some kind of administrative difficulty I do not need to go into. Now the people of Dún Laoghaire are still faced with long waiting lists. Despite the Department having applied more testers to that centre, there has not been a commensurate decrease in the number of people waiting or a commensurate increase in the number of tests that are happening on a weekly basis. It is not okay for this to continue the way it is. We need to deal with this as a matter of urgency. We owe it to young people in particular, and anybody who wants to get a driver test, whether it is a person who has come here to work and needs to qualify to drive in this jurisdiction or whoever it is. They should not have to wait months and years for driving tests. That is unacceptable. It needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. I would be grateful if the Minister of State were in a position to address what pressure valve there might be for Dún Laoghaire in the absence of the Sandyford centre coming online. What are the Department's answers to dealing with the waiting list for driving tests?

The Minister of State is well aware that yesterday, Deputy Emer Currie and I introduced a Private Members' Bill, the road traffic (amendment) (Jax's law) Bill 2026. Jax's law is a Bill that seeks to amend sections 52 and 53 of the Road Traffic Act 1961, which are the provisions for careless and dangerous driving. At the moment, careless and dangerous driving are dealt with as minor road traffic matters in the District Court on a summary basis. They therefore have a limited set of penalties available to the court unless death or serious injury is caused as a result of that careless or dangerous driving, in which case the Director of Public Prosecutions has the option to move that up in the rank of offences and prosecute it on indictment in the Circuit Court, which hugely expands the number of penalties and the range of tariffs available to court to penalise somebody for the consequences of that careless or dangerous driving.

One of the things that is not recognised by the Road Traffic Act, however, is a serious harm that could be caused to somebody by the loss of a pregnancy. For example, Saoirse Aylward

came to me and Deputy Currie earlier this year. She had been involved in a road traffic accident in 2024 as a result of which her baby, whose heartbeat she had heard and who was to be named Jax, died essentially in her womb. She was seriously injured and the person who was carelessly driving in that instance was prosecuted in the Circuit Court. She suggested to us that if she had not been seriously injured but was involved in a road traffic accident, the impact of which resulted in her losing the pregnancy, there would have been no recognition by the courts whatsoever. One thing that Jax's law seeks to do is to change that, so that the loss of a pregnancy is recognised by the law as a serious injury or as an injury significant enough to escalate the offence from the District Court to the Circuit Court. I equally recognise the work that has been done by Colleen Langan, whose aunt, Róisín Connolly, née Langan, was killed in a car accident in Monaghan in 2010. I think she was 26 weeks pregnant; I may have that wrong. Her husband was driving.

4 o'clock

They were hit by another driver. She died as a result of that. Her unborn child died as well. From the time of her accident in 2010 to the time of Saoirse Aylward's accident in 2024, nothing was done in this space. We know that there is a lacuna in the law there that needs to be repaired. The Bill that we have brought forward will do that. It does not change anything magnificent in the law but it just creates a recognition of the fact that a person involved in a road traffic accident, whose pregnancy ends as a result of that accident, has suffered a serious injury. It deserves recognition in the context of how that offence is dealt with subsequently in the court. Colleen was here yesterday. Saoirse and Nathan Murphy, Jax's parents, were here as well. They are hugely invested in this.

Also in the Bill is the idea that the Road Safety Authority would begin to collect statistics in relation to pregnancies lost as a result of road traffic accidents. At the moment, inexplicably, they are not recorded. There is not necessarily a recording of the event when a person loses a pregnancy after a traffic accident. That is a statistic we should have access to. Although they do not enjoy personhood in the constitutional sense, it does reflect a seriousness in that accident that might not otherwise be recorded. The Bill also requires a provision that the Road Safety Authority would collect statistics in relation to lost pregnancies as a result of road traffic accidents.

Why am I raising this? This is a gold opportunity to short-circuit the notion of our taking that Bill through in Private Members' time. As a Government Member, I do not have the same access to Private Members' time that many TDs in this Chamber do. We might ask it to be put into the lottery on a Thursday. The chances of it being reached for Second Stage, Committee Stage and Report Stage are very small. A way we can circumvent that is for the Minister of State to use this Bill as a vehicle to put Jax's law on the Statute Book, to lift the provisions, as we have drafted in that Bill, and drop them into this section. I will be presenting amendments on Committee Stage to do that. I note the Minister of State's supportive nature in relation to the issues we have raised. I know he has spoken to the people involved, Saoirse and Colleen. I appreciate his engagement on the issue. The best way to engage with it and to deliver for those people is to allow this Bill to be the vehicle to make Jax's law real law.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fair to say that we all welcome any moves in relation to anything that streamlines or simplifies, particularly when we talk about road traffic, whether it

is from a point of view of retention of information and sharing information in relation to collisions or anything that can lead to something that is safer. We have all seen the absolute slaughter on our roads in recent times. Unfortunately, we have had too many tragic circumstances that are in the public domain that we all unfortunately have to comment on. That does not compare to the families who have been impacted, beyond detrimentally, in many ways, never to be put completely back together again. Coming from Dundalk, it is no different from anywhere else. Everybody has seen the increase in relation to the traffic. We have seen all the issues, particularly anybody who has had to use the M1, M50 or anything in recent times. Even the port tunnel cannot be used at times on the basis of the huge volume of traffic and the fact that this leads to, what are, in most cases, minor collisions. They are minor collisions that have an impact in relation to the problem across the board.

Yet we have all the issues in relation to speeding. We have the far worse issue in relation to drug and drink driving. Everybody can improve on the next issue, myself included, in terms of ensuring people are careful. People spend far too long playing with their phones, at times in this Chamber and everywhere else in life, but it can be far more detrimental when people are paying far too much attention to phones in cars where they can impact on themselves and many others on the road. That is something that we have to look at. I will follow up on what Deputy O'Rourke said. In fairness, I do not know how many of us have been knocking on doors and talking to many communities, particularly those involved with schools. We have not always seen a consistency in relation to traffic calming. I could probably name multiple places. I think of the likes of Sheelagh in north Louth. I can also think of one that is, hopefully, happening this year beside Pearse Park in Dundalk. We need to make sure more of these are happening in a quicker way and that we ensure absolute safety. It makes sense that we would streamline the process, that it would happen faster and that we would see a template of best practice operated everywhere it possibly can.

We know the issues. I refer to e-scooters. An eight-year-old in Dundalk was stopped on one. There was also the tragic case of Grace Lynch and injuries to many others, both locally and across the State. There is an issue in relation to scramblers. We need to make sure that we have fit-for-purpose legislation and whatever requirements are needed. We know the issue that An Garda Síochána talks about in relation to training. I know it is not always suitable in relation to following and chasing in dangerous circumstances. We have also had the issue of those acting illegally and travelling the wrong way on motorways. A community worker has come to me and I would like to speak to the Minister of State about it afterwards. This would have happened in my own locality. Between hard policing combined with youth workers who would have engaged directly with young people brought some of this happening to a stop. It is something he believes can be delivered across the board.

I would like to raise another issue. Paul Brady from Drive Virtual Driving Academy has highlighted the use of simulators. The Minister of State spoke about it himself. He had engaged with the RSA, many politicians and many Government representatives. A process was in play, as well as the possibility of using this. It seems to have stalled. He and I will be requesting some engagement from the Minister of State in relation to it. Those are two particular issues I will be bringing up with the Minister of State.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Before I start, I want to mention two young people who have been killed on the roads in Meath in the past few months. Mia Lily Keogh O'Keeffe was a wonderful

young girl. In her short life, she brought enormous happiness and love to her friends and family. She was gifted, creative and engaging with all who knew her. Her life was stolen from her. She was struck while walking her dog on a pedestrian crossing in Navan in February. The driver fled the scene. TJ McDonnell, from Bohermeen, County Meath, was killed just a few weeks ago. TJ was training for a cycling event with a friend when he was hit by a van. Here too, the driver fled the scene. I will not say anything more about the circumstances of these accidents as the drivers are before the court but TJ was a young man. In his short life, he had done so much. He touched the lives of so many people for the better. In both cases, their families, friends and communities had been devastated. The Minister of State knows this but a parent burying a child is a very difficult thing. In both cases, those collisions should not have happened. Just two days ago, there was a fatal collision on the M4 at Enfield, where a man in his 30s was killed. Will the Minister of State consider a minimum sentence for those involved in hit and runs? Sometimes this can be done to evade drink or drugs being detected in the system. I believe the penalty should be increased so that there is no incentive to do that. Leaving a person dying on the side of a road without treatment is despicable and can also directly result in death.

There have been 134 deaths so far this year on our roads and it is only September. In each of those cases, families are devastated. Road deaths are nearly a fifth higher at this point in 2026 than at the same period last year. Some experts are saying that we are on course to surpass the 2010 high of 212 road deaths. Statistics are saying that a disproportionate number of young male drivers are involved in road collisions, especially on rural roads. Young men in their 20s from Mayo and Donegal are disproportionately represented.

This is important because it also shows that a difficulty with the quality of the roads in certain parts of the country is leading to these deaths. It gives me no pleasure to say that under this Government, road death figures are getting worse. We are an outlier in European terms because in most of Europe, road deaths are falling. The alarming trend whereby 27% of road deaths are among young people between the ages of 16 and 25 is shocking.

It is important to remind people that road safety is first and foremost a personal responsibility. Each one of us is directly responsible for his or her behaviour on the roads and it is important that people take that responsibility in hand and drive in a safe and controlled manner. However, the truth is that roads are getting more dangerous and it is not by accident that this is happening.

Many towns and villages have little or no traffic protections. I can think of a dozen towns and villages in my county where cars and trucks rattle through at speed on a daily basis. In some communities, those protections are only useful for those who are already obeying the rules of the road. This is important. We need road protections to protect people, especially pedestrians, from others who are not obeying the rules of the road, including people who are driving too fast or under the influence. Many towns and villages in Europe have traffic calming measures at the entrance of every single street or road entering that town or village. People are forced to slow down because of ramps or chicanes. That should be a default standard. Every town and village should have a default chicane or ramp at its entrance to forcibly slow down cars coming into it.

Another important point is the absence of enforcement. When Mia Lily Keogh O'Keeffe was born there were 1,046 road traffic gardaí on our roads. When she was killed there were

638 road traffic gardaí on the roads. That action alone is the main reason people are being killed in higher numbers on the roads. All the Bills the Minister of State or anybody else brings through the House are not worth a hill beans if there is not the gardaí to enforce them.

I remember in the noughties people would think twice about drinking and driving because there was a reasonable chance of a garda stopping them on the roads. That behaviour changed radically because people knew there was no reasonable chance of their being stopped. Without enforcement, people's behaviour changes for the worse. They break the rules of the road and people get killed. That 40% collapse in the number of gardaí is the most important issue. If it is not addressed, all the Government's Bills will be meaningless. That is a fact.

I have been breathalysed twice in the last 30 years. On both occasions, it occurred at 10.30 a.m. on a Monday. I know there are some people who will be at weddings and late night events on a Sunday night, etc., but a very small cohort is still over the limit at 10.30 a.m. compared with people travelling home late at night on a Friday or Saturday. It is easier to staff road checks at 10.30 on a Monday than it is in the evening but it is less effective and less useful for saving lives.

On enforcement, the figures are incredible. Even when gardaí catch people the courts system is failing us. There has been a sevenfold increase in speeding prosecutions in the nearest District Court to me, Trim, but two thirds of those did not proceed. That is incredible. I invite the Minister of State to guess how many people on the roads are not insured. There are 211,000 people driving on the roads today who are not insured or registered. When the Minister of State drives home to Galway today he is likely to pass around 200 drivers coming in the other direction who are not insured or registered. That is incredible.

Then there is the situation whereby 20% of people put off the roads do not have a driving licence. In 2024, 8,200 individuals who were to receive penalty points did not even have a licence and 23,000 people who were disqualified never gave up their licence. We are talking about the wild west in terms of people ignoring the rules of the road and the laws. Unless we join the dots between enforcement, deterrence and behavioural change, we will never fix the end result, namely, deaths on our roads. We have light-touch enforcement in this country.

I have a question which I ask the Minister of State to address in his response. He contacted the RSA in the week after the M9 collision to convey his unhappiness with the organisation due to its absence in the aftermath of that accident. A spokesperson for the RSA said it was not in a position to give any information to people about how to deal with people driving down the wrong side of the road. The Government's plan was to split the RSA but it has done a U-turn on that. Why is that the case?

Another issue I have banged on about for years in this Chamber is that gardaí do not have the ability to pursue e-scooters, scramblers and people driving down the wrong side of the road. When I first raised this it was like playing handball against a haystack because no matter how many times I raised it, nothing happened on the Government side. After the M9 incident, the Government jumped into some level of action but, believe it or not, there will be just six gardaí trained in pursuit training by the end of this year. If gardaí are unable to pursue people who are breaking the law, we will not be able to enforce the law. If there is one thing I would like the Minister of State to take home today, it is enforcement. However, to be honest, I believe there will be fewer than 600 people policing our roads in five years' time, unfortunately.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As an Opposition TD who tries to be constructive, I broadly welcome the National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026. Many elements of it are welcome and will bring driving regulations and monitoring somewhat into the 21st century. The decision to finally abolish the paper motor tax discs is an important measure. For decades we forced motorists to have this piece of paper on their windscreens while the rest of society moved ahead with digitalisation. As such, moving to a digital system, backed by an online verification portal, makes a lot of sense, just as it did in the UK perhaps 14 years ago. I will mention the separate but related issue of insurance discs in a while.

The introduction of open-ended non-use declarations also makes sense, as it will get rid of an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy for thousands of vintage car enthusiasts, mechanics, people who fix cars and citizens who have their car off the road for whatever reason. Removing some of the bureaucracy is very welcome.

I also welcome the legal framework to finally resume the sharing of traffic collision data between An Garda Síochána and local authorities. This is crucial but has been unfortunately delayed because councils cannot engineer safer roads if they do not have full information about where accidents are occurring. In this context, while the Bill is a welcome step, this Government and its predecessor have already failed the broader test of dealing with the deadly crisis unfolding on our roads. As we all know, we are in the middle of a devastating spike in road fatalities, which are up significantly on the number in 2025. Depending on which figures are used, road fatalities are up 17% on last year and are rising at a time when the European Union average is falling. That is shocking and concerning. The crisis has grown because it has not been dealt. If we take the delay in delivering this Bill as an example, the previous Government allowed strict GDPR limitations and interpretations to legally block councils from getting collision data since November 2023, even though the Data Protection Commission explicitly stated that GDPR should not prevent proportionate publication of crash location details, especially when the technology exists to get rid of personal identifiers by anonymising or limiting the data.

The critics of this asked why the RSA could not just itself strip out names and addresses or pass on the co-ordinates to council engineers. I am wondering whether this was a resourcing issue above all or something else. It has meant that for three years local authorities have been effectively blindfolded. I acknowledge there are patch jobs that were put in, like the locations of interest, so they got some statistics, but one has to ask how many accident black spots went unfixed while this Bill was just dragging on or was not actually formulated in the first place.

While this Bill brings in digital tracking and makes things a lot easier, it is, as other Deputies have said, very quiet on the enforcement of the law. It is great to have a database, but if we do not have enough traffic corps members on the roads to intercept dangerous drivers, it will not work. That is why, as I have said before, we need a separate dedicated traffic police whose members have specific powers in relation to the roads and who do not even have to be members of An Garda Síochána. That is a model that works in other countries. The databases that we will improve on will not breathalyse the drivers. I take on board what Deputy Tóibín said about being stopped and breathalysed at 10 o'clock in the morning. I was breathalysed by a garda at 8 o'clock in the morning. I said, "You are on the ball." He said that it was part of Drew's measures and that they had to do that before they clocked off. To me, it makes more sense to try to catch people when they are actually under the influence. We do not have new digital

measures stopping and seizing unroadworthy vehicles when they are actually on the road. Yes, it can be traced back, but sometimes you have to stop the people when they are actually out there. You nab them on the spot.

A bugbear of mine is the person who drives for a full kilometre in a bus lane. The R136 in my constituency is a case in point. I have a lot of sympathy for people who, if they are turning towards a left lane, get into the bus lane so as to avoid queuing. They are not blocking any buses and not blocking any traffic and are able to make a turn, but how long is a piece of string? I have seen people go along for the full kilometre and then bump in front of someone else. That practice irritates other drivers and is breaking the law but it is increasing. I have seen it anecdotally a lot more in the past two or three years than I had done in the previous ten. I have had reports from constituents of those idiots who break the pedestrian lights in heavy traffic, not just when they are going at speed but also when they are going to work during school times, when the traffic is busy. They go through the lights and sometimes push past the school traffic wardens as well. We need that physical element of policing.

We also have to look at the gaps that the legislation fails to fill. I again refer to Jax's law, which I was happy to co-sign recently. I will not repeat everything Deputy Barry Ward, who is proposing it along with Deputy Currie, said earlier, but this legislation highlights one of the important gaps in our core road traffic framework, that is, that the law still fails to legally recognise the loss of an unborn child caused by dangerous driving. If the Government is fully committed to comprehensive reform, mechanisms to address gaps like Jax's law could be integrated into this legislation, as Deputy Ward said. The Department should do it rather than waiting for Deputy Ward to put the amendment in himself. That would be better than having grieving families campaigning on the margins, hoping that the Bill gets to Second Stage and other Stages through other means. If Jax's law could be added into the wording, I would certainly support amendments to that effect.

Earlier today, I mentioned the lack of joined-up thinking in transport and planning as regards buses, trains, parking spaces and EV charging facilities in new developments. People are told they cannot have parking spaces because they have this fantastic public transport service, so they have to drive but they have nowhere to park. People get frustrated because of this. They get agitated. They have been fighting with their neighbour to try to get a parking space. Now they are rushing out to get to a place that you need to take three buses, which do not always turn up, to get to. We have to understand what is required in new developments. If we are going forward, all speeds in new developments should be 10 km/h - as simple as that - not the 30 km/h and 10 km/h and then a crawl out of it allowing people to move at normal speed, but allowing people to actually park their cars so their relatives can visit or they can get to work. At the moment we are just creating extra aggression on the roads, and that is the last thing we need in terms of people responding because if someone does something untoward on the road and you are already agitated, you will get madder and respond in a way that you would not normally do.

We also need more work on graduated penalties for repeat non-compliant offenders and issues like managing unregulated e-scooters and e-bikes. Again, that is about catching them rather than some welcome legislation that we have coming later this year in that regard.

Others have mentioned the quality of the roads. I second that. Some of the roads are in very bad nick. Again, I have a personal bugbear about what seem to be very low speed limits

on dual carriageways. I know traffic has to be managed, including heavy traffic like on the M50, for example, where you cannot go too fast or you will crash, especially in the rain, but sometimes the speed limit on good-quality roads seems to be quite low and then on the regional roads it is way too high. Some work, I have to acknowledge, has been done on that, but we need more.

We need more in terms of training in pursuit. Deputy Tóibín mentioned the six gardaí who will be trained by the end of this year. That is too little too late in terms of trying to catch people out and about doing robberies and going up the wrong way on dual carriageways, as we have tragically seen recently.

On the insurance issue, I notice that the Motor Insurers Bureau of Ireland has information that can be shared with the Garda in terms of automatic numberplate recognition etc., but I would love to see insurance discs gone as well as the motor tax discs on cars. There should be a way of working that, maybe not in this legislation but soon.

Broadly, I welcome the Bill but we have to put resourcing into enforcement as well.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister of State for being here and introducing this Bill. I will start by acknowledging the 134 deaths this year and the families who have lost their loved ones.

