



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 22 Meán Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 22 September 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Visit of US Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I commence Leaders' Questions, I ask colleagues to join me in offering a warm céad míle fáilte to our guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery from the Arizona Legislature. They are led by Senator Frank Carroll, whom I had the great honour of meeting earlier this year on St. Patrick's Day when I visited Phoenix as part of our St. Patrick's Day celebrations. I welcome all of the rest of the delegation who are in the Gallery. I thank them for being here and they are most welcome.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tá brú ollmhór ar dhaoine mar gheall ar na harduithe móra i bpraghsanna ola tí, peitreal agus díosal. Tá Sinn Féin ag moladh réitithe le dul i ngleic leis seo agus praghsanna a laghdú. Caithfidh an Rialtas iad a chur i bhfeidhm láithreach. Workers, families and businesses are under enormous unsustainable pressure from soaring fuel prices. The price of home heating oil, petrol and diesel has skyrocketed. People simply cannot afford the Government paying lip service to this situation. They need the Government to do its job; they need action and they need it to implement solutions.

Tonight, Sinn Féin has legislation before the Dáil to bring down fuel costs by removing carbon tax. This is the eighth time that we have brought forward this measure and the Government has voted against it on every single occasion. The cost of home heating oil has shot up by hundreds of euro in just the past three weeks. Families are exhausted. They are sick to their back teeth of being fleeced just to heat their homes. A full fill of oil now costs €1,600. How on earth can people be expected to pay those prices? Why on earth would people be expected to pay these prices?

The Government needs to recognise the intense pressure households are under and back our proposal tonight. The Government needs to act to ease the burden of soaring petrol and diesel prices because prices have now topped €2 per litre in many places. In some parts of the country,

motorists are forced to fork out €2.20 for a litre of diesel. Instead of doing its job and moving quickly to get fuel prices down, the Government dithers, delays and drags its heels once again. It tells people to wait. There is no action - there is plenty of kite-flying, mind you, as regards what the Government might do in the budget. As a matter of fact, the Government must have leaked half of the budget already. The one thing it has not done is provide workers, families and businesses with clarity on the relief the Government will bring forward in respect of fuel.

Public frustration is again building. The Government is rerunning the same out-of-touch, go-slow approach that brought so much anger, so much stress and discontent back in the springtime - anger, the Minister will remember, that boiled over into mass protest. The public had to force the Government to listen and act. People should not have to take to the streets again for the Government to do something to get surging fuel prices down. That is the Government's job.

It is time to stop talking about all the things it cannot control and time to act on the things that it can. That means cutting taxes to bring down fuel prices. What we need now is decisive action that puts workers and families first. I am asking the Government to immediately introduce solutions - now, today - that will make a real difference for people. That means implementing our legislation, removing carbon tax from home heating oil and giving households some desperately needed relief. It means providing a further immediate excise cut on petrol and diesel to get their prices down.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank Deputy McDonald for her remarks. As she knows, budget 2027 is being designed and delivered against a significant international backdrop and risk to the Irish economy. In the context of geopolitical uncertainty, we have gone through a significant series of shocks over the last number of months and years. The Government is cognisant of the serious pressures families face when it comes to day-to-day issues when filling their cars with diesel or petrol or buying home heating oil. The budget is taking place in two weeks' time, and this is just political opportunism from the Deputy and her party trying to bring that forward on a two-week basis when she knows negotiations are ongoing.

The central priority for the Government is to help with the cost of living. That will happen through a significant income tax package to reward work, support workers across the economy and give people a break. It will drive affordability across different areas of service provision, including childcare and the cost of disability, and using the social protection package to help those most in need and most pressurised by the increased cost of energy across our economy. Areas like the fuel allowance are under consideration. We have constantly said publicly and in our negotiations that we are keeping the wider taxation of fuel and energy under review so that we are agile and responsive to the needs across our economy.

Let us consider the measures that we have taken thus far. We have taken measures costing in excess of €1 billion in response to the energy shock in 2026, with reductions in excise on a litre of petrol of 27 cent and a litre of diesel of 32 cent. We have extended the fuel allowance. These are all matters for further consideration for the budget in two weeks' time. We are also cognisant of the current price pressure on home heating oil, which is why that is receiving specific consideration in the context of the budget.

It would be better if the Deputy just came forward with constructive and helpful input-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----rather than seeking to politicise everything. How Sinn Féin can gain is the constant direction from the Deputy's party, and how it can exploit different areas and different people across our economy. I look forward to reading Sinn Féin's pre-budget submission, because we know that, while it has a loose attachment to many in the Russian economy, it plays Russian roulette with the Irish economy when it comes to all its pre-budget submissions.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Making a speech and coming up with nothing.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: Sinn Féin wants to cut taxes, massively ramp up expenditure and undermine our economic future. In this budget, we will prioritise, we will target towards those most in need, but we will also protect growth, prosperity and jobs for the Irish economy into the 2030s, ensuring that we continue to build enterprise, strengthen our labour market and give people that hopeful future. That is about protecting investment in infrastructure and housing as well, which is a critical part of budget 2027.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is also working on a broad range of supports when it comes to trying to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels in our economy and there will be additional measures there, too. This will be a budget that is centrally focused on the cost of living, improving public services and alleviating the tax burden on work. It will make a difference and will seek to mitigate the harm for those most in need over the winter period.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Jesus, that is woeful spoofing. The Minister does not have to speculate on anything because we have been very clear for months on end that the Government has to give assistance to the 700,000 households that heat their homes with heating oil. The Government has done nothing except give this kind of guff and try to act to distract, but it will not distract people from the realities of their lives.

Now, as we meet and as we speak, they are being ripped off for home heating oil and fuel prices are soaring again, just as we told the Government they would. All the Government has ever done is the minimum and it has to be brought kicking and screaming to even do that. Let me just repeat, for the avoidance of doubt: this evening, we are bringing forward a concrete measure to address the removal of carbon taxes from home heating oil.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are simply asking that the Government do that now because families, households and businesses are struggling.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy's party continues to vote against all of the measures that we took, which made significant interventions that helped people when it came to the reductions of excise. Hers is the party of guff, day in, day out.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is full of waffle, full of no solutions and its economic policies are a road to ruination. That is Sinn Féin, day in, day out.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is that all the Minister has?

A Deputy: What about the children in poverty?

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: The reason I say that is economic management and protecting the economy can never be described as "guff". Of course there are trade-offs and choices for the Government about how we want to prioritise resources and how we want to moderate day-to-day spending to protect Ireland's long-term future. Sinn Féin just produces double-digit levels of growth and expenditure and ramps up taxes on work and enterprise, on the very backbone of the Irish economy and prosperity, on the wealth creators who are giving us the opportunity through increased corporation tax to distribute that to help people across our economy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Developers. Banks.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Developers.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It just shows that Sinn Féin cannot be trusted with the economy and with protecting Ireland when it comes to our future.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. The Deputy is on his feet.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: From the party that crashed the economy and brought the IMF here? Jesus Christ, we do not all have amnesia here. Come on.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please proceed, Deputy O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is some nerve of Fianna Fáil to give lectures about sound economic management.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Seventy-seven percent is how much wholesale electricity prices have surged in the past year. That will not come as a surprise to the over 300,000 households currently in arrears, and it is not news to the people lying awake at night worrying about how they will keep the lights on.

We have to get off this endless merry-go-round of price shocks and soaring bills. The Minister knows, I know, we all know that we are particularly vulnerable to these price shocks because we are so dependent on fossil fuels. Trump is to blame for a lot of things, but he is not to blame for that. We are hooked on fossil fuels, and that is a direct result of this Government's incompetence and negligence, which has left hundreds of thousands of households hopelessly exposed. Where are people supposed to find the money for all these price increases? They are already trying to cobble together the cash to meet rising rents, mortgage payments, groceries and childcare costs. If they are relying on home heating oil, they will have seen the cost to fill soar by €700.

The pressure on individuals and families is now immense and never-ending, and the cracks are beginning to show. More than half a million households are behind on their electricity and gas bills. Unless the Government acts, it will get worse. That is why we must see a targeted energy credit of €400 in the budget. This would help those low- and middle-income families who desperately need it. It is a vital measure to provide them with some breathing room. However, the budget needs to go much further than that.

The harsh reality is that the Government has utterly failed to invest in solar and renewable energy, and it is families the length and breadth of this country who are now reaping the consequences of its failure. A no-brainer for the budget would be a massive investment in solar to bring people's energy bills down by at least €450 a year - this year, next year and every year. The Social Democrats have a solar-for-all plan that the Minister could implement. It would double the grants for solar panels, introduce a grant for battery storage and make solar panels free for households at risk of fuel poverty. Crucially, it would roll out plug-in solar. That is what we need to see - some real ambition from the Government.

These are measures that the Government could introduce in two weeks' time. They are sustainable and we have the money to pay for them. Will the Government introduce them or will it just keep making excuses?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reiterate that Government is cognisant of the serious pressure that many families and households face into the winter. That is taking centre stage in our Estimates discussions and how we examine different and further interventions on how we tax energy in the economy.

To give workers a break, there will be an income tax package, which will give some workers some respite through the winter period. In the social protection system, we want to target the fuel allowance allocation and other changes that will be under consideration to help those most in need and those facing the significant price rises over the winter period. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is working on some areas, which I will not comment on the detail of, relating to our grant support system and how we better calibrate it to promote renewable energy options, to

get people off fossil fuels and to drive greater affordability. He is examining a range of options in that context in advance of budget 2027.

We are also looking at how we can drive affordability in the provision of different services, including childcare, the cost of disability and other mechanisms through our social protection system to help those most in need. It is unfair to say that the Government has done nothing. We have taken some of the biggest interventions *per capita* in Europe to mitigate the price rises. A total of €1 billion has been expended already on reductions in petrol and diesel. We are considering further options for home heating oil. Many households, in particular in rural Ireland, are impacted by that price rise, which is likely to continue and be sustained over the winter. That is why that range of options for tax and expenditure is under consideration by Government, all centred on helping people, targeting the most vulnerable and protecting people through the winter.

The Government is also prioritising sustainability. That is why the grant support systems that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is evaluating will be changed to help incentivise greater uptake of grants for energy sustainability. He will set that out in or around budget day.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Is the Minister's Government not ashamed that the one offshore wind farm we have is currently being dismantled? That is the Government's level of delivery of offshore renewables. In other countries that have invested, it has brought down people's energy bills. What is the Minister doing about it? We have over half a million households in electricity and gas arrears. I asked the Minister about a targeted energy credit and he had nothing to say about it. He has the resources to do it. All the advice is that he needs to target resources to help people who need it most. Has the Minister nothing to say about that? Will there be a targeted energy credit to lift those households out of energy arrears? What is he going to do for the households who are behind on their bills, are afraid to put the heat on, and are worried sick at night about what they are going to do? Will he adopt our proposal for a targeted energy credit? Will the Minister use the resources at his disposal to do something useful for those households? What does the Minister have to say about our constructive proposals for a targeted energy credit? Please answer that question.

Deputy Jack Chambers: On the Deputy's first point, he has clearly not read the facts about electricity generation from renewables. It has increased five-fold since 2005. Regularly throughout the first half of 2026, almost half of Ireland's electricity came from renewable sources. Ireland has now reached a record of over 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, up from 4.8 GW in 2020.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is not bringing down bills. It is going into data centres.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Significant progress is being made on renewable energy. The Deputy needs to correct the record on that. He is dismissing progress. We have been clear that the broadened eligibility for fuel allowance last year has brought over 400,000 households into the social protection system. That is under consideration as a direct payment that is targeted at people in the lowest four income deciles in budget 2027. We want to use fuel allowance and other measures in our social protection system to help those most in need. That is the impulse

of this Government, protecting the most vulnerable, supporting affordability and making sure we give workers and families a break when it comes to income tax.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Two weeks from today, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will deliver his budget and, across the country, people want to know if it will bring down their household bills. They are being subjected to daily budget leaks now. The Minister for Finance cannot help himself, flying kites and doling out goodies, with a morsel here and a soundbite there.

It is like "The Late Late Show" of old; one for everyone in the audience but only if you happen to be in today's target interest group. So, what will it all add up to? Will it add up? Last year's certainly did not. Will the Minister learn from his mistakes of last year? In last year's budget, the Government ignored PAYE workers. Now we see union after union voting for strike action. It is extraordinary that the Minister has not yet had any meaningful engagement on public sector pay. Workers urgently need to know how he is going to address this and what he plans to do for PAYE workers this year.

Second, in last year's budget, the Minister pursued reckless and unsustainable spending policies. He gave an ineffective and expensive VAT cut to big burger chains, which we in the Labour Party strongly opposed. He left a shortfall of €600 million in the education budget. Unfortunately, it seems that this year we are seeing more of the same. The Defence Forces are now cutting student officer rations in a miserly and desperate effort to save €12 million. His flagship policy this year seems to be chasing global oil prices as Trump's war rages in Iran and the Middle East. Workers are watching as the Government spends more than a billion on untargeted fossil fuel subsidies, with hundreds of millions more to come.

Fine Gael is now spit-balling the idea of special investment accounts for those who already have money in the bank but, meanwhile, families cannot afford childcare costs or to put food on the table. Almost 70% of young people are looking beyond our shores for a better life, as the youth council reports today.

Will the Minister learn from last year's mistakes? Will he look to spend money where it can make a difference to communities, to help the hundreds of thousands now in arrears on their energy bills and the commuters facing enormous and outrageous public transport fare increases? The Minister needs to invest in alternatives. He needs to make it easier to switch to solar power, heat pumps, electric vehicles, bicycles and affordable public transport. We need a massive street-by-street retrofitting programme, as the Labour Party has called for, and the roll-out of a new urban and rural re-electrification programme, based on renewables, across the country. That is the best way to bring down household bills in a sustainable manner and tackle climate change. Instead, all the Minister offers are temporary, half measures, namely, untargeted fossil fuel subsidies.

Here are three choices the Labour Party is asking the Minister to make in this budget. First, will he meaningfully engage with public sector workers and deliver for PAYE workers? Second, will he properly fund public services like education, rather than narrowing the tax base further? Third, will he invest seriously in the climate transition, instead of continuing with unsustainable and untargeted fossil fuel subsidies?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am really surprised to see the Deputy label something like the fuel allowance as a fossil fuel subsidy. What would low-income workers and-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Minister knows that is not what I am talking about.

Deputy Jack Chambers: ----- the most vulnerable in our society say about that? It was an important measure taken by this Government.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Jesus.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I heard the Deputy on "Morning Ireland" in the past couple of weeks. She was asked a direct question. She was very much a leader on a hedge. She was not sure what way to go when it came to questions on the carbon tax and other matters. The Deputy should make up her own mind about what her policy direction is.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We are very clear what it is.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are very clear, as a Government, when it comes to supporting people and families around the cost of living. We will have targeted measures using our social protection system, as I have said. Second, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will bring forward changes to grants to incentivise and help families build sustainability in their own homes and ensure that there are more accessible grants for people who currently cannot afford them. There might be different views on how we should do that but that is something he wants to make positive progress on in the budgetary context as well. Everyone across this House would support that.

Third, when it comes to last year's budget, we obviously made decisions with respect to housing and taxation around housing to support greater supply in the economy, which has to be welcomed. Anything we can do to support increased housing supply has to be supported. We are correct to make that decision. Similarly, when it came to protecting jobs in the adjustment, particularly in regions and rural Ireland, VAT changes were made.

The Deputy's question related to public sector pay talks. We have obviously had a decision by trade unions to move to industrial action rather than engaging in substantive talks.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: That is not the case.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: That is not true.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is deeply unfair on the public that there will be significant disruption to their daily lives because unions are unwilling to sit down-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Not true.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and engage constructively on a new agreement, which we want to have. This Government wants to have a fair, equitable deal for public sector workers. Our

record on that is clear. If you take the lowest paid in the public service, their wage increases have far exceeded inflation over the past number of years. A clerical officer, teacher or nurse will have received in excess of 30%, when inflation is about 23%. We have targeted and supported the lowest income cohorts in terms of public sector workers.

We are clear that the only way to get a deal is for there to be intensive engagement. What we have had over the last two months is a process of balloting rather than substantive engagement. My officials remain open and willing to do that.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Why are they going on strike?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Again, the Deputy just makes this generic point about funding public services. We have funded significant increases in public services over the last number of years. There has been nearly €10 billion more in our health system over a series of years. There have been significant increases in investment in our education system, particularly in special education, and rightly so, but no area of the public service or, indeed, public expenditure should be immune from greater reform, efficiencies and improved productivity. What we are doing in this budget as well is trying to drive greater outputs from the level of spend which has significantly increased in the last number of years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is to make sure we get greater value for taxpayers and improved public services rather than it just being a binary discussion. which is what we get from the Opposition benches, about allocating more.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik to respond.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is not sustainable.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I would agree with one thing. When the Minister says Fianna Fáil has a clear record, it certainly does: it has a clear record on abandoning public sector workers.

Deputy Ged Nash: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The last time public sector unions went on strike was when Fianna Fáil was in government. We are seeing the neglect and abandonment of the public sector PAYE workers again with Fianna Fáil now in government. The Labour Party has put forward clear, costed proposals. We are the only party that did not support the narrowing of the tax base and stood against that reckless VAT cut for hospitality last year. We put forward very clear proposals for helping struggling households this summer just gone in our May mini-budget proposals which the Minister voted against. We have clearly put forward the need for targeted energy credits as a way of helping households who are now in arrears on energy bills but we also recognise, as the Minister does not seem to be able to do, that we need a more sustainable, long-term way of addressing spiralling energy bills and spiralling housing and childcare and

grocery costs too. That is where our costed alternative budget that we will be launching next week will be putting forward constructive measures that are taking climate seriously-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and taking public sector workers seriously in a way that Fianna Fáil does not seem capable of doing.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy needs to study the facts. If you take the last five to six years, public pay has increased by in excess of €12 billion per year.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Where is the agreement? Where is the deal?

Deputy Jack Chambers: That has resulted in a massive expansion of public services, more than 70,000 more people working across public services - in our education system and our health system and with the number of front-line gardaí increasing year on year, and rightly so. We want to invest in better public services and ensure public sector workers are given a fair, equitable pay agreement.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The agreement ran out.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why in the last pay deal we allowed for increases of 9.5% when inflation over the same period was about 6.5%, again, supporting a fair and equitable deal. That remains the case. We are a Government that will make provision for a public sector pay deal so people are paid fairly.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are open and willing to engage with unions. Instead they are balloting their members.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: They are waiting.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That has been their prerogative. Over the last two months they have taken a course of balloting members rather than engaging in substantive discussions to give their members a pay deal. We are willing and open to do that and we will make provision for it as well.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The State is failing persons with disabilities and their carers. The disability services are in crisis on all levels. From the minute a parent or a guardian notices a difficulty with a child, they must fight for everything: for an assessment of needs, with over 22,000 children now waiting; for an appropriate crèche place; for an appropriate school place; for access to therapy services; for respite places; and, indeed, for residential places. Today I

want to focus on respite and residential services for adults with intellectual disabilities, that is, children transitioning to adulthood at 18 years and older adults.

Respite services for young adults are almost non-existent. They finish in school, special school usually, and effectively fall off a cliff. If they are lucky, they may get a weekend of respite every six months or maybe not at all. This puts huge pressure on family carers, who often become ill themselves. This leads to the question posed by the Before We Die campaign. That question is: “Who will care for my son or daughter’s needs when I am no longer able to do that or when I die?” It is not uncommon to hear a parent say, “I hope they go before me.”

Some 92% of adults with an intellectual disability rely on a parent as their primary carer but only 2% of those have a plan in place for their future. Some 2,000 persons with an intellectual disability live with parents aged 70 years or over. Five hundred of those are with parents of 80 years of age or over. This means that, typically, residential places are provided only when an emergency arises or a carer becomes ill or passes away. This model of crisis management is cruel and heartless and more often than not means that the adult with the disability has to leave their community. Statistics show that over 600 reside in counties outside their own and over 200 reside more than 100 km from their previous home. This is also the most expensive way to provide services as they are provided by private, for-profit companies.