I welcome the Bill. There are a number of practical changes in it that I support. It removes the outdated requirement to display a paper motor tax disc, reflecting the fact that gardaí can now check tax status electronically through automatic numberplate recognition. That is a great positive. It strengthens Check My Vehicle, giving people buying a second-hand car better access to official information on a vehicle's tax and roadworthiness status. It allows local authorities to access collision data so they can identify dangerous locations and better target road safety improvements. This is critical to all our communities. I think we have all been in positions where we have flagged areas that are potential black spots for accidents. Anything we can do to join up all the agencies involved in road safety is a positive.

The Bill also allows mobile camera van operators to provide certificate evidence rather than routinely attending court. I will speak about court efficiency later but, obviously, that is very much an improvement. Importantly, it allows a jury to return a verdict of careless driving where somebody has been charged with dangerous driving but the evidence supports the lesser offence. This reform arises from Mr. Justice Haughton's report into the tragic death of Shane O'Farrell.

There is a significant gap in our road traffic enforcement system that I want to focus on today. It will not be a surprise to the Minister of State, and I thank him for his Department's engagement with me on this issue. It relates to court penalty points, which I have raised with him before. When a court imposes penalty points, we should be able to say with certainty that the sanction actually reaches that driver's record, and at present we cannot. Today's debate is about the national vehicle and driver file. I know Deputies are coming to this debate with road safety in general in mind, but I am trying to focus on the NVDF.

As the Minister of State knows, I have been pushing the issue of recording court penalty points since I started to engage with Susan Gray of PARC Road Safety Group. The figures for 2024 that the Department worked on show that almost half of court-issued penalty points were

not fully captured on the national vehicle and driver file. It is important to put those figures in context. They include Irish licence holders, foreign licence holders and people who do not hold a driving licence at all. We know that a certain number of court penalty points are not going to get to the NVDF. At the same time, the Department's own analysis found that 19% of unmatched court penalty point offences in 2024 and 2025 could have been matched to an existing driver record and that potentially represents about 1,500 penalty points per year. This is particularly serious because the NVDF is the database that the Garda and motor insurers rely on to establish a driver's status. The system works much better when an offence is dealt with through fixed charge notices because the driver number is captured from the start. The serious weakness arises when the cases go through the courts. People can arrive in court, they may not produce their driver licence and their driver number may not be collected. The Department and the RSA are subsequently left with the task of trying to match the driver numbers with the court sanction, that is, to match it to the correct record. This is particularly concerning because penalty points are cumulative and a driver reaching 12 points, or seven as a learner or novice driver, should be disqualified. I have had assurances from the Department that those cases have been identified and dealt with. However, the fact that the Department's analysis identified cases that could have been matched in the area of penalty points demonstrates why we need to fix the underlying process. This has to be about making the process as effective and efficient as possible. I raised this with the Minister at the transport committee earlier in the year. He also agreed that a fifth of potential court penalty points not being applied was unacceptable, and that the Department can match cases after the event and could continue to do so. I would welcome the Minister of State's feedback today as to whether that is happening.

Susan Gray and I have also met with the Courts Service and the Department of Transport on this. I welcome the commitment from the Courts Service to work directly with An Garda Síochána to capture the driver number at the earliest possible stage and carry it throughout the case. I am looking for an update on that today because this Bill gives us the opportunity to clarify that process in court for capturing driver numbers and ensure that information follows the case to the NVDF. First, we should capture the driver number at the beginning of the process, carry it through on the summons into court and then onto the NVDF systems. Second, if necessary, we should change the law so that somebody who has been summonsed for a traffic offence must produce their driving licence or learner permit, and so that the courts staff have the authority they need to capture that information. Third, we should continue to examine historical unmatched cases where the information exists to identify the correct driver.

There is another practical issue with the NVDF that I want the Minister of State to address today. Garda members carrying out roadside checks should be able to access the driving licence photograph held on the national vehicle and driver file through their Garda mobility devices. This is something I have been raising for quite a while, and we have had feedback that it is being considered. It would lead to more accuracy, which is essential. In the past there have been mismatches and this would address that. The NVDF contains an enormous of information that can assist enforcement. If a garda stops somebody at the roadside, being able to verify not only the details of the licence but also the photograph associated with that licence would be another useful tool in confirming the person presenting themselves is the actual licenceholder.

I want to raise the future ownership of the driver file itself. There was a statement on 29 July that, as part of the reform of the Road Safety Authority, ownership of the driver file element of the NVDF will transfer from the Department of Transport to the RSA. The

Department has said it is intended to give the RSA end-to-end ownership of driver-related systems and that it will also include the new offence management system being developed. I understand the logic of consolidating driver services, but the driver file is not simply an administrative database. It is a critical part of our road safety enforcement infrastructure. It is the brain of all the information we retain on drivers, from disqualifications to penalty points and driver numbers. Given the issues we have identified with penalty points and the matching of records, I am asking the Minister of State to set out clearly why he is transferring ownership to the RSA and why he believes that is the right approach. At the moment, I do not quite understand the rationale. We have to join the dots between An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, the Department of Transport and the RSA. Some information on that would be good.

In my remaining time I will speak to Jax's law. As the Minister of State knows, Deputy Barry Ward and I introduced that Bill to the House on First Stage yesterday. Saoirse Aylward was here, as were Jax's father, Nathan, Colleen Langan, who campaigns for her aunt Róisín, and Susan Gray of PARC. While Saoirse had been through a horrific ordeal, she said she had been retraumatised by the justice system and felt that while she was recognised as a victim, the loss of Jax was not. We are asking the Minister of State to examine our legislation. We think we have come up with a viable solution. We hope that as part of this Bill he could consider an amendment to address what we believe is a gap in the law, and look at both recording and publishing the data on that loss of pregnancy in road victims information.

As I said, I believe this is a positive Bill. I thank the Minister of State and know he has put a lot of work into it. It is about making the NVDF work harder, better, more effectively and more efficiently. I hope he can take on board some of the ideas and concerns I have presented today.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome the Bill. It is mainly technical, but I want to draw attention to the fact that many Irish roads are becoming increasingly dangerous. You just have to go outside the door here to see people breaking lights on a regular basis. When you are driving on the M50, there is scary stuff happening out there. As others have said, there are rising road deaths and serious collisions caused by dangerous driving. Inadequate Garda enforcement and years of Government inaction have created a safety crisis that is costing lives. It is families across Ireland who are paying the price of Government failure on road safety. Rising road deaths are not unavoidable accidents. They are the consequence of years of underinvestment, inadequate Garda traffic enforcement and a lack of urgency from the Government. They are also down to bad behaviour by drivers. The statistics on those driving the wrong way down motorways are really worrying. The figures are going the wrong way rather than the right way in that regard.

I will touch on some issues that are not in the Bill.

One of the issues that constantly comes up in my area and across the State is the use of nitrous oxide. It is not a banned substance. Residents ring in to say there is somebody sitting in a car outside their house taking nitrous oxide and driving off. They contact the Garda and are told the fact it is not a banned substance means there is very little the Garda can do about it. This is happening on a regular basis. The evidence can be seen on the side of the road, at parking spots, at beauty spots and so on right across the State. Deputy Mark Ward and I have a Bill coming up. We are hoping there might be something in relation to that.

A couple of things are happening in the community. There are stolen cars. I have been a victim myself. My car was robbed recently. I was lying in bed when someone went around using the fob. It impacts on communities. I was away for a couple of days and got a phone message from a woman saying there was a stolen car in her area. It was 1.40 p.m. For four days, there were stolen cars in that community. I remember trying to deal with this issue 20 or 25 years ago. Many of us thought this was behind us but, unfortunately, it is on the rise again. Some of it is down to the new technology as well. Cars are not safe enough.

I want to talk about scramblers. I was driving along the quays opposite the High Court and a guy was coming down with a balaclava on his head. We had the incident of Deputy Michael Healy-Rae getting assaulted and it will be up before the court but this guy had a balaclava on and was on a scrambler bike on one of the main roads in Dublin right across from the courts. We are allowing this to happen in our city. That was on the quays but it is happening in my area as well. The gardaí have tried to respond, seize vehicles and so on but we are not doing enough. We need to empower the gardaí. It is probably a non-issue for the Bill today but we all need to wake up in this House to what is happening in our communities. Theft of cars is on the rise. It is in many working-class communities but not exclusively so. They are robbing the cars from everywhere and people have to deal with the financial loss of that. In many cases, it is older cars; it is the car that brings the kids to school or the car that brings people to shops. We need to do more and look at new ways of tackling these issues.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit ar ais tar éis an tsamhraidh. Is deas é a fheiceáil. There are parts of this Bill I really welcome, particularly moving towards better digital records. That is something I have continuously pushed for in this House. I congratulate the Minister of State and the Department staff for all the work that went into this. However, it will be better if I say what I do not like and what I want to see improved - namely, enforcement. I spoke in this House yesterday about supporting gardaí before they become gardaí, while they are gardaí and after they are gardaí. We can do a lot better as a State.

I come from four generations of policemen: my father, my grandad, my great-grandad and the grandad before that were all policemen, going back to before the foundation of the State, so I have a long line of people who knew how to deter crime. My dad was a sergeant in the traffic department in Dublin city for 35 years and I saw at first hand when he would come home and be shook from seeing car accidents. It is probably the reason I did not get a motorbike as a young lad.

I see and I hear from listening to gardaí nowadays that we are not giving them the support they need in the job or financially. I have continuously asked for tax incentives and tax breaks for critical workers, be it gardaí, nurses or teachers, in Dublin, Galway, Cork or any of the cities where the rent is higher. It is something we can do which will incentivise more gardaí, nurses or teachers, and give them financial support. It will also help gardaí be better at the job because they will not have the small financial worries that they would not have if they were in a less expensive area, working the same job and doing the same hours that city gardaí are doing.

Focusing on the Bill, we need rules that can actually be enforced. I heard Deputy Gogarty speaking earlier about enforcement that creates a deterrent and the policies that change behaviour. I proudly represent Dublin Bay North and I hear about the consequences of transport policy every day on my commute if I am taking public transport, with the 130 bus

being cancelled eight times yesterday, with the roadworks being done and with being told these traffic jams are constant and with allowing people to then use rat runs, speeding through residential areas in Marino, putting people's children at risk. I see it constantly. When one road closes, then capacity changes. Having been on Dublin City Council, I find the traffic plans and the diversions really frustrating. While I always want to see traffic policy being data driven, we should know what happens after we close a road or alter a major junction. Pedestrianising a route or making a route one-way with an outdated traffic plan, which I have seen across north Dublin, is not acceptable. Elected officials should have a greater say. People put their trust in elected officials. To have an unelected engineer determine what happens to a road is not acceptable. What is the point of holding an election if an entire road or area can be changed without the push-back of an elected official?

There are measures I would like to see in the Bill. We should have the same approach consistently. One of the strongest parts of the Bill, and one which I commend, is the provision to allow local authorities receive and process collision data. As has been mentioned by multiple Deputies, it has long been needed. I welcome it. When councils can identify locations where collisions are occurring, they can target investment accordingly. That is using data. That is what this whole Bill is about but that is the kind of evidence-led policy I would like to see across Departments. Be it energy or health, we need to put resources where there are pinch points.

On speeding, there are some very practical things we could do. People need clearer, more frequent signs showing speed limits on the stretches of road they are travelling on. There are areas in my constituency where there have been repeated accidents and where a wall has been built six times because people are speeding. Since a camera showing the live speed was installed, the wall is still intact. People are seeing that flashing LED. It changes driving and the data shows that. Also, the wall being there shows that.

We should make far greater use of solar-powered speed feedback signs. It is not being done. They would tell a driver instantly that they are doing 55 km/h in a 50 km/h zone and must slow down. It is simple, visible and immediate. When somebody repeatedly ignores the limit there has to be enforcement. I have travelled to other countries where I have seen instant tickets being given to people who are repeatedly speeding and it would definitely deter people. I would support this as that speeding ticket could be the deterrent that stops someone speeding again and saves someone's life. I heard a lot of Deputies talking about the incident on the M7. That is something we need to discuss but the systems and what we are doing need to be changed.

I welcome the proposal in the Bill that will end the requirement to display the paper motor task disk. The State already holds vehicle information electronically and the Bill will modernise that and remove the paper disc requirement. I think that makes sense.

We should use digital records, rather than maintaining paperwork for the sake of tradition. It would speed up the process and allow for Garda stop points to have a quicker flow of traffic.

We should examine how motor taxation works and whether it can be linked to fuel consumption, so that when somebody can drive less, there is an incentive to do so.

The issue I want to spend more time on is e-scooters, which were mentioned by Deputy Crowe.

We need to stop pretending that e-scooters, electric bikes and scramblers are all the same thing. Outside this House people can get an ordinary legal e-bike. When I was parking outside my house the other day, I saw two young lads on a bike going down the road faster than I can drive, and they had no helmets. By the time I would have called the local Garda station to say they were coming, they would have already gone past it. Powerful electric bikes can already fall into a category with e-mopeds with regard to registration and other legal requirements. People in north Dublin are constantly onto my office speaking about their child having been nearly run over or having been hit and this is something on which we need to allow better enforcement by gardaí. We need to have this serious discussion.

We should also examine whether some form of identifiable registration should apply to e-scooters. I do not think it is acceptable that people with phones can be jumped on O'Connell Street by someone on an e-scooter and there is no way to easily track who owns that scooter. If that vehicle was registered and the ownership was clearly visible, it would deter them being used for crime. With regard to drug dealing across the inner city and my constituency, at night we can see people visibly shifting drugs on these e-scooters because they know they will not be chased by gardaí if they go off road. We need to support and empower gardaí.

Speaking about enforcement brings me back to An Garda Síochána. It is easy for us to pass another law in the House and say the Garda will enforce it but gardaí need resources. With regard to numbers, I have given one suggestion on how we can increase the number of gardaí in Dublin by giving incentives and tax breaks to gardaí and critical workers. We also need more road policing units. They need equipment to test the so-called bikes. I welcome the recent announcement by An Garda Síochána of the seizures of these e-scooters. It shows that when there is a will they can get results. When gardaí do their job lawfully and proportionately within their training, they should be supported for doing it. This does not mean gardaí are above scrutiny - far from it. No one in this country should be. However, accountability should not mean leaving individual members afraid to intervene against dangerous behaviour because they fear that doing their job will leave them exposed.

I welcome the better digital records and data the Minister of State is introducing and the measures that will help to save lives. I hope he takes on board some of the other considerations I have mentioned with regard to supporting gardaí and allowing them to do their jobs, and when they leave the Garda they should be supported the whole way through.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank all of the Deputies for their contributions to this debate and for the careful consideration they have given to the Bill. I acknowledge their concerns and the practical issues raised on Second Stage. I might take a little bit of time to refer to some of the issues.

Deputy Farrelly spoke about education. It is important to say the RSA piloted a scheme during the academic year 2024-25 that delivered training to teachers in almost 140 schools. In 2026, the RSA aims to have completed a national roll-out to transition year in 730 post-primary schools, expanding the capacity for new learning sessions in the first and third quarters of this year. I agree wholeheartedly that education is of paramount importance. We are delivering education through RSA teaching units in preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and third level institutions and a lot of work is going on in this regard. I have come across children who have done these programmes and I have asked them what they have learned, especially

with regard to bicycles. The first thing they told me was that they learned how to stop the bike, which is, quite simply, the most important thing.

Several other issues have come up. In relation to Garda enforcement and the protection and training of gardaí, I met the Garda assistant commissioner with responsibility for road policing, Department of justice officials and my officials to discuss what gardaí need in terms of training, pursuit training and legislation. The Garda has given us a list of two or three issues on which it wants us to formulate legislation to help gardaí do their jobs properly. These are being looked at by departmental officials and we will bring forward legislation as urgently as we can. Whether we bring it in through this Bill or in a separate Bill on an emergency basis, we are working on it. I want to make sure that whatever we bring in will work and will help gardaí. We are in ongoing discussions with the Department of justice and the Garda on it and we are working on it.

With this legislation we are bringing forward, and other measures such as body cameras, gardaí have more technical backup and more resources to do the job they have to do. I would love to see 1,000 gardaí in the road policing unit. We do not have them but I am working with the Garda, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to see how best we can help gardaí and get more of them out there. The message should not go out from here that there is no enforcement because there is. Gardaí now use drone technology to see what is going on with scramblers and e-scooters.

With regard to e-scooters, we have brought in a regulation on hi-vis vests, visibility and helmets. Next week I hope to sign more regulations to change the minimum age from 16 to 18. I hope to get it signed next week. We have other proposed legislation to redefine an e-scooter to make it a mechanically propelled vehicle. We are going through how we can bring it in and how we can end up with registered e-scooters so we know who the owners are. This is very simple and will be a help to gardaí.

Somebody mentioned NCT waiting times. The NCT service has seen an annual increase of more than 30% since 2020 in the number of tests being done. At the moment there are 721 vehicle inspectors in the NCT service. The number of vehicles tested in July was 159,000, so there is a lot of testing going on. Somebody mentioned that 60% or 50% fail the test. I would prefer to see a vehicle failing a test if it is not right than it being let out on the road. We will have to have a common-sense approach on this.

Somebody else mentioned driver licence exchanges with the USA. We have a licence agreement with Australia and with seven of the ten Canadian provinces. We have another proposed agreement under way with Nova Scotia. In the programme for Government, the RSA is dealing with New York state, Massachusetts and New Jersey to exchange technical details with regard to how they do their driving tests compared with ours, and whether they match our standards. Each of the United States has different rules, regulations and standards so we cannot have an overall measure for the US but have to look at each state individually. We are working on this.

With regard to speed limits, we reduced the speed limit on local roads from 80 km/h to 60 km/h. These account for 80% of the road network. The local authorities are now charged to have the changes in urban areas in place by March of next year and they are working on this. With this legislation we will be able to reduce the speed limit on the remainder of the roads

from 100 km/h to 80 km/h. We also say clearly that at the end of the day speed limits are not a licence to drive at that speed. People have to drive with total control of their vehicle at all times.

Legitimate questions have been raised by Deputies in the House while we have been discussing this legislation. It is all in the interest of having safer roads, reducing the number of deaths on the roads and reducing collisions to make sure everybody can feel safer on our roads. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is sitting behind me. We are working very closely in the Department and we discussed a lot of what we are speaking about today at our management meeting yesterday.

5 o'clock

It included what we can do and how we can improve our efficiencies to make sure our roads are safe. This Bill itself is not the entire answer. There is a lot more we have to do in terms of legislation. We then have the challenge of making sure that when we bring in legislation, it is acted upon. Deputy Currie raised the issue of court services and licensing. We are working on that at the moment to see how we can best deal with it. I intend to bring forward amendments to the Bill. We will be making additional improvements on Committee Stage, and I look forward to working with Deputies across the House to make sure we get this Bill enacted as quickly as possible with the amendments I intend to bring in on that Stage.

I thank the Members for their time. It has been a very interesting and worthwhile debate. It is important to thank Deputies because all they have in their heads is to try to reduce the number of road deaths. Everybody makes a personal choice when they go out on the road, whether they are a pedestrian, cyclist, motorcyclist or the driver of a car or a truck. They have to take personal responsibility, and that is most important. We can bring in the laws and the legislation to help protect people, but we have to start with education. Speeding and failing to wear seat belts are problems. We all know that phone distraction is a huge problem in cars. I plead with every Deputy to make sure that when they are talking to young people in their constituencies, they ask them not to use their phones when they are in their cars.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Lots of TDs do it as well.

Question put and agreed to.