The services are in crisis and we need a new statutory agency, including the HSE, local authorities, section 38 and section 39 organisations and families, to plan and provide disability services. We need an emergency funded plan immediately. We need a statutory register of needs and a personal plan at age 18 for all adults as they go into adulthood. We need that urgently.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Healy for raising this really important issue. I acknowledge the Before We Die campaign and the dedication of the parents, the carers and the families behind it. We all know they speak from a place of deep concern about what will happen to their sons and daughters when they are no longer able to provide care themselves. That fear is real and deserves to be heard. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, have engaged directly with the group to hear their lived experience and to ensure that it informs the wider approach and direction of the Government on this issue. My colleagues, Deputies McAuliffe and Crowe, have also engaged extensively with the group. I am conscious of the profound impact this has on people with disabilities and their families, particularly ageing parents. We want to continue to support people to remain in their family homes for as long as they and their families wish. There is also the need, as Deputy Healy said, to significantly expand residential capacity. That is a clear priority for the Government. Some progress has been made, and that is reflected in the wider commitment we made as part of budget 2026 last year when it came to specialist disability services, which was a €3.8 billion allocation, almost 20% more than the year before. Of that, there has been a significant amount of funding to deliver residential services to support people to live independently in their communities.

Specifically on respite services, there has been particular investment. The amount of funding has doubled between 2021 and 2026, reaching €150 million in 2026. That funding supports the expansion of residential and respite services, day services, home support and personal support hours. That was complemented by €25 million in new development funding

for respite in last year's budget. This is supporting an initiative expected to deliver 10,000 additional overnight sessions and 25,000 additional day sessions this year. The HSE's 2026 national service plan targets 175,000 respite sessions and 91,000 day-only sessions for the year.

I am conscious that just setting out some of the changes does not cut it for a lot of families who have not seen the benefits of this increased investment. We need not only to continue to prioritise this next year but also to ensure that the level of investment, which has increased exponentially in recent years, is prioritised around respite, particularly on some of the specific requests coming from this campaign, which is in all our communities. This is of growing concern to many parents, and that certainly will form the basis of my budget discussions with the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and the Minister, Deputy Foley.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The modest improvements the Minister has outlined are at best from a very low base, if not an almost non-existent base, but all individuals with disabilities have accessed services since childhood. It beggars belief that there is not a comprehensive national database and register of needs for those individuals.

These must be put in place as a matter of urgency. As the Minister knows, every adult with a disability has a right to live as independently as possible within their own community, with the supports they need and with dignity, autonomy and security. Urgent action needs to be taken to provide respite as residential care. An emergency funded plan is needed in the forthcoming budget for adults with intellectual disability living with parents who are aged 70 years or over. These parents cannot wait for systemic change. They need action now. Will the Minister include emergency funding in the budget he is due to introduce in two weeks' time?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I share the view that we need to see continued expansion of the availability, frequency and range of respite options in order that people with disabilities, their families and carers have the support they need now and into the future. We need to use each budget to deliver progress in that area.

In 2025, the HSE delivered 164,000 respite nights to 7,500 people, alongside more than 65,000 day-only respite sessions. That was an 82% increase in day sessions and a 24% increase in respite nights compared with pre-pandemic levels. There has been significant progress over the past number of years. I am not going to argue with the Deputy about those who have not seen the benefits. The Government needs to ensure that in each budget and in how we organise disability services and respite care, that there is continued momentum and progress, particularly where we know that demand is continuing to grow. That has been reflected by the Before We Die campaign group. It is something we want to continue to prioritise in 2027.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 35, I call on the Chief Whip, Deputy Butler, to move the arrangements for this week's business.

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (1) (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (2) (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Fifteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026 (to conclude within 60 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on Passenger Name Record data*
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council Decision on the signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on Passenger Name Record data*

*Two separate motions to be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 60 minutes, with questions to be put on each motion separately; and any divisions claimed to be taken immediately Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Fuel, Energy and Carbon Tax Relief, selected by Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on World Pharmacists Week (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Electricity Regulation (Climate Action and Connection to Distribution and Transmission Systems) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Ciarán Ahern.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

- (a) the only Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) which may be answered shall be those under the aegis of the Government Chief Whip, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Government business;

(b) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.; and

(c) private members' business shall be taken following proceedings on the Second Stage of the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (1) shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (2) shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Fifteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

5. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time; and

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
Total: 3 hours 24 mins					

6. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the weekly division time may be taken earlier than 8.45 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of Government Business;

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
Total: hours 24 mins					

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Defective Concrete Blocks Social Homes Scheme 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

— opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

— speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

— speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

— a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

4. the proceedings on the Motions on Proposals for Council Decisions on the signing of, and the conclusion of, the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record data shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all proceedings thereon;

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

(d) any divisions claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Electricity Regulation (Climate Action and Connection to Distribution and Transmission Systems) Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on World Pharmacists Week shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

- (a) the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the sequence contained in the table immediately below (to be read across);
- (b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and
- (c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
Total: 2 hours 15 mins					

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The testimony of the four Garda whistleblowers on the "RTÉ Investigates" programme has caused serious concern. Requests have been made for the Minister at that time, Helen McEntee, to come before the Dáil in order to take statements and

engage in a question-and-answers session. Such is the seriousness of what is emerging, the Taoiseach also needs to come before the House. Can we get a commitment from the Government that this will happen as soon as those involved return from the United Nations Assembly?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Given the state of the revelations in last week's "RTÉ Investigates" programme, how long does this Government believe it is tenable not to allow either the current justice Minister and the previous one to come into the Chamber to answer questions regarding the architecture of the protected disclosures office? Garda confidence has been massively undermined, as testified to by the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors and the Garda Representative Association calling for an external inquiry. Before then, we need answers from the Government. We cannot continue with this ducking.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I find it incredible that we do not have a commitment for a debate with both the former and current Ministers for justice about the ramifications of the whistleblower documentary last week. The budget will not distract us from seeking this debate. We are objecting this week. We will object next week. We will object every week until the debate happens.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need an urgent debate this week on the threat of an armed march going through the Garvaghy Road to Drumcree Church at the weekend. I met with the Garvaghy Road residents yesterday. That mostly Catholic area is gripped with fear and anxiety that after 28 years of not having to face these triumphalist sectarian marches that have incited loyalist killings and led to sectarian violence, what is due to happen at the weekend will drag their area and the North back into sectarian conflict. This matter needs to be debated as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Further to the revelations in today's newspapers to the effect that doctors are looking for an outright ban on scrambler bikes, despite the fact that we have new laws coming in, it has emerged that 1,100 children have attended hospital on foot of e-scooter injuries in the past five years. There have been 59 serious injuries, some involving organ displacement, have been reported. This House needs to have a debate on that matter.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have heard from all the whips about the changes they would like on the Order of Business this week. We have important business on the schedule that we need to get through. As everybody watching knows, there is Government time and Opposition time. The Opposition can use its time for anything it wishes to discuss. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements for the business agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: With respect to the Government Chief Whip, she knows what we asked for, namely statements.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mac Lochlainn has had his time.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: This needs statements and accountability from the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could he please resume his seat? Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Gary Gannon: They are not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Martin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dillon, Alan.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Fleming, Sean.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	

Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Grealish, Noel.	Murphy, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nash, Ged.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Kyne, Seán.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lahart, John.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to raise again the urgent situation on the Garvaghy Road in Portadown. As the Minister will be aware, the Parades Commission is about to consider an Orange Order application to march down the Garvaghy Road this Sunday. For 28 years, this community has lived with relative peace. The dispute, which was long-running and carried a high human cost, was resolved. It is just incredible that anybody would seek to reopen that matter and bring the anxiety, stress and instability that all of that would mean. This is a very serious political and, potentially, community crisis and the Irish Government cannot be a passive observer. I wrote to the Taoiseach, as did the residents, I understand, looking for a meeting. We have sought for some level within government to engage directly with residents. Will this happen, when will it happen, and who will lead that effort?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy McDonald. I appreciate the Deputy raising this important matter. As the Taoiseach said last week, his officials have been engaged on this. I have not got a specific update with respect to the Deputy's request for a meeting. As the Taoiseach said, there is a process that is being kept under review. However, I will raise the matter with the Taoiseach and the Minister for foreign affairs and ask them to respond directly to the Deputy. I appreciate the concerns that the Deputy has raised here.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have recognised that what is happening in Gaza is a genocide but the Department of justice does not seem to think it has ever happened because it is asking people to access documents when most of the buildings in Gaza have been razed to the ground and more than 70,000 people are now dead. What the Department is asking of these students who are trying to study here is the impossible when they have already overcome impossible barriers. It was impossible to continue in education when you were being rained down on by bullets and bombs in a tent, impossible to raise the funds to access these courses, and impossible to place these courses themselves. Might I add that the institutions are opening their arms and their doors to welcome these students in. When will the Government read the room and reverse its decision to block these students from studying here in Ireland?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We all accept that the level of suffering inflicted on the civilian population who are not responsible for the actions of Hamas is wrong - it is an affront to human decency - and we have repeatedly opposed and strongly condemned Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank, the blatant disregard for international law and the ongoing expansion of settlements. Certainly, my colleagues at the UN will be reflecting that during the week.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Student visas.

Deputy Jack Chambers: On the issue of visas, and as the Deputy will be aware, there is a well-established process in the Department of justice that assesses every visa application.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: But the Government changed the goalposts this year.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy. It does not work like that.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I understand that some may have been granted and that others are still being assessed, but there is a well-established process that is progressed and through which an assessment is made of each individual case.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Government is moving the goalposts.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today, the British Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, has announced that women employees will be provided with two weeks' leave to grieve and recover following a miscarriage before 24 weeks. It is now five years since I first introduced legislation in the Seanad to provide for workplace leave along the same lines here. I refer to leave when it matters most - compassionate leave. My Bill received unanimous support from Senators then, including Government Senators, but progress since then has been glacially slow, held up by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Tomorrow, my Labour colleague, Deputy Marie Sherlock, will bring the Bill to the enterprise committee on the next Stage. This is our latest attempt to move the dial to support women through pregnancy loss and couples through fertility treatment and to make our workplaces more compassionate. Will the Government listen to the thousands of people, mainly women, who have contacted all of our offices over the years, take the proposal on and, crucially, make it law this year that employees can receive recognition in the workplace where they endure an early miscarriage?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Bacik for raising this important issue. As she will know, the Government approved the general scheme of the pregnancy loss leave Bill in July of this year, the aim of which is to introduce for the first time in Irish law statutory leave for pregnancy loss prior to 23 weeks' gestation.

3 o'clock

I acknowledge the work of Deputies Bacik and Sherlock on the matter.

The Minister for enterprise is now working on drafting this legislation as a matter of priority and I hope all parties in the House will be able to progress the policy outcome on this through legislation as quickly as possible when it concludes. I appreciate the Deputy raising it today.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There was a report in the *Irish Independent* at the weekend that a young woman who suspected she had been raped in Dublin city while intoxicated is now facing criminal charges, potentially, for false reporting. Not only that but it has been decided that all the resources of the Irish State should go into dragging this woman back from France where she lives, via extradition. As we know, it is not unusual for intoxicated people to be attacked violently and not to recall all the details. The implications of this decision are huge. The number of sexual offences that are reported could not fall any lower and the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, routinely does not prosecute 67% of all sexual offences. For some incredible reason, the DPP and gardaí have decided to prosecute this woman. The message this

would send to survivors who may have been drugged or intoxicated when they were attacked and might not remember all the details is incredible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I hasten to add that nobody has been falsely accused or charged, so I do not see why this is happening. There will be a protest at the DPP's office at 1 p.m. on Friday against this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I have not read the newspaper article she referred to or about the case she referenced so I do not want to make any inappropriate comment. As a Government, we seek to support any victim of sexual assault properly through policies and through the resourcing of our agencies and An Garda Síochána. I have not seen or read the detail the Deputy referenced, so I will not comment on it.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: There is a growing call for a public inquiry into the handling of protected disclosures in An Garda Síochána and I support that. However, I believe it must go much further. The concerns around protected disclosures seem to extend to the public service, An Garda Síochána, the Prison Service, the HSE, financial services and beyond. I raised this matter previously in the Dáil, and my party raised it in a Private Members' Bill, to strengthen protected disclosure protections for whistleblowers, which was rejected by the Government.

The Minister will be aware, as it was mentioned on the floor of the House previously, Mr. Ciarán Kenneally, a former Tusla employee submitted a second protected disclosure in November 2025, following on from confirmation by the Data Protection Commission that Tusla had unlawfully processed his personal data. While the disclosure was acknowledged, he is still waiting for the investigation to be commenced more than a year after making that protected disclosure. Will the Government now commit to the holding of a comprehensive public inquiry into the operation of protected disclosures?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. As my colleagues said last week and at the weekend, it is not appropriate to comment on any specific cases that are ongoing and I will not be doing so today.

The Government will be commencing a review of the Protected Disclosures Act this year, which will begin with a public consultation and an opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in that review to ensure the legislative framework we have is fit for purpose and meets all the respective inputs of stakeholders and everyone involved, including those who have made protected disclosures. However, I cannot comment on the specific case the Deputy referenced.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The CCTV monitoring system for Limerick city and county, currently located in Moyross, oversees 360 community cameras spread throughout Limerick city and county. Unfortunately, within the next ten days it is due to close with the loss of 11 jobs and dire consequences for crime prevention and detection in Limerick city and surrounding areas. This is due to the loss of funding from the social inclusion fund, which, as the Minister knows,

is being gradually wound down. It has left a deficit of approximately €660,000, which is needed to enable this service to continue for the next 12 months.

I cannot overstate the amount of anxiety in the community, particularly among members of An Garda Síochána, about the loss of these cameras and the effect it will have on crime detection in the Limerick area. People are pleading with me to ask the Government to intervene to save the service and put it on a sustainable basis. Is it proposed to do so?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. It is clear that the service should be sustained, particularly if investment has happened and the service is of such importance to An Garda Síochána and to the local community in Limerick. I will speak to the Minister for justice to ensure that it is examined and that the service can continue. I appreciate the Deputy's advocacy on this matter.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I again raise the matter of public transport in the south east, particularly rail and bus links for our commuters. Gorey is one of the fastest -growing towns in Ireland. Arklow is on the verge of huge expansion. Rathdrum is ideally placed for easy access to Dublin. Rosslare port continues to grow. However, these towns and their rural hinterlands are woefully underserved by a rail service that is inconvenient, infrequent and low-capacity. There are no imminent plans for improvement. Commuters also struggle with the reliability of the current bus links. Local Link has been transformative for our rural communities but there is demand for significant increases in services and frequency. Quite simply, the current rail and bus services cannot cope with the demand as the populations of Wexford and Wicklow continue to grow. We need a coherent plan for transport infrastructure in the south east.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Brennan. To be clear, the significant increase in transport infrastructure investment over the next four years will be seen in the south east. This investment is twofold. First, we want to see significant capacity improvements. That will obviously involve upgrades to existing infrastructure. In addition, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is doing work on the public service obligation to ensure that the demands of an increased population are met by an improved service experience in some of the towns and villages in the south east the Deputy has mentioned. The work the Minister is doing as part of budget 2027 is to significantly enhance the capacity of public transport more widely in 2027 and in the years to come. This is to match the significant uplift in infrastructure investment whose positive benefits will be seen by citizens across the country.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I hope the Minister will consider the Sinn Féin legislation being debated here this evening to reduce the cost of home heating oil. The households of the vast majority of the people I represent, the people of Roscommon and Galway, use home heating oil. As we approach the budget, there will be a lot of focus on the fuel allowance. The fuel allowance is well and good for those who receive it. It is a help to them. However, the vast majority of working people do not receive the fuel allowance. The evenings are getting darker and there will be pressure in terms of electricity and heating. I ask for a major focus, to include advertising, to be put on the additional needs payment as quickly as possible so that working people will know there is some support for them. No families should be in the dark or cold in

their homes as we approach the winter. I ask for the ramping-up of as wide a campaign as possible with regard to the additional needs payments so that workers will know that it is there and that it is not just available to people who are in receipt of social welfare payments.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Kerrane for raising this issue. I will reflect her requests to the Minister, Deputy Calleary. To echo what I said earlier on, we want to ensure that, through the decisions we make, we prioritise concerns about the cost of living in the budget. I refer particularly to issues relating to home heating oil. Using the social protection system will be critical in mitigating the issues facing those most in need, the 400,000 households who currently benefit from it. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to consider what the Deputy has said so that people understand the possibilities of making an application through that process.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I will address the rise in antisocial behaviour in Dublin Fingal West. I do not do so lightly. It is a fantastic part of the country with a great sense of community spirit, which we are all rightly proud of. However, we cannot ignore what is happening. A lack of visible Garda resources is allowing some people to take advantage. We all saw the serious incident at Skerries Harbour during the summer. There is open drug dealing in our towns and some teenagers are recording vicious attacks and putting the videos on social media. Our gardaí are doing their very best but they need resources and a local presence to do their jobs effectively. The local Garda stations in Rush, Lusk and Skerries, which are now towns of over 10,000 people, are open for two hours a week, which is not enough. I ask the Minister to tackle this head-on and to start putting gardaí back where they belong: in our communities, on our streets and back in the police stations of north County Dublin.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I appreciate the concern he has referenced in the growing communities of Dublin Fingal West, which have seen increased antisocial behaviour over recent months. As a Government, we have sought to significantly expand the numbers in An Garda Síochána.

By the end of this year or early next year, we should exceed 15,000 gardaí. Combined with the civilianisation we have seen in recent years, that allows for significant enhancement and redeployment of gardaí onto the front line. I will try to come back to the Deputy with information from the Minister for justice on the specific allocation. I know a lot of the newer probationary gardaí have gone to some of the suburban parts of Dublin in the past 12 months, reflecting some of the demographic changes we are seeing but also the need for increased policing and visibility. I will reflect the concerns raised by the Deputy to the Minister, who can relay that to the Garda.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Overcrowding on the Midleton-Cork rail line is reaching farcical levels. For a prolonged period, peak-time services have been left operating with just two carriages. This morning, a constituent told me the train was again dangerously overcrowded, with the driver on one journey having to get out to stop commuters boarding at Glounthaune and Little Island. My colleague, Councillor Eamonn Horgan, has been raising this issue over the past year. Irish Rail accepts that peak-time services are overcrowded but says there are no spare carriages available.

The Minister's own figures show Ireland collected €32.9 billion in corporation tax last year. Why is his Department so tight-fisted with the basics while revenues of that scale are coming in? How can we have so little to show for such extraordinary resources that these Cork commuters are still being packed into two-carriage trains just to get to work and college? People in Youghal are in a much worse predicament, with no rail and a shambles of a bus services that would drive you to despair.

Deputy Jack Chambers: As I said to Deputy Brennan, the capital investment in transport is due to significantly increase in the next number of years. If one takes the Cork area commuter rail programme, which the Deputy did not mention, for example, there will be significant progress in the wider Cork area over the next number of months and, indeed, the next number of years, where people will see improvements in public transport, in particular. The work we are doing with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is to ensure the bus service complements the significant enhancement of the commuter rail programme.

We are absolutely clear that, through our fiscal plan, we want to prioritise infrastructure investment in public transport and our wider transport system to ensure we reduce congestion and improve the commuter experience for many people who use public transport. With the progress being made by Irish Rail, such as the double tracking between Glounthaune and Middleton and other progress across the Cork area commuter rail plan, people will see the improvements over the period ahead.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Annual antisocial behaviour on Aghards green in Celbridge in County Kildare has now become criminal activity leading up to Halloween. It is becoming a longer process. We previously had bonfires. Now, we have cars driving over greens and scramblers. This is right beside the national school, Scoil Mochua, and also beside the playground. Residents' houses are being smashed. Front windows are being smashed and there are Garda investigations under way there. The Garda is doing its very best in increasing patrols and trying to help the residents of this area but what we need in Celbridge and Kildare, because we have the lowest ratio of gardaí *per capita* in the country, is increased numbers of gardaí and Garda resources. I ask the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, for the Leixlip district and Celbridge Garda station to be afforded additional resources to tackle this issue.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I regret that the local residents are experiencing such challenges with antisocial behaviour. As the Deputy said, that is worsening and exacerbated by the darker evenings. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to respond. Similar issues were raised by others earlier in the engagement. I will ask the Minister to reflect on the particular need for growing commuter areas to see the benefits of increased police numbers. That should exceed 15,000 in the next number of months. That will provide additional opportunities to the Commissioner to deploy extra gardaí in those areas that are most in need. The Deputy is right; we need to see improved visibility in that context. I will reflect that to the Minister for justice and I appreciate the Deputy raising it today.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Kilkenny City Vocational School and Coláiste Pobail Osraí are both excellent schools that do hugely important work for young people and the wider

Kilkenny community. However, their new school campus project has been stuck at stage 2B for quite some time. The school community and I are eager to see it progressed to the next stage as a matter of urgency. I spoke with both schools and school leaderships last week. Certainty around capital funding is needed. This project would provide modern, fit for purpose facilities and would be a vital investment in both schools and the wider school community and be a positive boost for the whole of Kilkenny city. I ask that capital funding be made available as soon as possible so that the project can move to tender stage. After all of the work and commitment in getting the project to this stage, the school communities deserve certainty and a clear pathway to delivery. God knows they have waited long enough.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I know he has raised it a number of times with the Taoiseach and others. In terms of education funding more generally, there was a €5 billion allocation in the previous five-year cycle in the national development plan. We prioritised educational resourcing of a 50% increase in the 2025-2030 plan to €7.5 billion. The Minister for education has published the sectoral investment plan for education. I appreciate the wider uncertainty, the lack of clarity that is reflected in the school community and the importance of progress in terms of it being stuck at 2B. I will ask the Minister for education to engage with the school on this matter. The level of funding should provide for the significant enhancement of existing school buildings but also for new schools right across the country. We sought to prioritise it in the national development plan and I will ask for the school to be provided with more certainty on the matter.