National Vehicle and Driver File, Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Energy Policy: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That Dáil Éireann notes:

— in 2025, data centres consumed 23 per cent of electricity and this is projected to increase to 30 per cent by 2030, far in excess of the three per cent of electricity consumed by data centres in Europe;

— data centres account for 88 per cent of increased demand for electricity since 2015 and now consume almost as much electricity as every home in the state;

— over 120 data centres are operating in the state, a concentration that is at least 10 times higher than the European per capita average;

— a United Nations report published in June stated "Ireland offers a cautionary example of local grid stress from concentrated digital infrastructure";

— data centres also consume large quantities of water and their water consumption increased during the recent period of hot weather while households faced restrictions on water use as supplies ran low;

— data centre development globally is producing massive increases in greenhouse gas emissions and accelerating global temperature rise towards imminent breach of the dangerous 1.5 degrees celsius above preindustrial level;

— an immediate ban on new data centres is essential, in Ireland and globally to stop further increases in their consumption of our energy, their greenhouse gas emissions and their other extremely damaging environmental impacts;

— one in seven households could not afford adequate warmth or pay their energy bills in full in 2024, and over 322,000 households were in electricity arrears in July this year, with average arrears of €509;

— Friends of the Earth estimate that the average household paid an estimated additional €263 for their electricity in the 2021 to 2023 period "due to the intensity of data centre presence on the Irish Single Electricity Market (ISEM) grid putting upward pressure on prices", and during the height of the 2022 energy crisis, the "data centre price cost effect" accounted for the equivalent of about 8.5 per cent of average household electricity bills;

— Budget 2025 provided a €250 energy credit to households, paid between November 2024 and February 2025, but this was not renewed in Budget 2026;

— up to the end of the 1990s, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) was a world class energy company, delivering low-cost energy, governed by a not-for-profit mandate, but that mandate was replaced with a commercial mandate in 2001;

— households in Ireland now pay the highest electricity prices in the European Union (EU), 38 per cent higher than the EU average;

— returning the ESB to a not-for-profit state company, with sole responsibility for power generation and distribution, and coupled with energy price caps, can deliver affordable electricity for all and be central to the achievement of a fossil fuel-free economy and society;

— People Before Profit-Solidarity's Emergency Price Controls Bill 2024, introduced in the Dáil at First Stage in May 2024, calls for electricity prices to be capped for households at €0.25 per kilowatt hour (KWh);

— a €500 annual electricity credit for every household would cost an estimated €1 billion per year;

— an additional €500 electricity credit for households with people in receipt of Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension or carer's payments would cost an estimated €250 million per year;

— data centres pay approximately €0.20 per KWh for electricity, half the €0.40 average price paid by households; and

— an electricity consumption levy of €0.20 per KWh on data centres would equalise their electricity unit costs with those paid by households and would raise approximately €1.5 billion per year;

calls on the Government to:

— include an annual €500 electricity credit for every household in Budget 2027;

— include a budget provision for an annual additional €500 electricity credit for households with a person(s) in receipt of Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension or carer's payments; and

— introduce an electricity consumption levy on data centres of €0.20 per KWh, to equalise their electricity unit costs with those paid by households and thereby raise €1.5 billion to fund €500 energy credits for households.

I am sharing time with Deputy Coppinger. The budget is coming up. The cost-of-living crisis impacting huge numbers of people is on everybody's lips. This is, of course, added to the housing crisis blighting the lives of so many. People are asking if the Government is going to help those who are struggling. There are many aspects to the cost-of-living crisis. There is the cost of accommodation and housing, the cost of childcare, the cost of public transport and the cost of groceries and food but a critical issue for hundreds of thousands of people, and for everybody really, is the cost of energy. Thanks to Donald Trump, everybody is facing higher electricity, energy and fuel bills. By the way, shame on Members in this House, and I am glad to say there are not many of them, who ever thought that Donald Trump was going to do any good for the world. Not only has he helped Israel rain death and destruction on the people of Palestine and the people of the Middle East and done horrible things to many different groups of people, now every person in this country and across the world is paying an economic price for his policies. There are going to be people who will not be able to pay their electricity and energy bills this winter because of his warmongering and misguided, immoral policies.

The Government is offering little assistance to those people. It offered the red carpet to Donald Trump last weekend, of course, but it is offering little assistance to the ordinary people. More than 300,000 of them are in arrears with their electricity bills. They cannot pay, or are seriously struggling, to pay their energy bills. Of course, it is not just about electricity. Our motion relates to electricity prices, but our proposals are actually about trying to help people who are struggling generally with the cost of energy, whether that is gas or electricity. When

we take the two together, more than half a million households in this country are in arrears with either their gas or electricity bills. That is set to get worse because of Trump.

We are making a very simple proposal in this motion. It is to help people who are struggling, and not just those in arrears, but to ensure that every single household can get some help by introducing a €500 energy credit to help them with their electricity bills. We are also proposing to give an additional €500 to every household where there is somebody with a registered disability. We would pay for that by imposing a levy on the data centres. This levy would amount to making the data centres pay the same price for electricity as householders are paying.

I do not know how many people know the next fact about energy use, but we certainly want to alert people to ensure that they know about it. We have been trying to alert people to it. Some people may know, while others probably do not know, that while ordinary people are struggling to pay their electricity and energy bills and the price hikes resulting from the policies of Trump, data centres - as we will go on to discuss - are now using almost one quarter of the electricity in this country but only paying half the price per unit of electricity that ordinary householders are paying. It is a shocking fact. Data centres, owned by the billionaire tech companies that are making obscene profits, pay half the price for their electricity that ordinary householders pay. It is absolutely disgusting and completely unjustifiable.

It is worth going through the profits of the main owners of the data centres that are proliferating across the country and hoovering up one quarter of the electricity in the country, and soon to be one third of the electricity. Almost 80% of electricity in the Dublin area is being hoovered up by these data centres, the proliferation of which is making a mockery of any attempt to deal with climate change. They are also using significant volumes of water.

The companies that own them are Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Meta, and they are making obscene profits. Microsoft's Irish profits were €47 billion. Google's profits were €4.5 billion. Meta's profits were €2.9 billion. These are their annual profits. Amazon's profits were slightly less at €22 billion, but still very significant. These are some of the richest companies, owned by some of the richest people in the world, and they are being subsidised by ordinary householders who are struggling to pay their bills, and who are going to be struggling even more this winter.

We are suggesting a very simple idea: that the data centres pay the same as the ordinary householders. That will raise €1.5 billion, which will fund a serious bit of support to help every household in the country to deal with their bills.

The average electricity arrears is about €500. This could help wipe out the arrears being endured by some of the poorest families. The average household is three or four people so hundreds of thousands of people are seriously struggling to pay their bills and are going to struggle more. This could give them a real break.

Our policies do not stop at that. Some might object that it is just more money in the pockets of energy companies. It is true that the energy companies are cleaning up at the moment, making extraordinary profits. I think the ESB made €975 million in profits in the most recently available figures. We also want to cap prices. In our wider policies, and we will propose this for the budget, we want to cap the prices they can charge ordinary householders for electricity and the same for gas, petrol, diesel and so on but that is another day's work. In case anybody objects that this is a handout to the super rich and the multimillionaires, believe me, People

Before Profit will be taking that money back off the millionaires with a multimillionaire tax. We will propose and have proposed taxes on the super wealthy year in, year out.

Setting that aside, people need help now. The Government recognised this in 2025 when it gave energy credits of €250 but it then withdrew them. In the most recent budget, people with disabilities lost about €1,200 in the various cuts in supports the Government inflicted on them. That is why we have also stressed the need to give additional help to people with disabilities. It is hitting the most vulnerable - those with disabilities and their carers. We propose a fair and justified way to give every household some support and in particular to give additional support to those with disabilities.

It is worth bearing in mind that we have the highest electricity prices in Europe, confirmed by the European Union statistical agency during the summer. We were told by previous Fianna Fáil Governments that we needed to deregulate and liberalise the market and change the mandate of the ESB, the State-owned electricity company, because if we introduced competition into the market, it would benefit the consumer. The opposite happened. Prior to the deregulation of the Irish electricity market, we had the lowest electricity prices. Now, we have the highest. They are 40% higher than the EU average, and that was before Trump's wars and the impact of data centres. Deregulation and privatisation of the market have benefited private companies and big energy providers but have crucified ordinary householders to the extent that hundreds of thousands of people are in arrears.

I am picking on the data centres in imposing this levy because they are hoovering up huge amounts of electricity to the benefit of some of the richest people in the world. The Government defends the subsidy to these people already making billions in profits on the grounds that it is critical infrastructure. I wonder if the Government and the Minister are listening to what the tech billionaires themselves are now saying. It is a technology the Government has decided it will subsidise, allowing these data centres that are linked substantially to the development of AI to proliferate. Even the AI tech billionaires are now saying that technology could destroy the world and humanity. I do not actually take that very seriously because I think they are just looking for more handouts but it underlines the madness of a policy of giving them €1 billion in subsidies a year and continuing to allow data centres to proliferate. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response. People will be out on the streets this Saturday at the Affordable Ireland demonstration demanding a real break in the cost of living. They are absolutely right to do so. A simple measure the Government could take to alleviate some of this cost-of-living misery is to support this motion.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Solidarity fully supports this motion. Just before I came down to the Chamber, I heard very positive news that a data centre has been refused planning permission in Mayo. I have not heard the full details but there were concerns about where it would access electricity and concerns about climate. I hope we are now seeing the tide start to turn against the *carte blanche* given to data centres.

I recall raising this during questions to the Minister previously. He and another Minister sort of laughed in my face when I said-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have never done that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----the purpose of these data centres was mainly for AI, which is not useful to the world or to humanity; in fact, it is very detrimental in many cases. I hope the Minister is starting to reconsider. A lot of young people and a growing body of people are extremely critical of AI. I also want to mention how intersectional an issue this is. It intersects with the environment, military technology, the cost of living, which this motion focuses on, and many other issues. An estimated cumulative average of about €360 in ordinary people's energy bills has been laid at the door of data centres. With households already paying twice as much as a data centre per unit and with the highest electricity prices in the EU, why is the Government so uncaring about the proliferation of data centres? Would the Minister admit that maybe the Government has erred? Ireland is now becoming the bogeyman rather than the poster boy for what other countries should not do. These price rises hit low-income households disproportionately and the Government has taken away the supports. How are people going to cope if that continues to be the Government's stance? Seven electricity suppliers have increased their energy prices over the past few months. The CRU said there will be a €41 increase per month from October, largely laying it at the door of data centre usage. With over 322,000 in electricity arrears, there is a serious problem for many working-class families. The Central Bank also came out with a pressing concern that house building will slow down, another issue I raised previously, because of the lack of available electricity connections due to data centres. A levy on data centres is urgent. It is not like they cannot afford to pay. Microsoft had profits of €47 billion. Is the Minister seriously suggesting it could not pay a levy? It is well able to pay.

Further than that, the ESB, which once was a public utility, should be brought back into State ownership and run for profit to get bills down in the first place. Bord Gáis announced it will increase its bills by €140 a year. There is a huge level of gas arrears. In recent days, the regulator admitted that data centres are a threat to the gas grid too and new data centres will be offered lower prices but it may have to cut them off if there is too much demand. There is a proposal for 17 more data centres. They would have the same gas needs as 2.6 million homes. We need to get a grip. There should be a moratorium on data centres. They are now a threat to people's pockets, the environment and our resources, guzzling a quarter of our electricity. It is proposed to take water from the Shannon to Dublin. Most of the data centres are around Dublin, Meath and nearby locations.

My constituency, Dublin West, seems to be a hot spot for data centres. There are more than 20 data centres in Dublin 15 and Clonee, which is beside us. According to a report our councillor John Burtchaell put in, the council is not aware of how much energy those centres use. They are not required to indicate that on planning applications. It just seems to be a let-it-rip approach. Another data centre has been approved for Clonee. These centres are overwhelmingly located in areas of deprivation. That has been pointed out by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change.

It is interesting - and I hope this will spread to Ireland - that there has been a movement against data centres in the USA. Even the Republican Party is having to make talking points out of data centres because of the impact they are having in the context of drought. This is combined with the heatwaves we have been having. In Monterey Park in California, for example, there was an organised response to a new data centre coming to the town. It was a huge issue at the city council. In Naas, 300 people turned out at a public meeting to discuss this matter. Therefore, consciousness of these data has been raised in Irish society centres,

particularly over the summer when we could not water our plants because data centres were using so much water. People are aware that there is a real problem with these issues. It is not just an environmental issue; it is a democratic issue as well because it seems the big tech companies - the tech bro billionaires - are dictating, and they are completely unaccountable. For example, *thejournal.ie* had a report that roughly half of these centres did not even have to give details of the resources they are using.

This motion should be supported by the Minister. We could eliminate the arrears of the more than 300,000 households and take the dread and stress off many people. How can the Minister continue to allow the electricity companies to increase their profits? ESB Group just made a 20% increase in its profits. Airtricity also hugely increased its profits. The data centres are guzzling almost a quarter of our electricity. They are also guzzling our water. To sit idly by while people go into debt is absolutely unforgivable.

These multinational companies should be taxed more broadly. We cannot continue to pretend that we can have public services such as a State childcare system, healthcare and so on without taxing wealth. We cannot continue to allow these companies to pay low tax or no tax.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move:

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

"the Government:

— remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and its impact on energy prices;

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

— 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); and

— affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government with the Energy Affordability Action Plan to be submitted to Government in the coming weeks and consideration ongoing of supports for household;

notes that:

— the ongoing conflict in the Middle East has caused international wholesale gas prices to increase which has a significant knock-on impact on retail electricity prices;

— supplier hedging strategies have and are continuing to help cushion households from the full volatility in international wholesale energy markets;

— price setting by electricity suppliers, including standing charges is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned and each such company has its own different approach to pricing decisions over time, in accordance with factors such as their overall company strategic direction and costs such as staffing, tax, infrastructure;

- Government understands that any price increase can be a challenge for households and businesses;
- for that reason, the Government has taken action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy;
- extensions to the package of temporary fuel supports have brought the total cost of these measures to over €1.4 billion and are helping to reduce the cost burden at the petrol pump;
- successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with energy costs;
- in Budget 2026, key measures included an extension until 2030 of the nine per cent Value Added Tax (VAT) rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills, enhanced social protection payments, including an increase to the Fuel Allowance weekly rate and an expansion in the eligibility rules, and a record allocation of €640 million for SEAI retrofit schemes;
- at the same time, additional retrofitting supports have been rolled out to further help households, capital expenditure of over €2 billion has delivered over 287,000 home energy upgrades from 2019 to the end of August 2026, including over 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;
- in January this year we expanded and reformed retrofitting schemes to ensure more homeowners can receive grants, the new measures included increased attic and wall insulation supports, an increased grant of €12,500 for heat pump installation, and new grants for windows and doors;
- almost 89,000 applications have been processed to the end of August 2026, an increase of 116 per cent on the same period last year;
- this year to the end of August 2026, almost 42,000 homes have been upgraded through SEAI schemes, including over 6,800 homes at risk of energy poverty under the Warmer Homes Scheme;
- the latest Eurostat report (comparing electricity prices across the EU) outlines that Ireland had the fifth highest 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);
- 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 and gas customers up to €700 and €400 (respectively) annually;
- protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills and households struggling with their bill are strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier;
- the Department of Social Protection can also provide support through the Additional Needs Payment to help households meet expenses, including difficulties with fuel bills;
- Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (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 NEAT continues to work intensively on an Energy Affordability Action Plan to be submitted to Government in the coming weeks;

— the range of supports that were included in Budget 2026 are in line with the movement away from one-off measures, towards permanent supports with funding also provided to address structural issues such as retrofit and infrastructure;

— the Government will continue to monitor and assess the situation in relation to energy costs; and

— the Government will also make a range of relevant decisions as part of Budget 2027;

further notes that:

— data centres represent critical digital infrastructure that are central to Ireland's modern economy;

— they strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge intensive regional hub for the Information and Communications Technology sector and also support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that support billions in annual economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and supplier ecosystems;

— when considering the impact of data centres, we must also weigh wider economic benefits — tax revenues, employment, broader digital infrastructure value and significant support and linkages provided to other high value sectors of the economy;

— currently the industry employs 19,500 directly, in addition, Ireland's technology sector, underpinned by digital infrastructure in data centres, accounted for employment of 182,900 people in Q4 2024, equivalent to seven per cent of Ireland's total workforce;

— while data centres are large energy users, unlike other European countries that have heavy-industry bases, Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy, this is our core energy-intensive industry;

— comparing total non-residential electricity consumption, which includes industry and data centres, Ireland's consumption is in line with Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Dublin, (FLAP-D) and other European markets, which represent the tier-one, foundational hubs of Europe's digital infrastructure;

— the Government has for a long time recognised that data centres and their energy consumption need to be managed and planned appropriately and we are taking the regulatory, policy and investment measures to deliver on this;

— the Government is committed to delivering a balanced approach to facilitate sustainable data centre demand while also ensuring overall energy security and affordability for consumers and businesses;

— the Government's Large Energy User (LEU) Action Plan, published in January 2026, sets out a 'plan-led' approach for very large and energy intensive investments, which due to their scale and energy consumption benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning;

- the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) LEU connection policy, published in December 2025, establishes a pathway for new data centres to seek connection to the electricity system, that addresses security of electricity supply risks, system constraints and promotes renewable energy targets;
- the CRU is responsible for electricity connection policy and the economic regulation of the electricity system operators ESB Networks and EirGrid;
- Electricity Network Tariffs Structure Review, are set every year by the CRU to recover the costs of developing, operating, and maintaining the electricity grid, they fund a grid that is more resilient to storms and supplies electricity to a growing population, new housing and expanding businesses;
- extra-large energy users, like data centres, have in recent years seen large increases in network costs, with average increase of 175 per cent compared with a 45 per cent increase for domestic customers during 2020-2026;
- the United Nations (UN) university report referenced Ireland as 'a cautionary example of local grid stress from concentrated digital infrastructure', however, it should be noted that though referenced, Ireland was not a central tenet to the study but rather a brief paragraph in a much wider report;
- data centres are not a major driver of demand on the public water supply network, accounting for less than 0.3 per cent of the water supplied by Uisce Eireann;
- in addition, not all data centres use water from the Uisce Eireann network, with a number of them having their own wells or utilising rainwater harvesting and on-site storage;
- the CRU's LEU connection policy supports Government renewable energy targets, as data centres above certain thresholds will be required to meet at least 80 per cent of their annual demand with new additional renewable electricity generated in the Republic of Ireland; and
- according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Greenhouse Gas Emissions data for 2025, Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 36 years, including a 7.1 per cent reduction in energy industries, to an all-time low, this demonstrates that economic growth has been definitively decoupled from greenhouse gas emissions;
- the Friends of the Earth report referenced makes particular assumptions about how the electricity market works and the authors acknowledge that the modelling used in the report has limitations;
- consistent with the Government's position, a recent Friends of the Earth report underlines the importance of deploying even more renewable electricity to remove gas related cost effect driving energy prices', both Government LEAP policy and CRU LEU Connection Decision recognise and support sustainable LEU development ensuring renewables are a key component in any development going forward;
- the Government is committed to delivering a balanced approach to facilitate sustainable data centre developments, which operate within the boundaries of our climate legislation and targets and are associated with strong economic activity and employment, support our society, and make efficient use of our electricity grid."

Tairgim an frithrún. I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion. It gives us an opportunity to discuss this issue. I reject the motion - I take some of the points that are made in it - and that is why I brought forward the countermotion.