Deputy William Aird: I raise the issue of school transport. I have been inundated with contacts from parents whose children do not have a school bus ticket this year. Many of them had tickets for several years but, this year, they have none. These include children going into sixth class in primary school and sixth year in post-primary school. There is confusion regarding the difference between eligible and concessionary tickets. There is a lack of clarity about how distances are measured. Some children have no seat just because the bus is too small. We cannot expect children to move school because transport has changed. As one parent put it simply to me, the children get their books and their school meals but what good is any of that if they cannot get to school? I ask the Minister to ensure the shortcomings in the school transport scheme are urgently addressed so that children are not left behind before the school day even begins.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I regret that some students in Laois have had that direct experience. As a Government, we have all supported a significant expansion in this over the last number of years. There were around 120,000 children using the service in 2019. That figure is now 181,000 in 2026. Matched with that has been an unprecedented level of funding to support the service. There was €219 million allocated in 2019 and that is due to exceed €600 million this year. As a Government, we have prioritised supporting rural school transport right across the country. This is managed on behalf of the State and Government by Bus Éireann, which co-ordinates the wider day-to-day operation of the service.

I will ask my colleagues in the Department of education to engage with the Deputy to try to resolve some of the issues that are there for some students. In the wider complexity and

organisation of this, I accept there are particular issues in certain areas which raise their head every year. I will ask the Department to engage with the Deputy on it and I regret that students have had that experience.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: We are here again. There are so many children in my constituency in south Kildare who do not have an appropriate school place - or any school place - yet this year. I raise the case of two particular families. They are families who have done everything right. They engaged with the NCSE and applied to schools across their area and well beyond and yet their children remain at home while their peers and siblings are in classrooms. It is having a devastating impact on their development. One child, Kayden from Monasterevin, is autistic and has already spent a year being home schooled. His parents have applied to 20 schools over the past two years and homeschooling just is not meeting his needs. Another child, Jack from the Curragh, finished primary school in June. Jack is autistic and has a moderate intellectual disability. He has been refused by all of his local special schools. These families are heartbroken. More importantly, two vulnerable children are being denied their right to education. What immediate action will the Government take to secure appropriate school places for these children don scoilbhliain seo?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge the particular instances of the children she has raised. We have sought to prioritise special education funding in the past successive series of years. In 2026, there is a €3 billion allocation for special education - the highest annual provision in the history of the State and a 58% increase since 2020.

That has allowed for a significant expansion of special classes, supporting increased numbers of SNAs and teachers in special education right across the country, as well as 16 new special schools. I do not have a specific localised brief on the case the Deputy raised but I will ask that the Department of education and particularly NCSE, which is tasked with this matter, engage with the parents to provide some certainty on when an appropriate school place will be provided. That is what we are seeking to do in how we prioritise funding in this area.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Last week, I met the Offaly IFA branch at the Ploughing Championships in Tullamore. It was emphasised to me and many other politicians, including our MEPs, that it is vital that a CAP budget of at least €500 billion is secured in the upcoming negotiations. If that is not secured and, for instance, if there is a 42% change to the CAP budget, in my county of Offaly, it would lead to a loss of €9.1 million every year from 2028 to 2034 and a loss of 100 jobs every year for that period also. It is extremely concerning. It is important to note that CAP is not a bonus for our Irish farmers. It is the foundation that supports family farming, food production, rural communities and, of course, our economy. Any weakening of the CAP budget would be a direct threat to our economy, to rural Ireland and to the family farm. We need urgent intervention.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising this important issue. Like her, I met with the IFA last week at the Ploughing Championship and I acknowledged its concerns based on the current draft proposals for the multi-annual financial framework in Europe on which negotiation is continuing. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste as Minister of Finance, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, are all co-ordinating Ireland's position on that but also

reflecting our position in the context of the European Presidency at the moment. CAP represents a long-standing strategic investment not only in Ireland's position in terms of agrifood production but also supporting farmers in the context of the importance of the European Union's food security. There is a long way to go in this negotiation. Clearly, we want to see protection of farmers but also continued enhancement of agrifood production in this country. We need to support farm incomes and also support generational renewal which is another priority that the IFA and others have referenced. We will continue to work on that over the months ahead.

Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) (Smokefree Generation) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts 2002 to 2024 to prohibit the sale and supply of tobacco products, nicotine products and nicotine inhalation products to persons born on or after 1 January 2009; to provide for related offences, enforcement and penalties; and to provide for related matters.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this. The purpose of this Bill is to amend the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts 2002 to 2024 to introduce smoke-free generation measures, whereby the sale and supply of tobacco products, nicotine products and nicotine inhalation products will be prohibited to persons born on or after the 1 January 2019, those who turn 18 on or after 1 January 2027. The idea behind this measure is that it will provide a rolling age restriction, ensuring that the specified cohort will never be legally permitted to purchase some of these products over their lifetime. We know that about 100 people in Ireland die every week from nicotine-related illnesses and about 1,000 people are hospitalised every week.

The major causes, as we know, are cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, and heart disease. The RCSI in estimating the costs of smoking has calculated that in Ireland there are about 5 million years in shorter lives as a result of smoking, 2.5 million years in productivity lost and the net cost to our healthcare system is €20.2 billion. Even in pure economic terms, being able to address this issue is critical.

This legislation has strong support from organisations such as the Irish Cancer Society, the Irish Heart Foundation and many medics operating in this area. I am very grateful for their support and for the engagement that I have had with them over the past number of months in the preparation of this legislation. I also know that many youth groups and organisations support this. FDYS in Wexford raised a lot of awareness about the dangers of vapes to young people. Comhairle na nÓg right around the country, including in Wexford, Donegal, Mayo and Kerry, as well as at a national level have expressed continued concern that in many ways we are losing the battle against nicotine. As the Taoiseach rightly pointed out recently, a lot of these nicotine and tobacco companies are now using vaping as their way to create a new generation of addicts.

We should be rightly proud in this country of the leadership shown by the Taoiseach when he was Minister for health when he led the ban on smoking in the workplace over a quarter of a century ago. Recently the Minister of State, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, has made

some very positive moves in restricting flavoured vapes and the fancy packaging which are very deliberately targeted at young people. However, we need to go further.

As Members will know, similar legislation is being considered in New Zealand in the UK. I have yet to meet an older person who is a smoker who has ever said that they were glad that they took it up. They regret having started. I am not saying this will be the silver bullet that will solve all the problems that are there. There will still be the challenge with the black market and the challenge of big tobacco seeking every way to find to find loopholes. However, I believe it sends a very clear message that we want to encourage a smoke-free generation. We want to ensure that more people will not suffer from cancer, COPD, and heart and lung diseases. We want to keep people out of hospitals as a result of nicotine and tobacco.

The Bill is a relatively simple Bill. I am glad the Taoiseach has said that he will be considering matters in this regard. I hope that Ireland can once again provide leadership in this space and that the Government will take on board the proposals in this smoke-free generation Bill and that we would move to a situation whereby the sale or supply of tobacco, nicotine, nicotine-inhaling products or any nicotine product intended for consumption, including nicotine patches, will be prohibited so that anybody who is born on or after 1 January 2009 will be free from those products.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Dublin Local Authorities (Visitor Accommodation Levy) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to enable each Dublin local authority to adopt a scheme imposing a visitor accommodation levy on overnight stays in tourist accommodation within its functional area; to provide for the rate, collection, remittance and ring-fencing of revenue from such a levy; to provide for public consultation prior to the adoption of any such scheme; to provide for a register of accommodation providers, for the appointment of authorised officers and for compliance and enforcement; to provide for co-operation between Dublin local authorities and with digital accommodation platforms; to amend the Local Government Act 2001; and to provide for related matters.

In my time in this House, I have noticed two things. First, those of us who are not Ministers are often slower to identify how we raise revenue but perhaps quicker to identify how we might

spend it and I include myself in that category. Second, in this House when we are trying to solve a local or regional issue, we often do so with a centralised or national solution. I believe this legislation challenges both of those conventions.

Today I am introducing the Dublin Local Authorities (Visitor Accommodation Levy) Bill 2026, which will provide a legal framework for Dublin's four local authorities to decide whether to introduce a levy on paid overnight accommodation in their local authority area. The legislation will not automatically introduce the levy; instead it will give local elected councils the power to decide whether such a levy should apply in their council area and what the rate should be set at. This is about giving local government the option that it simply does not have at present.

I should say I love my city and I love welcoming people to this city. Tourism is a really important part of our local economy but it also comes at a cost. In proposing this legislation, I am providing the four Dublin local authorities a sustainable way to invest in their tourism offering. They do so very successfully at the moment, supporting events that we see year in, year out, events like the St. Patrick's Festival, college football events, international sporting events, high-profile concerts and, importantly, local culture and historic festivals.

By maintaining and improving the public realm, tourism infrastructure and the services that make Dublin attractive, we can continue to make it a great place to visit. There is a strong case for allowing our local authorities to consider introducing a visitor levy. Importantly, this Bill would leave that decision with the elected councillors in each of the local authorities.