To set the context of where we are, we all understand that, in particular, the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, which have not been mentioned - Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned the Middle East briefly - have caused significant disruption to global energy markets. I do not think anyone would disagree with that. We recognise-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Donald Trump, not the Middle East.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree, but it is not just that. It is also Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the various disruptions we have had in recent years that are putting significant pressure on energy prices right across Europe. On the purchasing power index through Eurostat, Ireland is approximately eighth for energy prices. It is not first, but electricity is still very expensive for a lot of people. That is a matter we continue to grapple with. The acceleration of the use of renewables will be critical in that regard, but I will turn to that in a moment. I assure the House that supply, which is critical for an island nation, is being monitored on a regular basis. Thankfully, approximately 50% of our electricity is generated through renewable sources. We doubled our renewable capacity over a ten-year period. We have 3 GW of solar, and we are going to accelerate that. We need to get on with the grid investment programme we have under price review, PR, 6 and make sure that critical projects such as the North-South interconnector that have been held up are built.

We understand that any price increase can be a serious challenge for households and small businesses. As a result, we have been proactive. We have introduced a series of measures to reduce fuel prices, and further measures are under consideration by the national energy affordability task force, which feeds into the budgetary task force. I chair that task force, which will meet again tomorrow.

Specifically on fuel, the package of Government support measures is to the tune of €1.4 billion. This package is helping to reduce the cost burden, particularly at the pump and for productive sectors such as haulage right the way across to agriculture. That is important because it underpins our supply chain and the tens of thousands of jobs in it.

I remind Deputies that I made a few significant changes in the budget for 2026. I reduced the VAT rate on electricity and gas to 9% right through to 2030. I extended social welfare direct payments to households, including fuel allowance payments. More than a quarter of households receive those direct payments, and that is a matter that is under consideration for the upcoming budget. I also retained the €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration. I intend for that to be kept.

The best way to insulate our economy and society from fuel price shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. That is why we are investing record amounts of money in retrofitting through part- and fully-funded schemes. We provided €640 million in last year's budget for this year to carry out retrofitting in households and businesses, targeting 73,000 households to bring about reductions in energy use, emissions and bills. In January, I brought forward changes to that. We expanded the schemes to which I refer and reformed the

retrofitting schemes to make sure they are targeted at middle-income households. We also expanded the warmer homes scheme, which is the 100% grant aid scheme for those at risk of fuel poverty and those in receipt of social welfare payments. We have done more than 35,000 houses under that scheme and we have increased the number year on year. We want to do more of that because it is a protection against future price shocks.

We brought forward similar upgrades in respect of attic and cavity wall insulation. We doubled the grants for heat pumps, electrifying homes and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Full home retrofits can save up to €1,200 per annum on energy costs. This year, since we made the changes, we have had approximately 89,000 applications to the end of August, so people are responding. I intend to bring forward further measures in that regard because they ensure that we can protect households against future energy shocks. More than €2 billion has been invested in that area since 2019. The 89,000 applications we have received to the end of August compares with 41,100 in the same period last year.

As of the end of August, we had supported more than 21,000 homes with domestic solar photovoltaic schemes, which are important in reducing people's bills. This year alone, we have received 35,000 applications, which is an increase of 72%. Again, we increased the grant to make sure that there are permanent savings for people.

A number of protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties with paying their bills. The arrears figures - particularly those relating to 90-day arrears - are too high. They have plateaued in recent months, but they are a concern. We are looking at that matter. At my request, all the main suppliers have put in place hardship funds and protections for customers against disconnection. Disconnection does not happen in any real way. It is percentage of a per cent. It is a very small number, and I want to keep it that way.

I have already mentioned the changes we made on social protection measures. They all form part of the discussions we are having now, in advance of the budget which will be announced in early October. The Deputies' parties will be putting forward alternative budgets, as they do each year. They are perfectly entitled to do so, and we will feed it into the debate.

It is important to highlight that the recent price increases are a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. We have seen a number of increases. Electric Ireland did not increase its prices and has indicated that it will not be seeking an increase in tariffs over the coming months.

I do not recall ever laughing at Deputy Coppinger in the Chamber. That is not something I would do. Her recollection of something might be completely different from mine. I take this debate seriously because we have to be honest with people that we are not a heavy industry nation.

We are not a large heavy industrial manufacturer. ICT, not just data centres, forms a really important part of our economy, employing about 7% of our people. There are about 2.8 million people working in our country now. Nearly 2.3 million are working on a full-time basis. Just short of 190,000 people work in the ICT sector. Some 19,000 are directly employed in data centres. Data centres are a very important part of our digital infrastructure and of our offering as a country. The largest and most important protection against poverty and price increases is for people to have good jobs. As a Government, we have a responsibility to maintain and grow the jobs that are here. I refer both to indigenous Irish firms and foreign direct investment. That

is also critically important. Neither Deputy mentioned job creation and job retention. That must be fundamental to the operation of our society and our economy.

We had a good discussion earlier today when we had oral questions on energy. There was a lot of discussion of data centres. I mentioned the large energy user action plan that I brought forward with the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, in January of this year. That sets out a planned approach to any additional data centres or other large energy users being given a connection. Any new ones will have to meet 80% of their electricity demand through new renewable sources.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On an annualised basis on a five-year-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was going to wait for Deputy Murphy to speak later on. Anyway, that is a fact. Deputy Stanley was also here for that debate, when I also said that applications for connections are not automatically granted. If anything, many have been refused. We have to balance this and that is done independently through the planning process and through the connection agreements that are in place.

On demand, the critical priority is to ensure we can meet demand right the way across our country. That is why the PR6 grid investment is so important. That €18.9 billion of investment will deliver more than 520 capital projects to allow for more renewables on our system - we are accelerating renewables - to allow more storage in our system and to bring down energy bills. The fundamental way to do that is to accelerate renewables by reducing our dependence on fossil fuel. That has to be done and that is what we are doing.

In relation to the measures we will take, the Deputies are perfectly entitled to put forward this motion with their suggestions. We are now preparing for the budget. I assure people that the budget will be a cost-of-living budget. It will be about protecting families, workers, working families and the most vulnerable in our society through what is a global crisis. We are not going to be able to protect everyone from every single price increase but we will do our level best to protect them in a very sustainable way that continues to protect jobs in our economy and not by shutting down a whole sector.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister is defending the indefensible. That is why he did not really engage with it. He is defending the fact that, when 300,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills, data centres owned by the richest and most powerful companies in the world are paying half the price the poorest people in the country are expected to pay. He is defending the absolutely indefensible. He is saying that we cannot possibly say that these, the richest companies in the world, which provide very few jobs as we will get onto in a second, should be asked to pay the same as ordinary households, which is a minimal ask. The fact that this would generate €1.5 billion, enough money to give a €500 energy credit to every family in the country and an additional €500 to every family with a disabled member, speaks to how much electricity is being used by these data centres. They are now using almost as much electricity as every single house in this State put together.

This goes to the nub of the issue, which is that this Government is not representing the people; it is representing the big tech companies. That is what it is doing at an EU level. If you read the priorities, you see that they are about pushing a deregulation agenda within Europe

as part of the digital omnibus package on behalf of US big tech corporations. It is also what it is doing domestically. On every single front, big tech's data centres are being put before ordinary people.

I really think that more and more people are waking up to the costs of this policy. There are huge costs on multiple fronts, to be paid by ordinary people, as a result of the Minister's prioritisation of these data centres and their insatiable demand for our electricity. There is the actual cost in their pockets, which Friends of the Earth has highlighted very clearly. Extensive research shows that, between 2021 and 2023, the average household paid an extra €263 in their bills because of data centres' usage. How does that work? Data centres are pushing up the total amount of electricity being used. They are using about a quarter of our total electricity. They are thereby increasing the amount of time we spend using gas rather than just using renewables. When you do that, gas sets the price for all the electricity. People are paying the cost of that. That does not take into account the extra money people are paying in network charges.

This report by Dr. Seán Fearon estimates that, in total, between 2015 and 2023, the public paid €715 million extra because of the Government's policy of prioritising data centres. That is just what happened in the past. Let us look at what is going to happen in the future. Without a new energy shock, the average household will pay €461 over the next ten years. However, we are in the middle of a new energy shock because of what is happening in the Middle East. The report's predictions in respect of the increase in the price of oil are modest but, in that scenario, the cost could be €726 million, €1.1 billion or €1.6 billion cumulatively for households. We are talking about the average household in this country paying hundreds and hundreds of euro as a result of the Minister's prioritisation of data centres.

The public is going to pay big time as a result of our failure to meet our climate targets. The Minister has thrown in the towel on climate action. He did so over Christmas, when he said we were not going to meet any of our targets. In the middle of September, we are still patiently waiting for the climate action plan for 2026. The year is almost over.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If the Deputy was here this morning, he would have heard about it, but he was not.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why? It is because we cannot meet any of our targets. We are going to reach a point well under half of our targets, which are supposed to be legally binding, because the data centres have gobbled up all of the renewable energy. Sometimes when the Minister talks about this he gives the impression that, as long as we keep adding renewable energy, it is good for the climate. The climate does not care. The planet cares about the amount of greenhouse gases. If you are adding extra renewables but all of that additional capacity is being gobbled up by data centres, then it does not matter. That is precisely what has happened. Since 2017, all of the extra renewable capacity has been gobbled up by data centres. We are therefore also paying for it in terms of climate.

We are also paying for it in terms of housing. It was the Minister's own senior civil servant who said that we need to make a choice about our energy use and asked whether our energy was going to go to data centres or to housing. Of course, the Minister dismissed that. Why? It was because he had made his choice. It is going to go to data centres. This has actually happened. It happened in west Dublin. A new substation was designed to provide electricity

for new housing but a data centre then came in and took up that electricity. We are paying for it in terms of public transport. I am convinced that this is a key factor in the delay in the electrification of our buses and other public transport projects.

Data centres are coming first and for what? In a comment last week, which the Minister kind of pointed towards today, he suggested that this is our equivalent to Germany's car factories. That is a joke. In terms of direct jobs, German car factories account for about 400,000 direct jobs. Earlier on, the Minister said - I believe he misspoke and probably wants to correct the record - that there are 19,000 directly employed in data centres. I do not know if he would stand over that figure.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There are 189,000 people working in ICT.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Earlier, the Minister said that 19,000 are directly employed in data centres.

Does the Minister stand over that?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Yes.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Great, because he will have to correct the record later as that is not what is in his record. The Minister knows he is fiddling the figures because that 19,000 figure - it is 19,500 - is coming from the KPMG report, on which the Minister spent €105,000 of public money to get. He told them we only want this outcome, that is, to say data centres are really important. Most of those jobs are construction jobs. There are not 19,000 people in working data centres directly in this country. The Minister knows that is not true. Most of them are construction jobs.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They could be building houses.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They could be building houses. That is the other way this is affecting the housing crisis. There are more than 10,000 of these workers who are spending their time building data centres and they are purely temporary jobs. The KPMG report actually says these jobs will disappear once we have built all of the data centres. The workers could instead be building housing. What is the actual figure? How many people actually work in data centres? The Minister's own report, which is a report designed to support the case for data centres, says 3,300 direct jobs. The figure is 3,300, not 19,000, not 200,000 or the 1 million KPMG was trying to point towards. The figure is 3,300 direct jobs. Of course, every job is important. If any of these data centres had to shut down, we are in favour of a just transition but 3,300 jobs for an industry that is gobbling up one quarter of our electricity makes no sense.

The Minister is defending the indefensible. People across the world are waking up to the reality that this is the toxic waste of the 21st century. They use up all your electricity. They use up all your water. They restrict other jobs being created because of various industries not having access to electricity. They prevent the building of housing. They interfere with the delivery of public transport and they provide a tiny number of jobs. Nobody wants them. People in America are rising up against them and saying we do not want them but the

Government approach is to say we will have this toxic waste nobody else wants. I will underline the point. When you are living in a country that has this very unusual, outsized nature of the data centres, people probably do not get just how unusual it is. Ireland is a massive outlier. There is no country like Ireland in terms of the percentage of electricity usage or any other metric you want to look at. We are ten times the European average.

The Government is on the run on this issue. An Coimisiún Pleanála's decision on the Mayo data centre is extremely significant. The turnout at the public meeting in Kildare a couple of weeks ago is extremely significant. People are waking up to the Government's agenda and the fact the Government is putting data centres before the needs of ordinary people in this country. I really predict this will be an enormous political issue over the course of the coming months. The Government's position is utterly untenable. It is why it makes all of the arguments it makes. Let us take up one of them as there are only ten seconds left. This idea that we should not worry as they are using 80% renewable energy is nonsense. The Minister knows it is nonsense. That is on an annualised basis over a whole number of years whereas the whole point is that data centre demand is pretty much continuous, it barely changes whereas renewables come and go. That is the whole point. It makes no sense to continue on this line. We need action on the cost-of-living crisis. We need people on the streets on Saturday.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak in favour of this motion. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le PBP as ucht an rúin seo. This is a critical motion because Irish households are paying roughly twice as much for electricity as data centres. Ordinary workers, families and pensioners are paying significantly more for their electricity than these large energy users. It is grossly unfair. It is the direct consequence of the Government's reckless failure to plan. At a time when ordinary people are being squeezed from every direction, Government policy has prioritised the interests of ever increasingly monstrous data centres over the interests of households, communities and families. For years, Ministers have ignored Sinn Féin's repeated warnings about the impact that unchecked data centre expansion would have on our electricity grid. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ignored warnings about pressure on grid capacity, despite data centre demand having exploded by over 400% over the last ten years. They ignored warnings about the fact that data centres are preventing houses from being built.

Just yesterday, the Central Bank report detailed that a lack of access to the grid is one of the key reasons why housing is not being provided. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael fight for this *status quo*, Sinn Féin is absolutely clear that data centres must pay their fair share. In my constituency of Kildare North, the building of the Herbata data centre has been a source of massive anxiety for my constituents. Nearby, Jigginstown in Naas has been rezoned for another data centre and this has also caused massive concern. I attended that meeting in Naas, which was attended by several hundred people. It really has ignited people. This new site is twice the size of the Herbata complex, with its borders a mere 130 m away from homes and schools in the area. Having attended that meeting two weeks ago, it is clear there are serious concerns and the Government has to address them. We have seen the reports from Clondalkin on the impact on locals from noise but a hyper data centre right beside Herbata could cause havoc for residents in Naas and Kildare. Ireland has done more than its fair share in respect of data centres. This summer, the United Nations cited Ireland as a cautionary tale on the environmental impact of runaway artificial intelligence growth and data centre demand.

We already have enough data centres to store the important data we need on health and banking, etc. and we have certainly done our bit. This is not a Luddite reaction to technology and innovation. This explosion in data centre demand is all around AI. When the CEOs of these companies are urging caution, surely legislators should listen. I absolutely believe a lot of this is hype and I suspect there could be bit of corporate capture involved in it but we have to take a pause and listen to these people when they are urging caution. Why, then, is this Government doubling down and insisting on building more and more data centres when our electricity infrastructure is creaking during a housing crisis? Just today, An Coimisiún Pleanála overturned Mayo County Council's decision to build a data centre as the applicants had failed to show there was sufficient electricity locally to serve the centre and for climate reasons. This is to be welcomed. I really hope that Kildare County Council is paying attention to this development because this logic must be applied across the State.

Look at the Scottish Parliament, which just this week voted to pause any new data centre builds until proper guidance is in place. Our housing supply is being massively affected by these new sites and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions mentioned that as well when it was before the climate committee recently. The Government still has no legislative requirement that housing developments be prioritised over data centres for grid capacity. This is why Sinn Féin has also brought forward legislation that would require the Government and the regulator to prioritise housing ahead of data centres for electricity connections because the national grid should, first and foremost, serve the needs of the Irish people. If capacity is available, homes must come first. If there is a choice between powering a new housing development and another large scale data centre, the homes must come first. This is what the people of my constituency want. They want their kids to be able to afford to buy a house in Naas, live locally and see their grandchildren growing up. They do not want them having to work an hour and half down the road.

This is why Sinn Féin believes a data centre levy should be seriously considered. Simply put, those who place the greatest demands on our electricity infrastructure should make a fair contribution towards the cost they impose on the system. This levy would help ensure the burden does not continue to fall disproportionately on ordinary consumers, while sending a clear signal that strategic national infrastructure must be used in the public interest. The Government's priorities have been clear. They have put corporate demand ahead of strategic planning and they have failed to ensure that housing and ordinary consumers are protected. Sinn Féin's priorities are different. We believe housing must come first. We believe workers and families must come first.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas le PBP faoi choinne an rún seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála anocht. Sílim go bhfuil sé ag an am ceart agus muid ag amharc ar an gcáinainéis. Week after week, workers and families are being hit with soaring energy bills. We hear it every single day. Unfortunately, we have had company after company in the past two weeks telling us they are putting up their prices again. There are double digit increases. That is another blow to families who are already stretched to the limit. The people out there are being told they have to find hundreds more euro every year. They simply do not have that

type of money. That is the reality. I do not know if the Minister is hearing it in his constituency but I am definitely hearing it in my constituency and right across this country everywhere I go.

The reality is stark. Ireland already has the highest electricity prices in Europe. We now have more than 320,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills.

One in four households in the State cannot pay their gas bill because they have fallen behind. The statistics that we are seeing now are staggering. These are real people who do not have the money to pay their bills when they fall due. These figures should be setting off alarm bells in Government Buildings. The Minister should be standing up and asking what he can do here. Instead, he waltzes in here as if there is nothing to see. Those figures reveal the reality that these families are facing every single day and the scale of the crisis that ordinary people have to meet. That is before we even talk about the hundreds of thousands of other families who are able to pay their bills but are stretching themselves doing it. Life has become so unaffordable. People who expected to be able to enjoy the odd luxury here and there simply cannot do it any more. Families, workers and pensioners are all fighting to stay afloat and to avoid falling into debt. Those people are quietly rationing their heat, cutting back on electricity and leaving their home-heating oil tank empty because they simply cannot afford another fill.

It is baffling that time and again Government opposes energy credits on the grounds that they are not targeted. The truth is that the existing supports, important as they are, are not reaching enough people. That is a problem affecting not just a small minority but it is affecting households right across the State. That is why Sinn Féin has been very clear in this. We are calling for a return of energy credits as an emergency measure to provide immediate relief. Energy credits were always supposed to be an emergency response while the Government got its act together to implement reforms that would bring down prices permanently. However, those reforms never came. The Government never came with a single idea. Instead, the Government repeatedly voted down the ideas that we in Sinn Féin brought forward, practical proposals that would drive down costs. We all see the result every single day. Irish households remain entrapped with the highest electricity prices in Europe while record numbers fall into arrears. Government failure has been allowed to become the new normal.

This crisis did not happen overnight nor can it be blamed solely on a war or global instability. Every country has faced those pressures. The real question here is: why does Ireland still have the highest prices in Europe? People know the answer to that question. The Government has pursued a reckless expansion of data centres without ensuring the necessary grid infrastructure was in place first. It can commission all the reports it likes and can hire all the consultants to tell it what it wants to hear but none of that changes that reality. Officials within the Department of energy have acknowledged that data centres are driving up prices for everyone else. They pay a fraction of what ordinary households and small business pay. This is the system that Fianna Fáil created and that Fine Gael has presided over for years. To make matters worse, data centres are now being prioritised ahead of housing development in the middle of a housing emergency.

Sinn Féin is having none of that. That is why we introduced legislation to ensure housing comes first. We have consistently put forward proposals and practical measures to reduce energy costs to strengthen our electricity system and to support struggling households. Time and again Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and their supporters have voted against those reforms. Time and again they have chosen not to act. Workers and families deserve better. They deserve a

government that understands the scale of the crisis and is prepared to take the action to address the causes of the high energy costs and not simply manage the consequences.