Under the Bill, a council would choose to introduce a levy whereby it could charge either a fixed amount per person per night or a percentage or a nightly rate accommodation charge. A maximum percentage rate would be set by the Minister through regulations, and other regulations would apply. Before any scheme would be adopted, a local authority would be required to publish its proposed scheme at least 60 days in advance and invite submissions from members of the public and relevant stakeholders. A report on that consultation process would have to be published before elected members voted on the proposal. Any money raised through the levy would be ring-fenced in a separate account and could not be used for general expenditure by a council. Instead, revenue could be used for tourism infrastructure and services, improvements to the public realm, culture, sporting or heritage events, sustainable tourism initiatives and other purposes connected with the impact of tourism.

If the councils choose to introduce a levy, Dubliners should be able to see clearly where that money goes and how it is improving the city and county. That is why transparency and ring-fencing of the funding are important parts of the Bill. The introduction of the Bill follows months of work by my party and other parties. In fact, this conversation has been taking place for many years. When I first served on the council, people like Mary Friel and Dermot Lacey of the Labour Party, Deputy Geoghegan, my coalition colleague, and Green Party, Sinn Féin and other councillors discussed it and the additional revenue streams that could be generated. I am of the view that there is a great deal of consensus around this issue.

We have moved from discussing the idea to developing the research to now putting legislation before the Dáil. I want to see the Bill progress now through the Oireachtas in order that local authorities in Dublin will have the option to avail of it. There appears to be widespread support at Government level. I have heard comments from Ministers and the

Taoiseach on the matter. In putting the legislation forward, I am challenging the Government to move now from support to implementation. I am assisting it with legislation that will allow it to prioritise the issue.

There are more than 17 sections in the Bill. Section 3 explains how the levy would be calculated and section 12 would permit local authorities in Dublin to share administrative services and enter into co-operation agreements with online booking platforms for easier collection. Many of the sections deal with the pragmatic and practical steps that would need to be taken to facilitate the implementation of the Bill.

I commend the Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Order of the Dáil of 16th June, 2026, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those next set down to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence, without any change to the allocation of Priority Questions:

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Minister for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and the Marine

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht

Minister for Health

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Order of the Dáil of 16th June, 2026, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those next set down to the Minister for Transport shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence, without any change to the allocation of Priority Questions:

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Minister for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and the Marine

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht

Minister for Health

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

Question put and agreed to.

Fifteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 23rd September, 2026, approves the Fifteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 18th September, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Questions to the Taoiseach are being taken by the Government Chief Whip. The Deputy who tabled the question is not present. We are slightly ahead of time.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): If the Deputy is not present, there is nobody to ask the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is correct. There is nothing we can do in that regard. I thank the Chief Whip.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Tairgim: “Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois.”

I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 go dtí an Dáil. The Bill contains measures to amend the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, the Civil Registration Act 2004 and the Charities Act 2009. This reflects the wide range of areas under the remit of the Departments of Social Protection and Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. I thank all the civil servants involved in the preparation of the Bill.

On the social welfare side, a key provision in the Bill is to provide the legislative basis for public service cardholders to be able to use their cards, of their own volition and on a purely voluntary basis, as a form of identity. Currently, only public sector bodies specified in law can request and accept the public services card as a form of identity. If any other institution does so, for example, a bank, credit union or utility company, it is guilty of an offence. The amendment provided in the Bill will facilitate people to offer their public services card as a form of identity if they wish to do so. It will not enable institutions to request it, but they will no longer be guilty of an offence if they accept it as proof of identity.

The Bill also provides the legislative basis for a person to be able to request that their date of birth be inscribed on their public services card. Again, this will only be included if the cardholder requests it. The intention is to facilitate people who may wish to use their card as a form of age verification. The Bill also provides for a range of amendments to improve the functioning of the social welfare appeals office and a number of technical amendments to keep the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 up to date as part of an ongoing programme of legislative modernisation.

On the civil registration side, there are two main types of provisions included in the Bill. One set will make improvements to the functioning of the General Register Office. I will outline the specific amendments when I go through the Bill section by section. The second set of amendments includes a range of proposals from my colleague the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. While the Civil Registration Act 2004 falls under my remit, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality has responsibility for birth information and tracing and for the State's response to illegal birth registrations.

The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 contains a range of measures to address issues arising for people affected by illegal birth registration, as well as amendments to the Civil Registration Act 2004. In the course of engagements with officials in the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, persons affected by illegal birth registrations requested improvements to the terminology used. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has worked closely with officials from my Department and the special advocate for survivors to develop the amendments, including changing the title of the register, created by Part 9 of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, from the "Register under Part 3B" to the "Register of Lived Identity", and changing the term used to "withdrawal" of an entry in the register of births rather than "cancellation".

In order to ensure, as far as possible, that all affected people's views were heard and taken into account, the proposed changes were the subject of a public consultation which ran from 13 March to 10 April of this year. Some 166 responses were received from affected persons, others who were adopted or boarded out and their families and friends. There was overwhelming support for the proposed changes. The Bill also amends access to the register of lived identity to make it more open, where an affected person so wishes. Importantly, these proposed amendments will not affect the rights of people who wish for their entry to remain private.

The third Act amended by this Bill is the Charities Act of 2009. Members of the Charity Appeals Tribunal provide an essential service to the charities sector in Ireland. I thank the chairman and members of the tribunal for their ongoing expertise, commitment and careful consideration of each case that comes before them. The amendments to the Act are wholly technical and operational in nature. However, they are essential in supporting the ongoing efficient operation of the tribunal and ensuring that it can deliver on the statutory requirements relating to it.

Members will be aware that the general scheme of the Bill was the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny in April and May this year. I thank the Chair, Deputy John Paul O'Shea, and all members of the committee for their work in this process. I welcome the support of the committee in progressing the amendments to the Civil Registration Act and the Charities Act. The joint committee's pre-legislative report contained a number of recommendations about the digitalisation of services. It wanted to make sure that offline application options remain possible, that digital systems are accessible and inclusive, that the impact on take-up is monitored and that there is engagement with the representative groups. I could not agree more. I am strongly committed to this. My Department and its officials will deliver.

My Department's strategy is to encourage the take-up of online services on a digital-by-desire basis, rather than to require or compel customers to use the online options. In designing and in delivering digital services, accessibility is always a key focus in the Department, with accessibility testing completed on all services being developed on our digital platforms before they go live. Customers are routinely advised of the various channels available to access Department services, enabling them to choose the option that is most appropriate to their circumstances. Officials regularly engage with advocacy groups, representative organisations and customers to inform continuous service improvement across all of our delivery channels.

The report also made a number of recommendations about the processing of personal data. I put on record that the processing of personal data, including very sensitive personal data, is

subject to clearly specified safeguards under the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended. It is also done in accordance with GDPR requirements. My Department actively implements its range of oversight arrangements for all of its processing of personal data. I have taken particular note of the recommendations relating to informing individuals that the use of a public services card is voluntary, either by legislation or by a public awareness campaign. I support the underlying objective of these recommendations. I have asked officials to examine them further in advance of Committee Stage.

I will go through the Bill section by section. The Bill contains 26 sections in four Parts. In Part 1, sections 1 and 2 contain standard provisions of the Short Title, construction, collective citation, definitions and commencement. Section 3 provides for the repeal of section 14 of the Civil Registration (Electronic Registration) Act 2024. This is a consequential amendment. This section shall come into effect following the commencement of section 21 of this Bill.

Part 2 amends the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005. Section 4 provides for the repeal of pre-retirement allowance and removes references to the scheme in the principal Act. This scheme has been closed to new applicants since 2007. There are no customers in receipt of this payment. Section 5 is part of the legislation modernisation programme. It provides for an update of references to tax regulations in the principal Act. Section 6 provides for the abolition of the provision whereby a person may be disqualified from receipt of jobseeker's benefit for a certain period and in certain circumstances when he or she receives a redundancy payment. This provision is no longer a requirement since the introduction of a pay-related jobseeker's benefit scheme. Section 7 provides for a number of technical amendments to the name of schemes consequent to the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2025.

Section 8 provides for amendments to section 263 to allow a public services cardholder, at his or her request, to inscribe his or her date of birth on the public services card to enable the public services card to be used as a means of verifying age. The cardholder may also request the removal of the date of birth from the public services card. In addition, it allows the cardholder to offer the public services card at his or her own discretion as a form of identity for a purpose that is not a transaction with a specified body, that is not a public sector body that is specified in Schedule 5 of the Act. It clarifies that the public services card remains the property of the Minister for Social Protection at all times, and that the card is non-transferable. Section 9 amends section 300A of the principal Act, which provides the statutory basis for deciding officers to seek a medical assessor's opinion in determining entitlement to certain benefits. This amendment further provides that appeals officers and the chief appeal officer may seek the opinion of a medical assessor when deciding questions related to the relevant statutory duties.

Section 10 provides that the chief appeals officer may remit a decision back to an appeals officer for his or her consideration in circumstances where remittal will resolve the matter faster overall. Section 11 provides for the allowance of an appeal to the High Court on a point of law from any decision of the chief appeals officer, whether revised or unrevised.

Part 3 amends the Civil Registration Act 2004. Section 12 provides for the definitions used in Part 3. Sections 13, 16, 18 and 22 substitute "register" or "register under 3B" with "register of lived identity" in various sections. Section 14 provides that the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, can register the birth of a child with the father's details on foot of a court order, naming him as the father of the child. Section 15 provides for the re-registration of a birth, to correct

the name of a father where the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, is the qualified informant and where that agency has been granted a court order, naming the father of a child under section 35 of the Status of Children Act 1987. Section 17 provides for the substitution of section 30H, "Correction, cancellation or registration of entries in register of births", with a new section, "Error in relevant entry". Section 19 amends section 30J, which provides that an tArd-Chláraitheoir maintains an index to the register of lived identity and sets out who may apply for a search of the register and the index. This amendment allows a person who has been nominated by the affected person or a member of the public to make an application to an tArd-Chláraitheoir where the person affected by the illegal birth registration gives his or her permission in writing.

Section 20 provides for the public inspection of information on the index linking the register of births and the register of lived identity where the affected person to whom the information pertains has given his or her consent to an tArd-Chláraitheoir to make his or her entry publicly available. Section 21 provides that a medical practitioner who attended to a deceased person outside of a hospital or other institution may authorise a person to perform the medical practitioner's duty to notify the particulars of a death to an tArd-Chláraitheoir. Section 23 allows an tArd-Chláraitheoir to correct a factual or clerical error in an online registration where that error has been notified to an tArd-Chláraitheoir by any person, including the staff of an tArd-Chláraitheoir.