The message from households across the State is clear: enough is enough. It is time to put ordinary Irish people first. People cannot afford more excuses, more delays or more inaction. The Government needs to stop putting data centres first and put people first. They need relief, they need it now and it is time to deliver for them.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le PBP agus Solidarity as an rún seo a chur chun tosaigh. I thank People Before Profit and Solidarity for bringing forward this really important motion. The reality is the people are in crisis. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that ordinary people need energy credits and that we need to start putting ordinary communities ahead of data centres. I am actually beginning to think that this Government is making life harder for people on purpose because if this was not on purpose, I do not see how it would be getting it so terribly wrong.

This is the Dáil's first week back and people are worried out of their minds because of the winter they are facing. They are telling all of us they are not able to make ends meet now and everybody is aware of that. They are seeing that oil prices are rising. People living in the west of Ireland are reliant on oil. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, is aware of that as somebody who resides in the west of Ireland. Oil prices are rising and Government is silent. Electricity prices are rising and Government is silent but Government is not silent on public transport fares. In fact, instead of being silent on it, it has decided to increase them. Instead of assisting struggling households it has decided to make it even more difficult for struggling households. Tonight's motion would assist ordinary families and workers by actually by putting money back into their pockets to make it just that little bit easier for them to be able to make ends meet. However, of course as always, these things fall on deaf ears when it comes to Government.

There is a clear message that I want to give to the Minister for Transport who has disappointingly just left the Chamber. Public transport fare price increases have already had a devastating impact on Galway families. A number of individuals in Galway have contacted me to say that they are unable to meet this extra demand on their resources. What this will mean, and the NTA has confirmed it, is that fewer people will be able to use public transport instead of more people. Not only that, but the Government has doubled down when it comes to Oranmore train station where people will now have to pay for parking in order to be able to use the train station, which is ridiculous. They will not be able to access Oranmore train station with public transport until at least 2028. I am unsure how the Government is expecting people to use that train unless it specifically does not want it to be used.

We have also seen a huge increase in the Dublin MetroLink cost. There are serious concerns in the west of Ireland about the impact this will have on people across the west of Ireland, specifically on capacity on the 424 bus. Far too many people all summer have been left waiting at the side of the road, unable to access that bus and it continues to worsen in these months during the academic year. We urgently need the Minister for Transport to intervene.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim buíochas le Pobal seachas Brabús as ucht an rún seo a chur os ár gcomhair and for giving me the opportunity to highlight the disaster that

is the Jigginstown Herbata data centres in Naas. The people in Kildare have serious concerns about the development of these data centres. Profits of corporations are being put before the liveability of the town as well as the livelihoods and well-being of its residents. The scale of the proposed project in Jigginstown is terrifying. If built, the Herbata complex would span an area seven times the size of Croke Park, reportedly consume three times as much electricity as the whole of Kildare annually, as well as 18,000 litres of water a day. This would jeopardise urgently needed future housing in the county by placing additional pressure on stretched infrastructure. The massive drain on energy resources by data centres will also lead to spikes in bills for families and small businesses who are already struggling to keep the heating and the lights on. The Government is wilfully and recklessly allowing the situation to deteriorate.

The environmental impact is equally alarming. The data centres proposed for Jigginstown will rely on gas and emit up to 1.6 million tonnes of CO₂ per year. That is equivalent to the emissions of half a million cars. If allowed to go ahead, this project will spell disaster, worsening the already dire cost of living, housing and climate crisis.

The hyperscale facility would create further problems in terms of noise pollution and property valuation due to being planned mere metres away from an established residential area. We are not against data centres wholesale but there has to be a balancing of interests. At the moment, Government is neglecting the public good in favour of wooing multinational investment. In terms of cost and benefit, the number of jobs created would be minimal and does not justify the harm the development would inflict on the environment and the quality of life of the community. The project simply must not go ahead. The land must be rezoned before the Jigginstown application is submitted. Sinn Féin Councillor Noel Connolly will bring a motion to Kildare County Council that would oblige the chief executive to initiate the rezoning process. There will be a protest outside Áras Cill Dara at 1.30 p.m. on 28 September when this motion is being discussed.

6 o'clock

The motion before us tonight is consistent with that objective and represents an important step towards restoring balance and protecting communities. For too long, companies have been drawing on Ireland's natural resources while our citizens bear the cost. The Government needs to finally show leadership, stand up to tech and say, "Enough is enough". Teastaíonn cothromaíocht inár gcur chuige i leith forbairt ionaid sonraí. Go dtí seo, fuair comhlachtaí teic *carte blanche* chun pé méid acmhainní gur mian leo a úsáid, beag beann ar an tionchar ar chúrsaí tithíochta, timpeallachta, soláthair fuinnimh agus uisce. I lár géarchéim chostais mhaireachtála, tá sé in am ag comhlachtaí teic a gcion féin a íoc. Cuirfimid ár bpobail agus ár gcaighdeán maireachtála roimh an mbrabús.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I am supporting this motion calling for the introduction of a €500 energy credit for households funded through a fair levy on data centres. As the Minister of State will know, ordinary workers and families continue to struggle with soaring bills while data centres consume almost a quarter of Ireland's electricity. They are driving up household energy bills while paying much lower relative rates than householders.

This is shocking and something over which every Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TD, many of whom are fanatical about data centres and AI, should be shouting their heads off. It is really shocking. According to Eurostat figures published earlier this year, data centres in Ireland pay an average of 19.1 cent per KW for electricity compared to 36.8 cent per KW paid by households.

The company Echelon Data Centres Ireland, which is building two huge data centres in my own backyard, just outside Arklow, had a massive €2.5 billion valuation last year. All these data centres should be paying at least the same price as the rest of us for electricity, and then let us redirect that money to the people who need it, whether that is hard-pressed households in Arklow or elsewhere in Ireland suffering from the cost-of-living crisis. We need to see an end to the discounted energy rates for data centres and a moratorium on the building of any more of these new facilities to protect the national grid and to meet our climate targets.

The Government may claim there is not a cost-of-living crisis anymore but families know differently. Every week, people are paying more for groceries, more for fuel, more for rent and more for energy. Household budgets are stretched to breaking point. Many people are working harder than ever, yet they are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. We in Sinn Féin have consistently pointed out that the cost-of-living crisis has not gone away and that households still need support with rising energy bills which are among the highest in Europe, as Teachta Doherty mentioned. Many people are now questioning why large energy users are not making a greater contribution through a data centre levy fund towards supporting the grid and helping households with rising costs. The revenue generated could then be ringfenced to provide a €500 energy credit for struggling households.

The message is very simple: ordinary people deserve a fair deal. Those who consume the most energy, that is, big multinational data centres, should make a fair contribution and that contribution should be used to help struggling Irish households with the cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett and colleagues for bringing forward this motion. The Social Democrats are very proud to support it.

I want to make three key points in my comments. First, data centres are affecting our communities and we have a duty and responsibility as representatives to simply reset the scales. We have all seen research that shows the very people who contact us worried about how to heat their homes are facing higher prices due to the sheer volume of data centres in Ireland. When an industry that has not been kept in check has this kind of impact on ordinary people's lives, it is our job as policymakers to step in and do something about it. We know they provide little direct employment. We know they are part of an immensely profitable and influential sector that can afford to contribute a small portion of those immense profits to mitigate these adverse impacts on ordinary citizens. We know that the public see an unfair system where they are expected to scrape by with skyrocketing electricity costs while the industry that uses 23% of our national electricity, and which is forecast to rise to one third in the next four years, benefits from a system of mates rates. Ní féidir linn glacadh leis go mbeidh ar an ngnáthdhuine fulaingt le costais fuinnimh, costais atá á n-ardú ag na hionaid seo, gan rud éigin a dhéanamh faoi.

We need a genuinely honest conversation on data centres. We see it time and again when reasonable concerns and issues are raised that there is no common sense behind the assertion put forward by both Government and the tech sector that if you do not support unrestricted data

centre growth, that means you do not want anyone to have internet, online archives or technology. There is a difference between having a coffee in the morning and having 50 coffees. There is a difference between having some data centres and having so many that they threaten our grid, disrupt our communities and make us a "cautionary tale" according to the United Nations. It is also not acceptable to fudge the numbers around the number of jobs based in data centres to suit their narrative, throwing out reports with outlandish employment claims, like figures of 20,000, that do not acknowledge the majority of those are temporary roles for the people building the data centres. This undermines trust and, frankly, indicates the cold hard facts do not justify data centres being allowed to operate at the scale they do in Ireland.

My final point is that data centres are a tool that have been managed poorly. Many useful or productive things may require data centres but the narrative we need to change is that because a good and useful thing may need a data centre that all data centres are then good and useful. This fable means they get lower electricity rates, the same grade connection priority as a hospital or school, they get to emit noise at night which is waking up people in nearby homes, and this happens regardless of whether they are storing a university repository or powering the generation of AI slop. We have a responsibility to balance what they want and what is good for our society and that is a responsibility that has been neglected for far too long.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank People Before Profit for bringing forward this motion which we are supporting. I want to thank Friends of the Earth, which has done incredible work on this in recent months. I highlight the report it has done which shows how much Irish households have been paying for the expansion of data centres. There was €715 million more in electricity bills between 2015 and 2023, and it has identified that Irish households will pay an additional almost €1.5 billion in electricity bills due to data centre growth. While the Government blames war and the Middle East for rising energy costs, on the other hand it is sanctioning the massive increase in data centres which is adding to it.

What we are actually seeing here in Ireland - and we have become a poster child for this across the world - is the grim reality of the AI-driven dystopian future that the big tech trillionaires have for us: data centres expanding across our country at an exponential rate by Meta, Google, Amazon, now consuming more energy than all urban households in the country. What have ordinary people seen as a result? Higher energy costs for families who cannot afford to put food on the table, the guzzling of our water when we had water shortages, eating up our renewable energy and the gobbling up of our infrastructure resulting in delays of much-needed housing delivery in the middle of a housing catastrophe. What does our Government do? The very same thing it did with the vulture funds - roll them in, bow down to them and give them whatever they want and facilitate them with cheaper electricity subsidised by the Irish public. It lifted the moratorium on data centres despite being warned that data centre expansion would make it difficult to meet electricity demand during extreme cold weather.

Will we see families in this country freeze so as to keep data centres running? This is utterly dystopian. Níl sé seo ceart. Teastaíonn rialtas uainn a dhéanann cinntí chun leas na ndaoine seachas leas na gcorparáidí móra. Cabhraigh leis na daoine seachas leis na hionaid sonraí. Electricity bills have increased by 70% in the past five years and they are going to increase more because of data centres. The Social Democrats believe there needs to be a moratorium on data centres. We believe we need to pause and look at the impact they are having and put people, our resources, nature and our communities ahead of what these big tech corporations

are pushing. We have to question it and the benefits of AI. We know people are losing their jobs. We have the creation of AI slop so that these data centres expand.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank colleagues for tabling the motion this evening. It is interesting that we have set the context that much of this is as a result of the war in Ukraine and the war in the Middle East. You would think the energy suppliers would start to feel that struggle as well, yet what we are seeing is record levels of profits among the energy suppliers. It is impossible to defend when you do not know where the attack is coming from. I am sure the Minister of State is hearing the same from people as those of us on this side that everything is going up. Literally everything is going up and we cannot understand why.

When colleagues across the House explain why this is happening, it is blatantly ignored to the extent that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, just decides that the end of the debate is an hour before the end of the debate. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, for being here. I was at that public meeting in Naas. I do not know when the Minister of State was last in Naas, but Naas is unique for many reasons. One that it is probably not so proud of right now is the fact that it has land zoning specifically for data centre use. I am not aware of any other town in this country where lands are zoned specifically and only for data centres to build on. There is something significantly wrong with that. If nothing else comes from my input today, I ask the Minister of State to convey to the Minister a request to issue a circular to all local authorities to stop zoning land specifically for data centre use. We do not have the infrastructure, we do not have the resources and we are having to deny the fact that we are interfering with economic reports because apparently that is what happened with the Department over the summer. We have significant problems here. In Naas, that is one part of it, and it is a significant worry. We have done our bit in Ireland, and we are far in excess of holding the door open to invite people in, while trying to keep everybody quiet who is suffering at the hands of it. Some 24% of our energy use going to data centres is wrong when we are paying exorbitant fees.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I welcome this timely motion and its call for a moratorium on data centre development and for electricity credits for families paid for by a tax on corporations. The other week, the energy Minister, as he did today, made the outrageous assertion that data centres are to Ireland what car factories are to Germany. It is a fallacious argument with no merit whatsoever. Instead of creating hundreds of thousands of high-paying jobs like the automotive industry, data centres create a tiny number, as Deputy Murphy outlined. Instead of developing products for export, data centres leach water and energy from all around them. Instead of providing economic activity, data centres merely host electronic transactions captured economically elsewhere. Data centres represent a severe economic threat to the State, and they are cannibalising the economy. Every kilowatt hour spent on a data centre is a kilowatt hour not available to a household or to a productive part of the economy like a pharmaceutical plant creating medicines, or a semiconductor factory. Data centres from one part of the economy, in big tech, are putting critical and important jobs in other productive sectors of the economy, even other foreign direct investment multinationals, at risk by inflating costs and threatening our ability to provide energy to our people and businesses.

I spoke to one businessman in my constituency this morning. He told me his electricity bill has surged 26% and it is now putting his entire business at risk. Data centres now guzzle nearly half of our renewable energy production. Meanwhile, we are, right now, decommissioning our

only offshore wind farm, the greatest renewable energy resource that we have. This Government is fuelling its own climate and energy disaster and putting an existential economic, environmental and social risk at the heart of Government policymaking. That should change and it should especially change in light of the climate crisis, an energy crisis and an impending economic crisis. Anything less is negligence in the extreme.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I welcome An Coimisiún Pleanála's decision to refuse planning for a data centre in Mayo on climate grounds, so all hope is not lost. I thank People Before Profit Deputies for tabling this really important motion. On behalf of the Labour Party, I brought a relatively similar motion to the House back in June, calling for targeted energy credits funded through a data centre levy as well as the introduction of a moratorium on the new construction of data centres. I did so and I imagine that the Deputies who are bringing forward this motion today did so as well because we recognise that Ireland has a growing problem with the way our energy system is being managed. There is a fundamental question here about who our energy system is being built for, who is paying for it and whether ordinary households and small businesses are getting a fair deal. Ireland has some of the highest electricity costs in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of households are struggling to keep up with their energy bills. We know that more than half a million electricity and gas accounts are in arrears. Yet, at precisely the same time, we see enormous growth in electricity demand from one particular sector, data centres. As is stated in the motion, they accounted for 88% of the increase in demand for electricity since 2015. That is staggering.

As I have said before, I accept that data centres, to a degree, are a part of modern society and our industrial society. They play a part in the digital economy and so on. Whenever any of us raise these concerns about the Government's approach to data centres and the seemingly boundless expansion, we get these kind of strawmen arguments saying that people use phones, social media, and all that kind of rubbish. The Labour Party has never argued that data centres should not exist. We acknowledge their place in modern society, but we have concerns about what is driving the current proliferation of data centres that we are seeing, not just in Ireland but elsewhere too, and the role that the AI race is playing in this. We have to question what data centres are being used for and if we want to support these purposes. We spend a lot of time in this house talking about the dangers of AI, reining in AI and regulating the use of social media so that it does not harm our children.

Why, on the one hand, are we doing that, and on the other hand, are we facilitating and actively encouraging the infrastructure that facilitates all of this? The use to which data centres are being put has to be part of the discussion about whether we want to continue to facilitate them. We have not had that discussion yet. It is not credible for this Government to continue to allow the expansion of data centres without properly considering the consequences for our society, as well as for our electricity system, for our energy prices, for investment elsewhere in our economy, and for our decarbonisation efforts elsewhere in the country. There is a simple principle here. If a particular group of users is creating significant additional costs for the energy system, they should shoulder the burden of those costs - some 88% of the costs, you might say.

That principle is particularly important at a time when households are struggling to pay their bills. The Government cannot ask families to absorb higher energy costs while simultaneously providing an energy system that gives very large energy users preferential treatment. Recent

figures show that data centres accounted for 23% of energy consumed in Ireland last year. It is around 50% of the energy consumed in Dublin. This is an extraordinary level of demand from a single sector and it does not show any signs of slowing down. Even when comparisons are made to Germany's heavy industry and the fact that we do not have one, in Germany heavy industry accounts for about 25% of energy use. Data centres are already at that level here and all the trajectories are that in a few years' time, it will be a third. When is that too much? We are going to scale up significantly because the de facto moratorium on new connections for data centres was got rid of last year.

We know the impact that this has already had on household bills. A Friends of the Earth report has shown us that data centre energy demand added hundreds of millions of euro to household electricity bills between 2015 and 2023, with a further €1.5 billion potentially being added over the coming decade. That amounts to about a week's wages for a low-paid worker being added to the bill of every household in the country. We also have the extraordinary situation where households can be paying substantially more for their electricity per unit than large data centres. Fundamentally, if large energy users are placing additional demands on the electricity network, they should be making a contribution that reflects those demands. We should be placing a levy on their energy consumption. It is some form of punishment or some anti-technology or anti-business measure. It is just about basic fairness. It is a fact that data centre demand is contributing to higher system costs and higher electricity prices, so the companies benefiting from that demand should contribute towards the cost. The money raised through such a levy, as the motion here calls for, should be used to help to address the costs being experienced elsewhere in the system, including supports for households struggling with their energy bills.

I might have suggested a more targeted approach for the energy credits than is put forward in this motion, but we are arguing over minutiae here. The principle is the same, and we need to make sure that those who are forcing the country to have these costs are paying their fair share. Hundreds of thousands of households are struggling to keep up with their electricity and gas bills. Their wages are being swallowed up by rent, mortgages, food and transport; take your pick. Energy is just the latest one of those. No one is presenting energy credits as a substitute for fixing Ireland's energy system. That is the other thing to say. Such is the extent of the energy crisis we are in that immediate assistance is desperately needed for households up and down the country while we deal with the underlying problem.

We need to address why our energy is so expensive in the first place. Everyone in the House knows what we need to do, that is, rapidly scale up renewable generation. We are miles and miles off target for our offshore wind generation. We are doing well on solar, but we have to do better on offshore wind. That is where the real gains can be. Electricity demand is skyrocketing precisely because of all the data centres that are being built. If renewable electricity is absorbed almost entirely by the new demand from data centres, then that renewable electricity cannot simultaneously help us electrify transport, decarbonise industry or move households away from fossil fuels. Almost all new renewable energy that is being generated onshore in this country through wind and solar is being gobbled up by data centres. It is affecting our efforts to decarbonise elsewhere in our economy. We cannot ignore that.

While this motion is primarily about energy and affordability, there is an important climate dimension to it as well. We cannot separate the two. A secure energy system has to be a cleaner

energy system, and a cleaner energy system has to work for households. The Labour Party supports calls for a moratorium on further data centre expansion until and unless we have sufficient renewable generation and grid capacity to accommodate new demand without putting upward pressure on household bills or undermining our climate objectives. We need to get the fundamentals of our energy system right before we can allow for unfettered increases in demand. Data centres need to make their fair contribution toward both supporting households through the present crisis and in allowing us to build the infrastructure needed to support a transition to a cleaner, more secure energy system for everyone. That is how we build a system that works for the whole country. It does not have to be a choice between economic development and climate action, but we have to carefully manage scarce energy resources and ensure that economic development does not come at the expense of households or our climate.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support this motion in principle. I have a couple of queries about what is implementable and what is not, but the hard-pressed people of Ireland, faced with rising costs, need a little bit more help in terms of energy prices at the moment while also trying to move toward a more sustainable future. For many years, people in Ireland have been told that our electricity bills, which I think are now the third highest in the European Union, are simply the result of international factors beyond our control. In some ways, that is true. Looking at gas, which I am about to get on to, global gas prices have risen internationally and conflict has contributed to that. The reason we are dependent on gas is because the electricity market operates on the system of marginal pricing, which means that the most expensive form of power needed to meet demand at any given time sets the price for 100% of the market. Right now, we are dependent on fossil gas for that. In the future, it could be different. If I have time, I will outline a couple of suggestions, which may already be in the Government mindset, but it is the pace I am worried about.

Why are we burning so much gas when we have all this existing wind potential? I have mentioned wave and tidal before. The answer right now lies in the uninhibited growth of data centres, which are consuming nearly a quarter of our metered electricity in this State, which matches the usage of every single residential home in Ireland. These data centres are operating 365 days a year, basically. The demand is completely inflexible, so when the wind stops blowing, that baseload does not end up dropping. Instead, we are forced to fire up the gas generators - diesel has, which is also a fossil fuel and has cost implications, has been referenced as well - to keep the data centre servers cool. Under the market rules, the gas does not just price electricity for the tech giants. Rather, it prices electricity for the family trying to heat their home in Clondalkin, Saggart, Rathcoole, Lucan, Adamstown, Brittas, Palmerstown or elsewhere throughout the country. Data centre demand has inflated wholesale electricity prices by up to 8.5%, maybe more, which has put hundreds of euro in extra costs on the average household in recent years as part of a rise in energy and household prices.

We cannot look at data centre policy on its own and energy policy separately. They are together. The current trajectory is placing an unfair tax, for want of a better term, on Irish families to subsidise what is still an unsustainable demand on our grid. If the data centres were not there in the first place, a lot more of our supply would be provided by renewables and we would not have the same dependence on gas. We need to review the data centre grid connections. There is already another application in my constituency for a licence to the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. The message has not gone out to these companies yet,

and I do not think it is Government policy to say that it is an unwelcome place for data centres. I have mentioned before the brave new future where we could be producing so much excess capacity that we could afford to operate data centres and be the data centre hub of Europe as one of the major energy producers. There is huge revenue potential, irrespective of the fairly minuscule job creation element associated with them.

As of now, we are going to have to work within Europe to reform the marginal pricing system that is penalising consumers for the corporate energy demands of multinationals. It is penalising the producers of renewable energy, basically. The figures are staggering. When a single sector consumes nearly a quarter of our national electricity and ordinary families face a crushing cost-of-living crisis, it beggars belief. I am kind of lost for words in terms of how to put it, but if you ask an ordinary constituent whether they feel they have been fleeced by data centres, they would say, "Absolutely". They feel they are not getting the support. The Government supports for electricity pricing over the last couple of years were very welcome. The current fuel allowances are very welcome. One half of me says that I do not like subsidising fossil fuels to keep cars and buses going. Another part of me acknowledges that some of the electricity produced is from fossil fuel as well. We need to reduce our dependence on these supplies and reduce our carbon emissions. When you look at what is actually impacting on people in their bottom pocket, you have to take a two-pronged approach. Even if we need to borrow strategically to create that energy self-sufficiency, it will benefit us in the medium term.

I have a couple of queries about the specific mechanisms in this motion in terms of legal hurdles, which give the Government an excuse to do nothing. From the research I have done, a legislative ban would violate Article 49 of the EU treaty on the freedom of establishment. That would leave the State vulnerable to court action and multibillion euro damages claims. This electricity levy to raise the €500 would also violate EU Regulation 2019/943 on non-discriminatory grid access. In terms of ring-fencing money directly for a household credit, that would clash with Article 11 in our own Constitution in terms of where taxes are collected and how they are distributed. However, that does not mean that the sentiment of this motion is not 100% right. We have to find a work-around so that we do not have legalese blocking Government action.

To achieve the goals through legally enforceable pathways, there might be a couple of other approaches, such as legally codifying the strictest possible version of the CRU's large energy users policy and mandating that no data centre can connect to the grid unless it has its own off-grid supply of battery storage and is relying 100% on renewables. Personally, I do not think any new data centre should be built for the next ten years until we get to a point where we are more comfortable in our energy generation. We could still levy some corporation tax off these companies, as it stands, to make sure that Irish families get some sort of a subsidy.

We are at a critical juncture in terms of our energy self-sufficiency and our potential. What would get rid of our dependence on gas as the baseline? If we put the investment in, mass battery storage would be one element to store all the daytime wind, solar, tidal and wave, which we are not even properly investing in, and replace the gas plants during evening peaks. The creation of new interconnectors would create further links to France and the UK.

If we have to import cheap nuclear or solar power from Spain when the domestic wind is low, so be it. Until we get to the point where we are producing three or four times our actual

needs, it will be a *quid pro quo* and we will benefit from that. That means we have to overbuild our own capacity for wind as well as for tidal and wave so that the grid is always renewable no matter what. Even on low-wind days when we are taking the solar from Spain, the pricing will be fixed in such a way that it is not dependent on fossils to set it. We could look at fixed-price contracts to have steady lower rates of renewable developers for decades. That could be done at EU level, bypassing the market price on a day-to-day basis for fossil fuels.

While it would be more expensive to implement now, green hydrogen is also a solution. Once you get to the point where you have built your hydrogen infrastructure and it is produced from excess renewables then the hydrogen can also replace gas to make sure we do not have any kind of winter blackouts. I am foreseeing that will be a possible solution for the 2030s and as we move into the 2040s, if we put the investment in. As Deputy Heneghan has so eloquently said so often, we have to get the grid right and allow the private generators and home generators to access and share the energy and have a more sustainable individual, local grid as well as having one big national one that is upscaled for renewable generation off the west coast which is not the case now. If we put in all that work, which will cost tens of billions, that will reap rewards. We will be the energy Arabs of Europe in the 2040s at a time when other countries will need access to that energy, not only for heating and transport but also for cooling depending on how the climate change situation goes. It will all be renewable and will have lowered our carbon emissions to virtually nothing. We have the potential if we have the vision.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank an Teachta Gogarty for describing me as eloquent. I thank People Before Profit for bringing this issue before the Dáil. Electricity and electricity affordability is probably my favourite topic to discuss. I studied engineering in DCU for five years and my thesis was on waste heat utilisation from data centres. Sometimes I hear people in this House speaking about data centres and the water they use. They are not looking at the statistics. I am not defending that they do use a lot of water but I note the recent Uisce Éireann report gave a figure of 0.3%. A lot of that water is in-house. With my politics, I am always talking about the current problem we face and what solutions we can bring. In the case of data centres, and this is already being done in Tallaght, we can use waste heat from data centres for a district heating system using a central pump to supply heat at a reduced cost to nearby buildings. I would love to see that being done at a faster rate. I commend everyone at district heating Ireland on the work they are doing.

I support 100% the parts of the motion on electricity affordability especially those referring to disabled people, those with long-term illnesses and carers. In relation to protecting jobs, the next budget needs to support businesses in retrofitting, transitioning and installing renewables. This is particularly needed for SMEs and local businesses as rising energy costs have affected a lot of businesses. I will continue to push for this.

For households, electricity is often essential for medical equipment. That equipment cannot simply be switched off and is often life-saving. However, I will not support the motion. It is not that I do not share the concerns about households but I do not support the motion's call for a blanket ban on new data centres. I am not persuaded that the proposed levy provides a sound basis for recurring household support but am reminded of the old saying: "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach him how to fish, feed him for life". Rather than provide a once-off €500 electricity credit, for the same price you could provide nearly every household with a plug-in solar system. In conjunction with a battery, that would have a ten-year lifespan and

would constantly reduce a household's energy bill. This would be in circuit, built in. I agree hardship does not require us to agree on this, but while what is outlined in the motion and the €500 credit would provide immediate relief, what we should do is invest in all reliefs for what will come in the future.

We need immediate protection and also lasting change. That is what a plug-in solar system, investment in batteries and the grid and decentralising our grid, and investing in green hydrogen, as Deputy Gogarty said, would do. Ireland is in a unique position because of our seabed and the potential of ORE. If another country such as Germany, which was mentioned here multiple times, had the potential we have it would seize it. From looking at records, I understand we had a lot of plans for our ORE. Sadly, the crash occurred and many of those fell through. We did have the only successful sale of an ORE system in the EU last year off the coast.

I do not agree with a current one-off payment. I would like to see multiple payments for plug-in solar, batteries and smarter grids. We could give a €400 electrical readiness credit towards assessments. I do not want that to be used as a gazumping method by electricians as we have seen with BER ratings and solar installations. I am thinking of a €400 electrical readiness credit by an electrical contractor so that they could make changes to protective devices in the fuse-box for a plug-in solar system, or maybe change one breaker to make every house compatible or make apartment buildings compatible. We might change the laws to make it compulsory that every single apartment dwelling be allowed to use plug-in solar or have solar systems on the rooftops. If we do not allow people who are renting to have access to renewable energy that is not a fair society. We can see what Germany has done very successfully with plug-in solar systems. There were witnesses on this before the climate and energy committee before recess. If we are going to do a pilot scheme of these systems, low-income households should have priority as well as elderly people and those with a disability and there should be a workable arrangement for renters.

There needs to be proper discussion of battery storage in the House. Before recess, I invited Energy Storage Ireland to speak in the audiovisual room. We had a great discussion on the potential of batteries to act as storage systems for the curtailment and dispatch down that we see constantly. That needs to be addressed. A panel can generate electricity when the sun shines and a wind turbine when the wind blows but a battery can help a household to use that electricity when it is needed. If used smartly batteries can be used when the cost is higher. If they are used as needed, smartly and with new systems being used with these batteries, it can really help people who are struggling.

The headline warnings I saw recently regarding electricity underline how solar export payments need a clearer policy. If people have invested thousands of euro in solar systems in the belief that they will be able to sell back to the grid at a certain price, but other EU countries are warning that the price for selling it back to the grid will be reduced, that is something our Government needs to look at now. Those reports have already been brought to the climate and energy committee and I look forward to discussing them with my colleagues.

I have already brought forward a Bill on data centres and what I would like to see being done at a faster rate. If data centres or any large energy user, LEU, across the country had an easier route to use solar, renewables or hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, to supply on-site

generation at an easier rate, it would be very beneficial for them and that would in turn benefit the Irish public.

It will not make sense to anyone who is struggling at the moment to hear about solar farms or wind farms waiting months for a connection. The CRU needs to examine this. It also needs to examine the tariffs so that they reflect the value of exported electricity and where customers can benefit from choosing their input and export providers separately like in any market.

I spoke to professors in DCU and UCD during the week, and this needs to be done.

I refer to data centres, the Government-commissioned study and the jobs associated with construction that have been referred to. Some of my friends work in that industry, including in the supply chain of development, construction and the wider spending effects. Some of those jobs in data centres are not permanent but they do represent a significant economic activity.

Ireland's wider multinational economy has supported this and continues to do so, but not every single project is justified. Looking at the programme for Government, one of the things I was very happy to have helped negotiate was that data centres should be encouraged to use renewable energy. I favour and will continue to favour the use of renewable energy. I do not think a blanket ban can distinguish between projects on that basis. Likewise, as regards the 20% levy, while a levy should be examined, this one should not immediately be examined without a discussion that ultimately speaks to investment and the tax revenue of this country.

I will speak about my electricity regulation Bill for the last minute I have. I believe that it will help connect additional renewable energy to the nearby demand, not only for data centres but also for energy sharing for a school that has solar panels and in the summer needs to share that energy that it is not using with a nearby nursing home or GAA club. We have one DSO. We need multiple DSOs, like other countries, because an energy monopoly is not good. I welcome the Government's emphasis on permanent supports; now I want delivery. Those proposals need eventually to face measurable results. I favour the immediate help and I hope that in the coming months we see plug-in solar rolled out, like the UK Government did on 27 August. Also, I would like clarity from the Department on whether, if someone is to order a plug-in solar system and plug it in now, that makes them a criminal for wanting to reduce their electricity bills.

I commend and welcome the discussion on the motion. I always love to debate energy in this House.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Heneghan and the many other Deputies across the House for their contribution to this debate and for the welcome opportunity, through the motion put forward by Deputy Boyd Barrett, to discuss the pressures households are facing as a result of very high energy costs.

The Government is deeply aware of and concerned about the pressures placed on households and businesses by high energy costs. Providing supports to alleviate this pressure has been and will continue to be a priority. The Government is taking action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy and has been proactive in introducing support measures on fuel costs and supports for the transport, farming and fisheries sectors. This is in addition to the range of measures in budget 2026 aiming to help households with energy costs,

which included extending the reduced VAT rate on gas and electricity, enhanced social protection payments and record funding for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland retrofit schemes. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, earlier outlined the significant funding made available for retrofit schemes and the increased number of applications. The benefit of even simple upgrades like adding insulation, cavity wall or external wall insulation, cannot be dismissed. It can improve the warmth and comfort of the home while reducing energy costs.

The Minister has engaged with energy suppliers and the energy regulator to ensure that consumers, particularly vulnerable customers, are protected. The CRU has a wide range of protections in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills. Each year, it carries out a review on the effectiveness of customer protection measures over the past winter as well as deciding the measures to be retained for the forthcoming winter. Some of the key measures that remained in place over recent years included a disconnection moratorium, reduced debt repayments and discounted tariffs for customers on financial hardship meters. The CRU will publish measures in the coming weeks, ahead of this winter. Anyone who is struggling with their bill is strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier. Suppliers will not disconnect customers who engage.

It is also important to note that switching supplier or plan could save the average electricity customer hundreds of euro on an annual electricity bill. I strongly encourage consumers to seek out the best prices available.

With regard to high energy prices, there are relevant structural factors. Ireland is import dependent for energy, making it particularly vulnerable to price volatility in the wholesale gas market. Ireland's isolated island location, low levels of interconnection, widely dispersed low-density population and reliance on fossil fuels are also important price determinants.

Energy is central to every social and economic activity in Ireland, but we remain too dependent on imported fossil fuels. The energy crisis caused by the conflict in the Middle East highlights why we must reduce our reliance on imported fossil fuels and develop our own energy through our security and strength. As an island nation with limited fossil fuel reserves, this means developing our own abundant renewable energy resources and deepening our interconnection with trusted European peers. The national energy affordability task force has been established by the Government 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 first report of the task force, published last November, set out measures for consideration in the budget 2026 process. The task force is working intensively on an energy affordability action plan, which will be submitted to the Government in the coming weeks.

Data centres are a critical component of Ireland's economic and digital present and future and a key part of our value proposition for foreign direct investment. Data centres strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic knowledge-intensive regional hub for the ICT sector and support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that supports billions in annual economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and supplier ecosystems. Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. This is our core energy-intensive industry and should be regarded as such. It is evident that future economic opportunities will be underpinned by energy-intensive digitalisation. The Government believes that these opportunities should be capitalised on in a planned and

sustainable manner in line with Ireland's decarbonisation, energy security and affordability objectives.

The Government's large energy user action plan, LEAP, published in January of this year, supports this. It sets out a plan-led approach for very large and energy-intensive investments, which, due to scale and energy consumption, will benefit from co-ordinated national infrastructure planning. LEAP represents a key strategic industrial policy in support of the Government's objective to accelerate renewable deployment, expedite grid investment and streamline planning for the next wave of industrial development.

Alongside LEAP, the CRU large energy user connection policy establishes a pathway for new data centres to seek connection to the electricity system that addresses security-of-supply risks and system constraints and promotes renewable energy targets. Electricity network tariffs are set every year by the CRU to recover the cost of developing, operating and maintaining the electricity grid. They fund a grid that is more resilient to storms and supplies electricity to a growing population, new housing and expanding businesses. Extra-large energy users like data centres have in recent years seen large increases in network costs, with an average increase of 175% compared with a 45% increase for domestic customers between 2020 and 2026. The Government remains committed to delivering a balanced approach to facilitate data centre demand while also ensuring overall energy security and affordability for consumers and businesses.

The Government will continue to actively monitor the current geopolitical situation and the impact on energy markets and remains ready to respond as circumstances evolve. Again, I thank Deputies from across the House for their contributions today. However, I do not accept the motion before the House and present the Government's countermotion in its place.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The debate we are having here is a very important one. It is probably the most important one that is in the Dáil this week for the simple fact that energy, how it is charged for, how it is priced, who has access to it and who generates it will be a key issue as we move forward. By any standard, we are in an extraordinary situation because of the extraordinary number of data centres we have compared with other EU countries - ten times more, on average.

We must take into account that a lot of American states are now resisting the location of data centres in them. Ireland is becoming the favoured home for them and now we have 120. I am not saying that data centres are a bad thing *per se*, but this is a really extraordinary situation, and it is going to become worse. The Government will highlight the jobs, and there are some jobs, but it is a few thousand jobs. It is not the tens of thousands of jobs the Minister is outlining as permanent jobs in these data centres. That is the reality.

If you look at the usage of electricity, almost a quarter of our electricity publicly available on the grid is now going to supply data centres. That is due to rise to over 30% in the coming four to five years. Data centres are using the same amount of electricity as over 2 million households in the State. It is putting huge pressure on the grid and the Government knows that. It is creating pressure for demand and putting huge pressure for investment. The grid is simply not able to take what is there. Who is footing the bill for the upgrade? Householders are shouldering the heaviest burden because they are paying the highest for electricity, almost double what the data centres are paying. They are paying a grid improvement levy as well. A

recent Friends of the Earth report estimates that households forked out an additional €263 from 2021 to 2023 to pay for the additional costs of the load being put on the grid and usage by data centres.

On the costs, we are told by successive Government analyses that creating so-called competition in the electricity market would lower prices. This is what we were told back in the eighties and nineties. We have the competition now, but we have highest prices. We used to have one of the lowest. We had the third or fourth lowest in the European Union. We were almost at the bottom at one stage. Now we are at the top of it. When the ESB was the sole supplier we had the cheapest rate in the EU. The competition worked the opposite way because there is a profit margin. Who has the profit margin? The owners of the large electricity companies have it. I do not have a problem with the ESB because we owned it. However, the facts are the other ones in the so-called market are creaming it off. On average we are paying 38% higher prices than other EU states and the average across Europe. The Government needs to introduce a consumption levy, and it certainly needs to be considered on data centres. They are getting cut-price electricity. They are making large profits. It can be done.

We need to start thinking about low- and middle-income households. Government is fond of talking about people who get up every morning, middle Ireland and everything else. I think middle Ireland are households on less than €75,000 gross. We need to improve the solar panel grants for homes so people can afford them, and grade the cost as income goes down in a household so those with lower incomes get the best benefit or get it free altogether. Certainly, we need to target workers in what Government likes to talk about as the middle-income bracket.