Section 24 updates the provisions for vital statistics in section 73 of the Civil Registration Act 2004 to align with the current practices on the compilation, abstraction and publication of vital statistics, which is now primarily conducted by the Central Statistics Office. However, I bring to the attention of Deputies that following further consultation with the Central Statistics Office, I am of a view that a more extensive review of the vital statistics provisions in the Civil Registration Act 2004 and its relationship with provisions in the Statistics Act 1993 would put the processing of vital statistics on a more robust legal footing. For that reason, I intend to introduce a Committee Stage amendment to remove section 24 from the Bill to allow sufficient time for my officials to liaise with the General Register Office, the Central Statistics Office and the Office of the Attorney General on this matter. Section 25 amends the particulars required when registering a birth or stillbirth so that signatures are only required where applicable, given the option of online registration.

Part 4 of this Bill amends the Charities Act 2009. Section 26 amends section 33 of the 2009 Act with revised definitions for the relevant Minister, the relevant body and the relevant regulator.

In addition, it amends section 77 of the 2009 Act, setting the quorum of the Charity Appeals Tribunal at three members, including the chairperson. These amendments also provide for the nomination of a deputy chairperson to chair a hearing of a tribunal in the absence of the appointed chairperson. Finally, it provides that witnesses before the tribunal will have an immunity from disclosing information or providing evidence about a certain subject.

This is mainly a technical Bill. I thank the Deputies who were involved in pre-legislative scrutiny. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister will know my views on this because we have had a discussion about it. For the purpose of putting them on the record, however, I cannot emphasise

how foolish I believe it will be to allow this Bill to pass in its current form, owing to the provisions specifically in section 8, which seek to expand further the functions of the public services card, PSC. This is being done at a time when that very card and the legal underpinning are being called into question in court. The Minister will know that his colleague, the former Minister, Regina Doherty, famously said in 2018 that the PSC was "mandatory" but "not compulsory". We have been asking ourselves at the committee - the Minister might not say in this House, but he might have scratched his head and asked - what, in the name of God, does that actually mean? In her confused statement, I believe she gave away what the Government's intentions are, which is to keep expanding this card and its use and to make it into a *de facto* national ID card without the proper security features that any such card should have.

Though the Government has consistently tried to row back on the former Minister, Regina Doherty's statements, insisting that the card is voluntary in practice, it risks becoming effectively mandatory because when a single ID card becomes widely accepted across the public and private sectors, people will feel a pressure to use it. This is a fact and there are multiple international examples of this. I scratch my head about this all the time. In the same breath as the Minister says that it is voluntary, I also know that the free travel pass cannot be accessed without it. That is not voluntary. A person can volunteer to not have the free travel pass. That is not fair. Most of these people have worked all their lives. People look forward to getting the free travel pass. Of course they do. Now they have to have the PSC. That is not fair nor voluntary. The only thing a person can volunteer to do is not get the travel pass to which they are entitled.

I am concerned, as are others, that this centralised use could also weaken the security of the PSC. The Government has consistently dismissed the concerns in its response to the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, Digital Rights Ireland and my own contribution during pre-legislative scrutiny. National ID cards are tough and difficult to make. They should be, and for a reason. Biometric data is ever-more sensitive in our changing world and the absolute bare minimum provisions needed, I believe, are at least that the card be protected by an up-to-date, state-of-the-art security feature, so that a person may use a virtual PPSN rather than revealing their PPSN; that the public service identity dataset is not used in any way, shape or form for biometric matching; and that the PSC must allow cryptographic authentication. This is not the case with this card as it stands. I am baffled as to what the rush is. A legal case is under way. The Minister is well aware of that. It is entirely possible to wait for the outcome of that. If the Minister is so set on putting this card into use, he should wait until it has proper legislative underpinning. I believe the current underpinning is quite shaky. MyGovID and SAFE Registration still do not have a proper statutory basis.

I am conscious that there is a lot more in this legislation than just the public services card but it is the one that took up some time when we considered the Bill in the committee. It is the one around which I have most concerns. As the Minister has said, the rest of the Bill is technical in nature. This is really important. People in Digital Rights Ireland and the ICCL, serious people who have given over time to study this, are sounding alarm bells. The Government is still parroting that mortifying line from the former Minister that it is mandatory but not compulsory. It is compulsory if a person wants to have the free travel pass. It is becoming more and more embedded. We are heading down a road without proper discussion and consultation. We are heading in the direction of a national ID card and I do not believe that this is what people want. In the absence of a discussion, it is said of the public services card

that a person might like it but they do not have to have it. The Government will then add little bits to it until, eventually, we find ourselves in a situation where people cannot access the travel pass or public services without it. It is becoming increasingly more difficult. The Minister said in his opening remarks that he wants to make sure that offline application options remain possible, and that the digital systems are accessible and inclusive. They have to be accessible and inclusive to people who have legitimate concerns in relation to the storing of their biometric and other data. They are not. For as long as they are not, we have no option but to oppose this.

The Minister said that the Department's strategy is to encourage the take-up of online services on a digital-by-desire basis but that is not the case with at least one aspect. We know that this is going to grow. He told us that he took particular note of the recommendations relating to informing individuals that the use of the PSC is voluntary, either by legislation or by a public awareness campaign, and that he supports the underlying objective of the recommendations and that he has asked his officials to examine them further. We will have this discussion on Committee Stage and I look forward to it. I hope the Minister looks forward to receiving the amendments that I will be putting down and having that engagement, because it is important. We would be foolish, as would the Minister, to stand in this Chamber and pretend that there are not legitimate concerns. People are concerned. They are concerned about the processing of their data, about giving over information without necessarily knowing that the information is needed and that the information will be handled correctly. There is an ongoing legal case, which I will not refer to. In that atmosphere and given that fact, it is incumbent on us to go slowly on this, to have that consultation and to listen to those experts. There was no meaningful consultation, no quantifiable way of establishing whether or not people actually want this card. I note that representatives from the Department say that people want the card but it is not asking if people want the card. They are applying for it in many instances because they do not have a choice but that is not the same thing as saying that they want the card.

I look forward to engaging with this legislation on Committee Stage. I look forward to debating amendments that will be brought forward by myself and others. I assure the Minister of our co-operation in getting business done as quickly as we possibly can but he can also be on notice that we will not rush to a timetable that may or may not suit other people. We will be putting those concerns to the fore. People value their data. More and more, people are talking about concerns in relation to their own data protection and GDPR. This legislation does not do anything to allay the cautions that are necessary in relation to those concerns. For that reason, we will be putting forward amendments. In his remarks, the Minister has signalled a willingness to bring amendments on Committee Stage for certain aspects. I ask him to have a look at the points made by the ICCL and Digital Rights Ireland, to take them on board and to bring forward consequent amendments that will reflect the concerns that are out there.

Deputy Mark Ward: The majority of the provisions in this Bill are procedural, and, as Deputy O'Reilly said already, we will not oppose them. However, section 8 of this Bill must be removed. It must be made explicitly clear that a person should have access to any service available without using a public services card other than the Department of Social Protection. This must reflect the current legal position arising from the agreement between the Data Protection Commission and the Department of Social Protection. If enacted, section 8 would lead to the public services card becoming a *de facto* general-purpose ID card. The Government

is making the public services card mandatory by stealth. I will give the Minister a personal example. My driver's licence was up for renewal. I applied to have it renewed but I could not without a public services card because I had changed address recently.

4 o'clock

I had not got a public services card, I never had a need for a public services card and I never had any interest in obtaining one but because you cannot renew your licence or learner permit online without a public services card, and because I needed a change of address, I had no choice but to apply for a public services card. I have one in my wallet as we speak. There was no other way to resolve this issue without my getting a public services card, so in this instance it was mandatory. As I said, the only voluntary part of this was for me to not drive any more. I need a licence. There are other cases, as has been raised already. If you are over 65 years of age, you cannot access free travel without a public services card. The Minister said in his opening remarks that the use of the public services card was voluntary but that is not voluntary to my mind. If over-65s want to access free travel, they have to have public services cards, and I just spoke about how I needed it to renew my driver licence. For me, that was mandatory.

Turning to section 10, I tabled a number of questions to the Minister for oral answer. They were not chosen, so I will bring them up here instead, as they are loosely related to section 10, which relates to the Chief Appeals Officer. I hope that will lead to quicker decisions being made. That needs to be done.

I want to raise the issue of appeals when things fall through the cracks. The Department of Social Protection is using GoFundMe-type fundraisers to deny people exceptional needs payments. I had a case recently when a single mother passed away, leaving a young family. Most of them are under the age of 18 and it will mostly be left to the oldest daughter to take over their guardianship. The community has rallied around this young family in these tragic circumstances, which is welcome, and it did a GoFundMe to deal with costs that might occur down the line. It raised a moderate amount, not a huge amount. One of the children, who at the time was a young adult, applied for an exceptional needs payment to cover funeral expenses but that was denied because of the GoFundMe. The applicant was never asked to disclose this, which leads me to believe that somewhere in the Department there is someone who, when they see a tragic death in a community, goes online to look to see if a GoFundMe was set up. That is immoral to me and does not sit right. Furthermore, when someone applies for an exceptional needs payment, they are asked to disclose the means they have at the moment. They are not asked to disclose any future means they may have. At the time of the application, the family had not received any benefit from the GoFundMe - there is not even any guarantee this family will receive the money from it - yet it was assessed on it anyway. I submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister on this recently to see how widespread the practice was because I do not believe it is an isolated incident.

Another issue related to appeals that is coming up with us regularly has to do with how fuel allowance is awarded. If you are on an invalidity pension and you are able to move onto a CE scheme – and it is welcome when someone is looking to come off invalidity payments and come back to the workspace – you are not allowed to apply for fuel allowance. I am asking that this be examined. Also, if an adult is working and still living at home with their parents, the parents are not allowed to apply for the fuel allowance. I have raised how this scenario of

working adults living at home is happening more often because of the housing crisis and I would like the Minister to look at it.