We need to introduce plug-in solar. That can be done. For low-income households in particular, solar is a quick and easy win to reduce the amount of electricity being used. That is a key issue here. Along with reducing the price rate we need to reduce the amount being used. We need to accelerate and increase the number of homes being retrofitted. I will make one point to the Minister of State. I was contacted by the principal of a national school yesterday morning. The school got solar panels in the past two years. It is concerned now by reports that it will not get paid for the electricity it is feeding back into the grid. It is not going to get the credits on that. The Minister of State might take that away for the Government to deal with because a lot of people added solar panels on the basis that it was going to reduce the cost of the amount they were using themselves, and to sustainably generate a bit of electricity. They are selling that to companies, and now the private companies are going to get that for free. The point he is making is that the Government subsidised it and householders paid for it as well. Government and householders paid for it. Is it now going to be fed back into grid for the private companies to receive free of charge and make super profits on it? It is perverse what is going to happen. Government needs to take that into account, particularly the schools situation and that of householders. I ask the Minister of State to take that back to his Government colleagues to get it dealt with because we should not allow that to happen. People put them up in good faith and we should not break that faith with people.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I start by saying this to everybody who is impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, the cost of energy, childcare, the failure of wages to keep pace with the cost of living, inflation, the cost of groceries and by the inequity we see highlighted in this motion and to those who are suffering as a result of the cost-of-living crisis as opposed to those who are profiteering out of it, they should get out on the streets this weekend and demand a

change in this Government's priorities in advance of the budget. Those who are doing that will be assembling at the Garden of Remembrance at 1 o'clock in the Affordable Ireland demonstration. The reason they should do it is because the Government, despite the fact that it has a three and a half page amendment in response to our motion explaining why it is not going to accept our motion, fails to answer or address in any serious way, or at all, the central point of the motion. Why is it that data centres owned by some of the richest people in the world, making extraordinary profits, are paying half the rate per unit of electricity as is being paid by ordinary working people and householders who are being hammered with the cost of living? How could that be, and why is the Government going to maintain that *status quo*? That in effect means those who are struggling to pay their energy bills are subsidising the data centres whose owners are making obscene profits while those data centres are directly contributing to the inability of households to pay their bills.

We now have a credible estimate that 8.5% of your electricity bill is as a result of data centres hoovering up the electricity and making you pay more while they pay half the rate. One could not make it up, but of course it speaks to something wider in this country. There is no cost-of-living crisis for the big corporations, the multinationals and speculators and the super-rich. They are profiting from the cost-of-living misery that ordinary people are suffering and the Government is maintaining this *status quo*. Even if it has dire consequences for the environment and the economic well-being of ordinary people, it is determined to maintain that unjust *status quo*.

If the plight of people struggling with the cost of living does not move this Government, it should maybe consider what newspapers like the *Financial Times* are saying because all of this is infrastructure for AI. The *Financial Times* is now saying that the entire American economy is one big gamble on AI, and we are now being told by the AI tech bros that it could destroy humanity. By the way, that is scaremongering at one level, but anybody seriously looking at it knows it is because the AI bubble may be about to burst and they are looking for a bailout. Yet again, they are looking for a bailout so that ordinary people will pay the bill. Our economy, more than any other, is a big gamble on AI and the tech bros. That is a very dangerous thing for the future of our economy and ordinary people are again picking up the bill. It is obvious the Government is not listening and is committed to putting the tech bros and billionaires before the needs of ordinary people and that is why we need to get out on the streets this weekend, and why the workers balloting for strike action are absolutely right to do so.

7 o'clock

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): 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 George Lawlor - To discuss the funding of men's sheds.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss wait times for operations at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss lack of resources and staffing issues at Cork University Hospital.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly, Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy - To discuss proposed increases to public transport fares.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for improvements to the Dublin to Rosslare rail line.

Deputy David Cullinane - To discuss staffing shortages at Waterford South City CDNT.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the high cost of mandatory digital devices for children attending school.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need for modular accommodation at a school in County Meath.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss online safety and the regulation of social media platforms.

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

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the recommendations of the report of the interdepartmental working group into the periodic payment orders indexation rate.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the new school building at Gaelcholáiste Reachrann, Dublin 13.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the difficulty in obtaining an involuntary committal for mental health services.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy, Albert Dolan, Marie Sherlock, Sinéad Gibney and Louis O'Hara have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Public Transport

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This Topical Issue is about the fare hikes - or the unfair hikes, as we might call them. The people who live in my constituency already had their fares jacked up. Those who get the train from Balbriggan or Skerries were taken out of the Dublin commuter zone and had their fares increased by almost €100. That was only last year. We now have a situation whereby they will be asked to pay more. They are not getting any extra services; not an additional carriage will be added. The Government was very clear about that. They will get nothing extra but will pay more for the joy of squashing onto overcrowded trains and standing at the side of the road while ghost buses do not turn up. It is not fair. Added to that,

we had the NTA at the committee this morning speaking to all the Government backbenchers who, God love them, are outraged at this but prepared to do absolutely nothing about it. The NTA confirmed this will not be for additional services. The Taoiseach was quite wrong when he told me it would be for additional services. The NTA was clear there will not be additional services and that the knock-on effect of this will be fewer people getting public transport. The Government does not give people an opportunity to get public transport unless it invests in it. It is not investing in it; it is just charging people more. It is a political decision, not a decision of the NTA. The Government can reverse it and it should.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People are struggling with the cost of living, including the cost of getting in and out of work and of transport generally, and we need to increase the number of people using public transport for climate reasons. The Government's response is to increase fares to make the cost-of-living situation worse for people and to reduce the number of people using public transport. The first point is self-evident: the 15% increase is a significant hit for people who use public transport, particularly working people who use it day in, day out. We now have it confirmed by the NTA - which is absolutely extraordinary - that it took this decision knowing it would reduce the number of people using the public transport system, when everybody is supposed to be committed to increasing the use of public transport to reduce congestion and to assist with climate action. How can the Minister of State justify that? It is beyond belief. It must be that the Government does not want people to use public transport.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Tánaiste told us we would have a budget for people who get up early in the morning to go to work but not if they get up early in the morning and go out to get a bus, Luas or train. The Government is saying those people will pay more than an extra €100 per year for the privilege of being on public transport that is inadequate and overcrowded. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, they are expected to fork out over €100 more per year. The NTA acknowledges fewer people will use public transport as a result. They will still have to go to work, college and so on. How will they get there? The Government is pushing people out of public transport and into cars in the middle of a climate crisis, which is incredible. This is 100% a political choice. A different political choice is possible. The cost of undoing this and not going ahead is €70 million. In the previous budget, the Government gave over €300 million in a special tax break to Google, about €400 million in a VAT cut to apartment developers and about €700 million to the fast food giants. To reverse this cut and go in the right direction, we should reduce fares and move towards free public transport, which is what we need. People are protesting. They were outside the Dáil today at 6 p.m. They will be on the streets again on Saturday at 1 p.m. in Parnell Square to build more and more pressure on the Government to reverse this hike.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputies for submitting this Topical Issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien.

The Minister has responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport, but neither he nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, working with the public transport operators, who deliver the services and

have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. The NTA also has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under public service obligation, PSO, contracts. In its capacity as fare regulator, the NTA under its responsibilities within the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 made the decision to publish a new fares determination on 3 September 2026, with the revised fares taking effect from January 2027. This is a critical step in standardisation of the national fares structure and in line with the national fares strategy that was published in 2023 with the key objective of the strategy providing more equitable and consistent structure for all PSO services.

Since 2022, we have seen inflation of almost 21%, which has driven up the cost of operating subsidised public transport services with fuel, vehicle maintenance and staff costs. In the same period, public transport fares have decreased through various measures such as the 20% cost-of-living discount, the young adult card discount of 50% and the extension of free travel to children under the age of nine. This has widened the gap between what it costs to run services and the revenue fares bring in. All the while, the NTA is seeking to continue with a significant expansion and enhancement of services. There is a requirement to strike the right balance in public transport fares to enable further enhancements to the public transport network in the coming years, offer the most competitive fares to younger and student passengers and ensure value for money of the PSO subsidy to society.

Fare revenue covers approximately 38% of the cost of operating PSO services nationally, compared to a 44% European average, with the remaining costs funded by the Exchequer. While 2026 saw a substantial increase in Exchequer funding, continued inflationary pressures have increased the cost of operating public transport services, which has limited the NTA's ability to improve services or introduce new services to the Transport for Ireland network as part of wider capital investment under the national development plan. Ireland has maintained an effective eight-year fare freeze alongside targeted affordability measures, including the young adult card, free travel for children up to nine, and the 90-minute fare. These measures compare favourably with international practice and will continue to provide substantial support to passengers in 2027.

The adjustments to fares are required to help offset the cost increases of recent years, improve fare revenue recovery and ensure the sustainability of the PSO funding. It is important to note that every euro raised through fares goes directly back into the network, supporting better reliability, frequency and capacity and the continued roll-out of BusConnects, Connecting Ireland and DART+. I have no doubt the Deputies will understand that maintaining affordable fares must be balanced with ensuring a financially sustainable transport system capable of funding service improvements, network expansion and fleet investment.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is very brave of the Minister of State to compare us to Europe. If he wants to go down that road, it will be a shame on him and his Government - let us be honest. He said he is maintaining affordable fares. Of course he is not; he is increasing the fares. He also tells us there will be significant expansion and enhancement of services but it has been confirmed that these unfair fare hikes will just tread water. It will be the *status quo*. They are not for new services, so my constituents will pay more again this year for the pleasure and the privilege of being on overcrowded trains or standing on the side of the road waiting for buses that do not turn up.

This is nothing short of a disgrace and it will be resisted. We have time between now and when the fares are due to go up. This will be resisted.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Of course we need to dramatically increase the investment in public transport. We are more than in favour of this. The absence or inadequacy of public transport in many parts of the country, and particularly in rural Ireland, is an absolute disgrace. The idea it should be paid for by hiking up fares for people struggling with a cost-of-living crisis in a way that the NTA itself says will deter people from using public transport is unbelievable. It has admitted that for every 10% increase, 3% fewer people will use public transport. The Government is driving them out of public transport and into cars. How can it possibly justify this?

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Government is, in a way, in an envious position. It has the capacity, in terms of a massive budget surplus, to protect people from the cost-of-living crisis. It is probably a position that governments across the world would like to be in. The Government can protect people from the cost-of-living crisis but instead chooses to impose extra costs on people. It is quite incredible. It is a targeted attack on those people who use public transport. It makes no sense from the point of view of the cost-of-living crisis as it is going to make it worse and it makes no sense from the point of view of the climate crisis as it will make it worse. The main thing I would say is pressurise, pressurise, pressurise. Put pressure on those backbench TDs who tell you that they agree with you, and that they will raise it with their Government colleagues, to show it in terms of the position they will take on the budget if the Government does not provide the money.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the three Deputies for their contributions and for raising this Topical Issue. I assure them that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department of Transport secured €940 million of funding for public service obligation and TFI Local Link services. This is a significant 43% uplift, an increase from €658.4 million in 2025. As I said earlier, Ireland's package of fare measures compares very favourably with many international peers. The challenge is to balance affordability for passengers with the long-term financial sustainability needed to expand and improve public transport services. The NTA has identified approximately 140 new service initiatives and capacity enhancements as part of its 2027 budget submission to the Department of Transport. Subject to the outcome of the annual Estimates process, this represents the biggest in-year and year-on-year enhancement of services for many years. The changes also represent an important step towards standardising fares nationwide in line with the national fares strategy published in 2023.

The Government and the Department of Transport, in partnership with the NTA and operators, remain fully committed to delivering a public transport system that is reliable, accessible, affordable, and capable of meeting the growing needs of communities across the country. It is, therefore, essential that the public transport system remains well funded and responsive to passenger needs and adequate fare revenue is critical to support this. Again, I thank the three Deputies for raising this matter.

Agriculture Schemes

Deputy Albert Dolan: I want to raise the issue of generational renewal and, specifically, the need for a farm succession scheme. We have been talking about the age profile of Irish farming for many years but the figures tell us that we simply have not shifted the dial. Only around 4.3% of Irish farm holders are under the age of 35 while almost 38% are over 65. This should be a concern to all of us who want to see the future of the farm family succeed.

Macra na Feirme, which represents more than 16,000 young farmers and young rural people throughout the country, has consistently highlighted this issue. Its straightforward message is that young people want to farm but access to land, finance and timely succession can remain a major barrier. In the past we have tried different approaches. We had installation aid for young farmers and we had the early retirement scheme. More recently we introduced farm succession partnerships, which provide a tax credit of up to €25,000 over five years. We have other supports, such as the young farmer scheme, complementary income support for young farmers, the national reserve and enhanced TAMS. In the past few years we have had the succession planning advice grant, which came in during Deputy McConalogue's time as Minister for agriculture. These are all valuable supports but the age profiles tell us they have not been enough collectively.

The commission on generational renewal has given us a substantial body of work and 31 recommendations. Among the proposals are the establishment of a €25,000 payment to establish a young farmer and a generational renewal payment of up to €25,000 for an older farmer transferring the farm. I appreciate that a comprehensive farm succession scheme may not be achievable in this budget but could a commitment be given that we will now design a proper farm succession scheme? We can learn from the shortcomings of the other retirement schemes and establish a clear pathway towards implementation. Ultimately the incentive has to be strong enough to encourage succession not when a farmer reaches 75 or 80 years of age but when the next generation is young enough to invest, develop the family farm and build a future on it.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Dolan for raising this very important issue and for his advocacy on behalf of the agricultural sector and young farmers in particular. The challenge of generational renewal in farming is widely recognised at national and EU levels. The programme for Government prioritises supporting intergenerational farm succession. Food Vision 2030, our shared strategy for the agrifood sector, states that generational renewal in farming is critically important to ensure the future viability and social sustainability of the Irish agrifood sector and of rural Ireland. This is a clear and fundamental point on which we all agree.

There are a number of supports for generational renewal available to farmers under Ireland's CAP strategic plan, which runs until 2027. These supports are complemented by a suite of strong national taxation measures, access to finance supports, and advisory, education and training supports. It is important that we have skilled, innovative young farmers coming into the sector to secure a viable and sustainable future for farming in the country. We recognise the need to consider whether existing supports are having the desired effect and how supports might best be configured for the future.

Of course farm succession is a complex issue and there are many factors that impact farmers' decisions. This is why the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming was established towards the end of my term as Minister. The commission adopted an objective, evidence-based approach to examining all the factors involved and engaged closely with stakeholders. It produced a thorough analysis and made 31 recommendations across a wide range of areas, including CAP supports, pensions, taxation, access to finance, access to land, collaborative arrangements, advisory services, education and training, gender balance and the overall attractiveness of the sector. This work will ensure that Ireland has a well-researched basis to make optimal use of the policy tools available to encourage young people, who are the lifeblood of farming, into the sector. It ensures we have a comprehensive, well-considered foundation for future policy on generational renewal.

An implementation group in the Department of agriculture has considered the recommendations and progress is being monitored on an ongoing basis. Some of the recommendations may be commenced in the short term but some will be more medium term. The current CAP is fully programmed. Recommendations around CAP supports will have to be considered in the context of the next round, post 2027. This is a point Deputy Dolan made in his contribution. Some recommendations on taxation have already been implemented and more are being examined in the context of the next budget. In relation to access to finance, we have to work with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and liaise with finance providers on the funding requirements of young farmers. The Minister for agriculture is consulting the Minister for Social Protection on the recommendations around pensions. Discussions with Teagasc are ongoing regarding education and training and advisory services recommendations. The gender balance recommendation is being progressed through the Department's women in agriculture initiatives.

The EU Vision for Agriculture and Food identified generational renewal as a priority and this has been reflected in the proposals for a post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy.

I know that is the key focus of Deputy Dolan in terms of wanting to make real progress here. The European Commission has also presented its strategy for generational renewal in agriculture. The increased focus on generational renewal at EU level is, of course, welcome and the EU strategy comes to many of the same conclusions as our own commission.

Regarding any formal farm succession scheme, the Department and the Minister are engaging with the ten recommendations in the report around CAP supports. These will need to be considered in the context of the new round post 2027, including the new CAP regulation and the new budget, and in stakeholder consultations. However, generational renewal should not only be looked at through the lens of CAP supports. It is clear that an holistic approach is required. As noted by the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming, this is an issue for all agrifood stakeholders to address in order to support the environmental, social and economic sustainability of farming and enhance its image as a career.

Deputy Albert Dolan: What really shocked me when I met Macra na Feirme was seeing that the numbers backed up what we were seeing on the ground. It really is important that we encourage young people to stick with the family farm. Part of that is that they need to see a future in it so that they know they will be able to take it over and invest in it for the future.

What I am proposing here cannot simply be viewed as a retirement scheme for older farmers. It must be designed as a succession scheme for the entire farm family.

I thank the Minister of State for the work he did in setting up that commission on generational renewal, because that was important. To have objective, evidence-based recommendations now allows the Department a chance to chart a pathway forward. I want to see that pathway coming.

It is important to recognise that an older farmer cannot be made to feel that the State is effectively telling them to stop farming. Farming is their livelihood, but it is also their identity, their home and often a place where they have worked for generations. At the same time, we cannot have a situation where a son or daughter is seeking to take over the family farm, but they might be 35, 40 or 45 years old before they get the opportunity to take real control of the farm business. This is why I believe the commission's approach is worth pursuing. Both sides of the transfer should be provided. Meaningful establishment capital must be provided to the young farmer taking over and financial security must be provided to the farmer transferring the holding. In principle, we already recognise this by virtue of that tax credit of €25,000 over the course of five years, but we need to go further.

We should remember what happens when succession occurs earlier. A young farmer has a longer investment horizon. They can borrow and invest, improve the family holding and adopt new technology and everything that goes with it. I understand that this might not be possible in this year's budget, but it is something the Government should pursue and look at further.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: I thank Deputy Dolan again for taking up the mantle in relation to this important issue, and for trying to drive it on and achieve real progress. It is a crucial issue for maximising the potential of Irish agriculture and food production on this island, and it will be driven by young people coming into the sector. That is why I set up the commission for generational renewal just about two years ago. The good work done by the many good people who were on that commission, under the chairpersonship of Aidan O'Driscoll, was foundational and important in distilling what the challenges were around generational renewal and in putting in place that evidential and policy platform to consider how we can best go forward in attracting young people into agriculture.

Many supports are already available, and we all acknowledge they need to be built on. The supports currently in place amounted to €428 million in 2024, which is significant, but we need to build on that further. I will quote Aidan O'Driscoll, who was the chair of the commission on generational renewal, in terms of his key perspective on the report and the issue. He said:

Ultimately, the really important decisions on this issue will be made around the kitchen tables in farmhouses throughout this country. The rather sterile term “generational renewal” translates on the ground into intensely personal and family decisions, which many farm families find difficult. This crucial context is also reflected in this report and addressed in our recommendations.

Those are important matters to consider as well, but the key bottom line is that agriculture has to be a sustainable livelihood for people. It is a really exciting time for Irish agriculture and so many wonderful things are happening in it in terms of the sustainability journey and that great capacity through new learning and technology and new ways of working with the

environment to be really productive from a food-producing point of view, while at the same time nurturing and protecting the environment around us. That can only be driven forward by young people, and I thank Deputy Dolan for the work he is doing in seeking to drive it forward and deliver the tools and supports within the next CAP, which will see more and more young people take up that career.

Personal Injury Claims

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to periodic payment orders, PPOs, specifically a long-standing commitment by the Minister for justice to implement legislation to effectively make periodic payment orders a reality for families across the country. At the moment, they are not. Every year, the State Claims Agency has to settle hundreds of medical negligence cases. A small number of those cases involve families and individuals who have catastrophic injuries, either at birth or as a consequence of a procedure that has gone very badly wrong.

Essentially, there are two options when a plaintiff is seeking compensation for those injuries. It is either in the form of a lump sum or of a periodic payment order. I think most sensible people would recognise that, in the context of a lump sum to provide for somebody's care until the end of their days, particularly for people who need 24-hour care, it is very hard to estimate how long the person is going to live and the nature of the care they will need in five, ten or 20 years. Periodic payments orders, then, are the answer, but we need to get the formula right.

Consideration of the issue goes back to 2010, which is almost two decades ago. A High Court working group made a recommendation in that year for the establishment of periodic payment orders instead of lump sums. In 2017, that legislation was passed under the civil liability Act. It was groundbreaking because it linked the payment, which was to be updated every number of years, to the harmonised index of consumer prices, HICP.

In 2019, though, there was a High Court case. The court effectively said the periodic payment orders were a dead letter because of the construction of how they were calculated. Effectively, families and individuals were running out of money because the actual cost of providing for the individual far exceeded the rate of inflation. A review was promised. There was an interdepartmental working group. It has reported and stipulated that primary legislation is needed to facilitate the Minister for justice bringing forward a change in secondary legislation. That has happened.

The critical part of it, though, is that the Minister for justice needs to bring forward secondary legislation so that periodic payment orders are based not only on the HICP but also on the annual rate of change in health workers' earnings. That is the critical aspect. I do not understand why the Government will not act on this. There are families out there like that of Margaret Best. Her son, Kenneth, was supposed to live only until he was 45. He is now 57. She ran out of money many years ago. There is also the family of Luke Miggins, who are heading into their sixth interim settlement. It is completely unacceptable that they had to go back to court every few years and arrange for a large number of assessments to take place, at a cost to the State, to get an updated payment for the care of their son. There has to be a better way.

We know what that better way is, and it is in the gift of the Minister for justice. When I asked the question last November, we were told that the secondary legislation was imminent,

but we are nine months on and we are yet to see it. When will we see the necessary, vital legislative change to allow families to get on with their lives and caring for their loved ones, adult or child, with catastrophic injuries?

Deputy Charlie McConologue: I thank Deputy Sherlock very much for raising this very important issue. PPOs, as the Deputy set out very clearly, are an alternative to lump sum awards as a method of paying compensation to catastrophically injured people.

Instead of receiving compensation in one tranche, as the Deputy laid out, a payment is made annually on an agreed date. The annual payment amount is calculated to meet the cost of permanent and long-term care and treatment. An indexation rate is applied to the annual payment amount to ensure the amount keeps pace with inflation.

Part 3 of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 contains amendments to the Civil Liability Act 1961, which provide that indexation of periodic payment orders will no longer be fixed solely on the consumer price index. Instead, the indexation rate for periodic payment orders will be set by regulations made by the Minister for justice with the consent of the Minister for Finance.

The amendments arise from a High Court decision on the existing indexation rate, which found that it was not an appropriate index for use with periodic payment orders, PPOs. The amendments proposed will allow greater flexibility in the setting of the indexation rate and set out the general rule that a periodic payment order will be adjusted on an annual basis by reference to an index specified under the section.

In 2024, the then Minister for justice published two reports relating to compensation payments in personal injury cases. A working group on the indexation rate for periodic payment orders was established to advise on an appropriate index following a High Court determination that the index used in primary legislation was unworkable. Its report recommended that the PPO indexation rate should be based on a combination of the harmonised index of consumer prices and the annual rate of change in nominal hourly health earnings. The amount of a yearly periodic payment payable should be based on a periodic payment order indexation rate comprising 80% of average annual rate of change in nominal hourly health earnings added to 20% of the harmonised index of consumer prices. Where a court makes a lump sum award in a personal injury case, it uses the discount rate to determine the size of the award necessary to compensate a person for future losses. The rate reflects what an award recipient would likely receive in return if the award amount were invested.

Separately, an independent expert working group was set up to advise on an appropriate discount rate for use in catastrophic injury cases. Its report recommended that the discount rate should remain unchanged from the rate set by the High Court in 2014 and subsequently confirmed by the Court of Appeal and plaintiffs in catastrophic injury cases should continue to be considered as having a risk-averse profile. It also recommended that an expert group should meet at a maximum of every three years to reassess the discount rate and that a trigger mechanism should be introduced to enable a review of the discount rate if there is a marked change in economic circumstances or if the rate is successfully challenged in court.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I am conscious the Minister of State relaying the reply on behalf of the Minister for justice. Any of us not living in a situation where a family member has a catastrophic injury have no real insight but from the families I have met and families I am aware of, the stress and burden they have to endure day in, day out, and the worry of not being able to provide that care are enormous. The toll it takes on families is enormous and then they are put through this arduous process every few years for an interim care order. To be frank, the reply from the Department of justice does not answer my question. My question is, when will the secondary legislation be passed?

I take a particular interest in the very large resources spent by our State is spent. It is not just about what is spent but how it is spent. The State Claims Agency spent over €109 million last year on legal fees for itself and plaintiffs. It spent about €115 million the year before. That is an enormous amount of money. That the State Claims Agency has to agree interim pay orders every few years with these families and spend the State's money doing so is outrageous. The recommendations of these reports have been with the Department of justice for two years. The Minister said last November they were imminent. What is the delay? Why are officials and the Minister not thinking about the impact on these families? Surely it is not rocket science in terms of what needs to be legislated for. It is very clear - it is the HICP and health workers' earnings. We need to see action.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: While the Minister for justice cannot be here in person this evening, I will pass on the key points the Deputy has made and her strong advocacy on this important issue.

As I mentioned, a working group on the indexation rate for periodic payment orders was established to advise on an appropriate index following a High Court determination that the index used in primary legislation was unworkable. As part of a two-stage process, the primary legislation governing PPOs has been amended to allow for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to set the rate by way of secondary legislation, as the Deputy outlined.

The Periodic Payment Orders Indexation Rate - Report of the Inter Departmental Working Group was submitted to the Minister on 26 April 2024. The Minister approved the recommendations shortly afterwards on 21 May 2024. Drafting instructions were issued to the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government on 13 August 2024. Drafting of the regulations is continuing and Department officials are working closely with officials in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government and the State Claims Agency to finalise the regulations. Once this work is completed, the regulations require the consent of the Minister for Finance before they can become operational. That outlines the timeline of where it is at. I take the Deputy's point on the urgency and importance of bringing that to a conclusion to bring a more streamlined and optimal approach in how this important mechanism works. I will feed back Deputy Sherlock's clear work and advocacy on this issue to the Minister, as well as how she addressed it in the Dáil this evening.

Online Safety

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I raise the topic of online safety and the regulation of social media platforms, which is a very topical issue given the EU KIDS Act, which we have been slowly

learning about over the course of this week, as well as the focus on it during Ursula von der Leyen's state of the Union address just yesterday and the online safety conference run by the Minister of State's Department last week.

I will start by talking about what we are trying to make safe and what the harms are. Across my constituency, including Dundrum, Stillorgan, Foxrock and Goatstown, and across the entire country, we are being contacted as representatives by parents who are at their wits' end trying to figure out how to manage this. They are so concerned at the dangers they see. When we design solutions to regulate these tech platforms to mitigate online harms, we have to think of what those harms are to find the right solutions. The first category is mental health concerns. Primary among them is the addictive nature of these products, what it means for all of us and what it is doing to our brains. There are also issues around self-harm being promoted, eating disorders and with the newest tools on the block, chatbots, we see people brought to suicide, essentially being nurtured bit by bit toward suicidal ideation and in some cases actually carrying out the act of suicide because an automated machine advised them this was a good idea.

The second category one might talk about is disinformation. There is polarisation, riots in the streets fomented online, radicalisation in particular of young men and the massive threat to democracy posed by the disinformation that flows online particularly at election times.

The other category we need to capture is scams. Scams are insidious. They are increasing and AI is turbocharging them. They come in the form of romance scams or networking scams where relationships are built and people are drifted towards crypto scams, where they are carved out of their entire wealth and that of those around them in a clinical and almost corporate way. The solutions we come up with need to address these harms. We need to make these products safe. If they are not safe, they should not be on the market in the first place.

I referenced addiction. It is a key part of the business model. The algorithms driving social media and informing what we see on our screens are designed right now - they were not always - to keep our eyes on the screen and they are boosted by the AI technology that underpins them.

Age assurance and bans are one thing but they will not fix everything and there are major issues with them, which can be captured in a few different strands. They are privacy, where we are required to hand over official documentation, and rights, where they essentially block from online participation people who are expected to be cut off, and online is not all bad. They do not work as we have seen in Australia and France, for example, and they leave behind this cesspit of the internet that those of us who are not subject to the ban have to deal with. Therefore, while I welcome the announcements this week and while I hope fervently that the European Union has learned from how poor the ban in Australia has been, its inefficacy, and from the French experience where the courts have now challenged the mechanism of the ban, I have major concerns about how it will wash out, what the details will be and how it will be implemented. As far as I can see so far, those categories of harm will not be addressed by those bans.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Gibney for raising this and for her clear articulation of the dangers and challenges we all have to deal with in how we respond and

protect young people. Online safety, and particularly the protection of young people online, is crucial to all of us and is also a whole-of-government priority.

It is timely that we are discussing this topic, given the developments at EU level which have been moving in recent times, particularly this week with President von der Leyen's address and outline of the European Commission's approach and the publication of the proposal for a new EU regulation, entitled the EU KIDS Act. The proposal addresses child safety online in two main ways. First, it will introduce a graduated approach to access to social media for children. Children under 13 will not have access to social media, with some very limited exceptions for child-friendly services. Children aged between 13 and 15 may have mini accounts, set up by parents or guardians with only age appropriate content and children over 15 may have autonomous accounts. Second, it will introduce new obligations on social media that prohibit design features such as infinite scroll and push notification during sleeping hours. The proposal will also introduce new obligations on more than just social media. It will also apply to online video games, AI companions and chatbots.

Now that the Commission's proposal has been published, the discussions will move to the Council and the European Parliament. As online safety of children and young people is a priority for Ireland's EU Presidency, we will give priority to those negotiations. Ensuring online safety regulation is up to date and fit for purpose means that this will continue to be an evolving area. Moreover, given the breadth of online safety, it requires a variety of approaches.

The European Commission is preparing proposals to amend the audiovisual and media services directive, which are expected to include new measures on content, including harmful content. President von der Leyen also announced yesterday that a proposal for a new digital fairness Act will issue this autumn. This is due to include important new online consumer protections. As with the EU KIDS Act, the Irish Presidency will give priority to the negotiations on these safety proposals as they emerge.

We have also seen developments in the USA, where platforms have settled cases. We are clear that any improvements to child safety that can be made in other jurisdictions must be implemented in the EU, including Ireland, too. Once today's proposals take effect, together with existing regulation, we will have secured that and even gone further.

I thank Deputy Gibney for raising it. This is something we will continue to seek to progress through the remainder of our Presidency. As we said from the outset, the Government's objective is to do this collectively, working at EU level because we believe that is the way to have the most impact on the protection of children and in the implementability of regulations

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State for the response. The first issue I have with it is the focus on age. I raised today the topic of online safety, not online safety for children. I appreciate that, as legislators, we have a particular role to play in protecting people who cannot protect themselves as well as everyone else but if we only talk about blocking children and making things safe for children, we are not addressing online safety, because everyone else still has to deal with it. Let us talk about age assurance and bans. One of the groups in society that has digital literacy challenges that are unique from those of everyone else is older people. At some stage will we see bans for older people? What do we think about that in terms of the right to online participation and so on? The focus on age is wrong because it does not deal with the tools and the addictive nature of the tools. In all the things the Minister

of State listed - and I appreciate the detail and I look forward to the detail coming out - algorithms are not mentioned. Yet, we are blue in the face on this side of the House telling the Government to fix the algorithms because they are the thing that will get closest to the business model.

One of the main issues with the proposals put forward by the EU is privacy. We will all have to hand over official documentation to enforce these bans and I am not assured by the methods people are talking about because people will essentially be handing over official documentation to states, private companies or third parties, all of which involve a raft of privacy issues. I could go on but the main issue I have is that there is corporate capture in Brussels and Dublin, which means all these beautiful shiny rules that are set out - these directives, proposals and ideas - have for years all promised to do the same thing, fix these issues and address online safety. Yet, they are carved out by the time they ever reach the end of the process and then they are simply not enforced.

The Government needs to take on big tech in Dublin and in Europe and we need to actually fix these issues, because nothing I heard gives me the comfort and feeling of safety we need to provide to the people who are calling me every day at their wits' end because of what their children are experiencing online, and what we are all experiencing online.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. I outlined clearly in my initial response the progress we have seen. While we all agree appropriate safeguards and rails are needed given the impact social media can have on, and the dangers it poses to, society generally, a key priority for all of us has to be the protection of young people and vulnerable people, particularly children in relation to what they are experiencing as the first generation and as they grow up. Collectively, at European level, driven by the Irish Presidency of the EU, we have seen progress on that, in the announcements this week which I outlined earlier.

There is no doubt, and as we have all seen, social media and the type of activity we have seen on it is affecting society in terms of behaviours and radicalisation of people. We all have to be open in considering how to address that and how to ensure the space is regulated in a way that serves society well. The Government is open to engaging and discussing that and trying to find an appropriate way forward. Key to that is having debates and discussions, such as the one Deputy Gibney is having today with the points she raised on the floor of the Dáil. We will continue to engage with her and across the Oireachtas on how we can address this important issue.

School Costs

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Back to school costs are having an enormous impact on families. The most recent cost of education survey showed that parents are now paying almost €1,800 per year for a child in primary school and almost €3,000 per year for a child in secondary school. Even more worrying is that the number of parents taking loans to cover these costs has doubled in just one year. Parents are being crippled by the cost of school uniforms, materials and the so-called voluntary contributions, which many parents feel forced to pay and which are used to subsidise the education system because our schools are chronically underfunded.

In recent years, more and more parents have an additional cost on top of this, as many schools now require them to purchase ICT equipment, such as laptops, for their children. During the summer months, many parents contacted me outlining the significant cost they are facing because the school requires them to purchase a laptop for their child or children for the upcoming school year. Parents were in touch with me who had to pay up to €1,000 between the cost of the device and the insurance to go with it.

That has a massive impact on families who have to deal with rising costs right across the board and who are really struggling with the cost of living at the moment. One father with a child doing the leaving certificate told me that he had to pay €1,000 for his child's device. That comes on top of the €6,000 in college fees he will have to pay for his other two children, who are attending university. One mother told me she had to pay €700 for her child's device. The child is going into the leaving certificate. She has another daughter for whom she will have to purchase one in two years. She said that they were made to feel that she would be left out of class work if she did not have the laptop. Another mother told me she had two children in school for whom she had to purchase a laptop. She said that everything has now become very expensive.

Parents are not being given an option to shop around for more affordable models. In many cases, they are put under significant pressure to purchase these devices. The Government's failure to regulate this is a dereliction of its duty. The Government is insisting that devices are not needed and not mandatory but guidance without enforcement does not offer any comfort at all. The resulting growing digital divide risks creating a two-tier education system where a family's income determines whether a child can participate fully in learning. That is completely unacceptable. If the Government is serious about reducing back-to-school costs and about equality of access, it must properly fund schools' digital infrastructure and stop expecting families to bridge that gap. Expecting parents to pay up to €1,000 on top of all of the other back-to-school costs simply will not cut it. I ask the Minister of State to outline how the Government is going to address this problem and ensure that families do not continue to struggle every year as the return to school comes around, particularly in respect of the cost of these digital devices.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this matter. I am answering on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton. At the outset, I will state that there is no requirement for any student to have a personal device in school. On 25 May this year, the Minister for Education and Youth communicated directly with all schools and boards of management to set out the Department's position that there is no requirement for a personal device for junior cycle or the leaving certificate. The Minister requested schools to be cognisant of the view of all parents in relation to the use of digital devices and the associated costs and set out the need for schools to engage with all parents, and not just the parents' association, before deciding on an approach regarding devices.

As the Deputy will no doubt be aware, under the Education Act, the boards of management of schools have responsibility for the day-to-day management of those schools. Decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology in schools is therefore a matter for the board of management of each school in the context of its digital learning planning. Schools, in consultation with all parents, are responsible for decisions on the use of digital technology, including tablet devices, laptops and learning platforms, and how best to manage their

integration into classroom practice, reflective of their own context and requirements. As mentioned, schools have been advised to consult with members of the school community, including parents, when planning for the introduction of digital technologies, including devices, with cost and other implications being fully considered by the boards of management before a decision is made.

Government is keenly aware of the challenges faced by educators and parents in relation to the cost of digital technology, including tablets. The Department continues to work to help support schools and families meet these costs as part of an overall ongoing commitment to reduce financial pressure on families and to ensure students are supported to succeed. To support ICT in schools, €200 million was allocated under the digital strategy for schools, with the most recent tranche of €35 million issuing in January of this year. Schools have flexibility to use their ICT grants to meet local priorities, including infrastructure, maintenance and device provision, within available resources.

The digital strategy for schools to 2027 does not mandate or prescribe the use of any particular devices or technologies in teaching and learning. It is concerned with the deeper embedding of digital technologies in education to develop digital literacy and competency and critical thinking and to enhance collaborative learning. It is not merely about replacing physical textbooks and resources with digital versions accessed via a digital device.

The Department commissioned OECD research on the impact of digital technologies on student learning and this was published in September last year. This research highlights that access to digital devices alone does not guarantee improved learning outcomes and that their successful use depends on thoughtful pedagogical alignment and teacher and student digital competencies.

The Minister will continue to engage with education stakeholders on this matter but it is worth nothing that the ultimate decision on the deployment of technology in schools remains with the school and its board of management. Each school is best placed to determine how best technology can support teaching and learning in its own context.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: We all recognise that digital education has an important role to play but it has to be fair and equitable. The Minister of State mentioned that the Minister has communicated with schools. She wrote a letter to schools about the use of digital devices. That is not good enough because it has not made any meaningful difference. As I said earlier, guidance without enforcement simply has not worked. There needs to be a review of the roll-out of these devices. We need to ensure there is a consistent approach and supports for schools. I do not understand why that has not happened.

Telling schools to avail of the ICT fund is a cop-out because the Government has cut €15 million from ICT grants for schools, with the total down to €35 million. You cannot cut the fund and then tell schools to rely on it to provide these devices. It is completely unfair that the cost is being heaped onto parents. There need to be supports for families who are struggling to pay and an overall review of the roll-out of the devices. The Government should restore the funding for ICT and provide proper support for schools for digital devices so that no child will be disadvantaged because they cannot afford expensive technology. Otherwise, we are going to continue seeing parents being put under pressure and a growing digital divide both between

schools and within schools and classrooms, where some children will have a device and some children will not, with those children being made to feel left out.

These are enormous costs. A sum of €1,000 for a device is not affordable to families. The Government should know that. It should be acting on this. You cannot continue to put this burden on families because families are at breaking point when it comes to rising costs right across the board, particularly when children are going back to school. I ask that the Minister for education and the Government as a whole finally get a handle on this and start to treat it seriously.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Hara. There is real recognition from the Government of the pressures on families at back-to-school time. That is why we put a number of supports in place each year, such as the back-to-school allowance. It is also why the Government engages with boards of management in schools to make sure that those costs are fully considered at school level and are managed. In the Minister's communication to schools and boards of management this year, she emphasised the importance of minimising that cost burden on students and their families where digital devices are used as part of school life. She requested that school authorities have regard to a number of key principles. The guidance also reflects the established departmental approach to the general management of school-related costs, which was set out in Circular 32/2017 and Circular 65/2010. This guidance is intended to support boards of management in making decisions that promote affordability, equity and value for money.

A number of measures are in place to support educators and parents as part of the Department of education's ongoing commitment to reducing financial pressure on families and ensuring that every student is supported. These measures include an instruction from the Department to schools to consult with parents and the school community on ensuring that costs are reasonable for parents and how to avoid costs acting as a barrier. For example, where possible, generic rather than branded items should be specified.

The Deputy raises an important issue. It is one the Government and schools always need to be cognisant of. It is important that we all collectively work together to make sure that the real cost burden families face in relation to school costs is managed as best as possible while ensuring that students have what they need to have the best possible and optimal education. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter today. I will certainly pass his feedback and the key points he has raised on to the Minister for education.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.59 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 22 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.59 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 September 2026.