I wish to raise a final matter that I have raised before. I have noticed a pattern with people coming to me with the same problem around the domiciliary carers allowance. A very high percentage of applicants seem to be turned down on their first application only to get it on appeal. Figures I received last year told me that 33% of all first-time applicants for the domiciliary care allowance were refused. Fifty percent of those appealed and of the 2,146 appeals, over 1,300 were successful. On that evidence, I would recommend to any parent out there who was denied domiciliary carers allowance to appeal it because on the evidence I have from the Minister's Department, they are likely to win. As one parent said to me, you would think the Government just wants people to go away after the first application is denied. To be honest, looking at these figures, it is hard not to agree with that sentiment.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: As I follow my two colleagues, the Minister will have got the idea that we have a particular problem with section 8, and why would we not? Anyone who had needed State services in the last while knows that, in order to access them, particularly online, a public services card is required. We need to just knock the idea that it is voluntary on its head straight away. We know there are huge issues. For want of a better term, how the State came upon something like 70% of the biometric information and data was illegal. I would like that point answered.

There is a real issue. Deputy Ward spoke about his driver licence. I can speak about my own young fellow and his permit. He is not driving at the moment, which can be a nuisance to me. Some of that delay is down to him but there is also the fact that there was a requirement for a public services card. There has to be a greater element of truth around the fact that this is becoming a requirement, an almost requirement or something where the State has made things so hard that it may as well be a requirement for State services. With many of the people who come into our constituency offices, we tell them that is the easiest way to do it. If what the Department is looking for is a State or national ID, then it should be clear about that.

There is an issue about the information and how it is contained. Deputy O'Reilly spoke about how we had no level of security over what is required. We have all spoken about our own information and the data analytics being carried out by firms that are interested in making money. There is a better knowledge of GDPR and data privacy. When the State has this information, we need to ensure that it has been obtained legally, is operated correctly and is protected with a sufficient level of security, which I do not think is currently the case.

Similar to the point raised by Deputy Ward, I have a very specific ask around additional needs payments. I have dealt with an issue for a number of constituents, some who have got over the line and others who have not, who have had boilers that went kaput and they did not have the money or time to undergo a full Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, warmer homes retrofit or whatever. Previously, they would have been able to apply for housing for older people supports from the local authority but now the only thing you can get if you want an oil or gas boiler is a refurbished boiler. I challenge anyone to go out and try to find one of those. I would say it would be very difficult. I would even guess it was impossible. The service was provided in particular for those who were older and who would not have had the money to pay for this or to do the full retrofit required. We all know the best thing that can

be done for a lot of older houses is to ensure they are proofed from the point of view of decent windows, doors and insulation. It does not always make great sense to introduce things like air-to-water pumps or renewable forms of energy. We know the necessity of ensuring that the house is airtight. My office is wasting time making multiple applications that fail just so people can look to apply for an additional needs payment.

I have a parliamentary question in to the Minister. I also have a parliamentary question in to the Minister for housing on the reverse. It is an issue that needs to be addressed. We get that in a perfect scenario we would be dealing with brand-new builds that are airtight and looking at air-to-air-type heating systems that work perfectly in those sets of circumstances, although that is very difficult to do from a retrofit point of view. The fact is that a huge number of people do not have the resources to outlay that money, and at this point in time a resource that was available to them previously is not available, whether that is through an additional needs payment or, as I said, through some of the supports that were available through the local authority. Between the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Minister for housing, it is something that needs to be addressed.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister and his officials for bringing forward this Bill, much of which contains, as he said, technical and administrative rationalisations. That is the unseen and unglamorous work in legislation and Departments but it is important, and I sincerely thank the officials for doing it. Improvements to the operations of the Charities Regulator are very welcome to ensure public confidence in the efficiency and effectiveness of its governance. Charities do incredible work across this State in aiding our most vulnerable, and proper administration, enabled by legislation and the regulator, is critical to proper oversight. I also welcome the adjustments to the Civil Registration Act to make it more inclusive for the modern era. It is not very often that we do this continuously in Government Departments, and when it does happen it should be applauded. Progress sometimes means reform, and this is a very good example of it. I also thank the Minister and his officials for the meaningful engagement with those adopted or boarded out. I hope that is progress that continues hereafter. Lastly, I acknowledge the changes to the eligibility requirements for jobseeker's benefit to include those who have received redundancy payments. Losses of income and livelihoods should not be compounded by a State that does not do all it can to help people in that moment. The change here to include people who have recently been made redundant is very welcome, especially in the context of cascading layoffs in many companies in my constituency.

I encourage the Minister, however, to explore how people who are in self-employment and who may have catastrophic collapses in their income are supported. Many contractors in these companies in my constituency employ people who are dependent on occasional gig-like work, who earn on average much less than PAYE workers do and who need to be similarly supported so they are not put into incredible precarity. There is work to be done there, and if the principle of this change in the Bill is to support people who have lost their income regardless of redundancy payments or other means, that should be a universal principle applied equally.

There is, however, a core issue in this Bill that featured prominently in the pre-legislative scrutiny at committee, which I will now turn to, namely section 8 of the Bill, which seeks to amend legislation for an operation of the public services card. I want to be very clear in acknowledging the good parts of the public services card. It is a free card, unlike other forms

of identification, like a driver's licence or a passport. That is of particular importance to people in low-income populations. I support the provisions of the Bill in ensuring that individuals are in control of who or what entity they give their public services card information to and can do so only with the cardholder's consent. That is a good principle. The existing use of the public services card in engagement with public services is primarily for social protection payments. Public use has increased drastically since its introduction, and many entities, like credit unions and NGOs, have voiced support for more widespread allowance of the use of the card to facilitate ordinary transactions, particularly for populations without a driver's licence or a passport.

There is no denying, however, that the public services card as an identity card has had a controversial past in this Chamber and outside of it since its introduction as a pilot by then Labour Minister Joan Burton in 2011. Today, 15 years later, there are 3.25 million cards in circulation, and 4.5 million in the population are SAFE registered, or have registered their information with the data system governing the card, including supplying biometric data that can be used by facial recognition software. Core to the criticism of the public services card in the past, including by the Data Protection Commission and the Comptroller and Auditor General, is that there has been no primary legislation, business case or meaningful public debate on the issue of a broader digital identity infrastructure for citizens of this State. In effect, the card has introduced a State identity infrastructure through the back door. In 2012 the Department started using the card's biometric facial data with facial recognition technology, and in 2025 the Data Protection Commissioner found that this use was "unlawful" and levied a fine of €550,000 against the Department of Social Protection, a decision later appealed by the Department and currently before the courts. It is notable that the use of facial recognition technology on this data means that the Department and, by extension, others, including the Garda, can facially detect up to 70% of the population. This leaves some significant cause for concern. Notably, the DPC has said in committee that if it wins the case, it may use its full enforcement powers against the Department, namely:

Where we make a finding of unlawful processing of personal data, we can require the processing to cease, ban the processing from recommencing and require the data to be deleted. If our decision in this case is upheld, what we will be looking for is for those types of corrective measures to be implemented ...

This would effectively mean that all facial images may have to be purged from the Department's databases and the practice of collecting them and using them in facial recognition by the Department would have to halt. To date, no High Court or Supreme Court judgment has determined whether the PSC scheme is lawful or unlawful.

The governance, legislative basis and operations of the data associated with citizens through the PSC have been challenged repeatedly by other NGOs, including the ICCL, UCD's centre for digital policy and other concerned citizens. Some have gone so far as to call it "unlawful". The central controversy surrounding the card in Ireland historically has been its use, or potential use, as an identity card without being called one, or such use being legislated for, or this being the subject of sufficient public debate about the need, business case, purpose or risks associated with such use. I am reminded here, as were other speakers, of the radio interview in which then Fine Gael Minister Regina Doherty declared it was "mandatory" but "not compulsory". Today many social protection services and, reportedly, many other public services are in effect

not easily accessible without a public services card. One witness at committee, Dr. Elizabeth Farries of the UCD centre for digital policy, said it was "becoming effectively mandatory". Notwithstanding the concerns about the PSC and identity infrastructure as they currently exist, much of my core concern during our pre-legislative scrutiny focused on how the scheme may be applied in the future. As Dr. Ferries described, the PSC enables a "broad interoperable identity infrastructure in which data sets become linkable, profiling becomes easier and information collection for one purpose migrates into others". On the question of function creep, or the data that would be used for things that it was not originally intended to be used for, there is precedent, as was reported to the committee. Given recent pronouncements by the Minister for culture and the President of the European Commission with regard to digital ID and integration of such IDs to authorise access to social media, there is some cause for concern that such identity infrastructure would extend use into the digital sphere and, in particular, social media. Dr. T.J. McIntyre of the ICCL said at committee that he suspected the effort from the Department of Social Protection and the Department of public expenditure and reform:

... was to become an all-in-one public identification database, ... all of which is viewable by everybody and every government department. ... The problem is that, as things stand, the underlying database of the public services card ... is essentially a 360 degree view of the individual which contains all this information and does not have these more granular access controls in place regarding who can see what and which, if it is expanded for identity verification or age verification in other contexts, will unnecessarily leak information in those other contexts as well. There are fraud risks associated with giving out too much of this data.

If the future of the SAFE data, or PSC data, in particular facial recognition data, is the starting point of a more comprehensive database of activity of people on this island, the further contention is that this could lead to a kind of Big Brother or surveillance state infrastructure, including the use of such technology to profile the population. This was the most significant warning from witnesses - that the use of this data and the associated technologies could underpin a surveillance architecture through facial recognition. Dr. Ferries highlighted this repeatedly as a future risk. There are, she said, risks in surveillance associated with "proportionality, democratic oversight, discrimination risks and the protection of fundamental rights showing up time and again".

It is clear that there should have been a more comprehensive national debate on the question of national identity infrastructure. Primary legislation should have been moved, and the question of the primary uses of such infrastructure, the business case for its costs, the benefits, advantages or disadvantages and the oversight of such a system should have been part of that debate. We have still not had that. However, I acknowledge the public desire that the State facilitate the use of public services through more modern technologies. Many would argue that the State needs to modernise even more, and that public service cards yield usability benefits to the general public.

Since independence the Republic has had no major crisis of civil liberties. We live in a liberal society where privacy is respected in virtually all aspects of the law. Ireland also enjoys a fairly high level of trust among the public and the organs of the State. There is an expectation that they will interact with them in a fair way. This is internationally unusual. There are countless examples of other countries' police or military infrastructure being used against the

populace in a systematic way. This has led, in other jurisdictions, to an inherent distrust of the state holding data on the person, restrictions on the use of that data and stronger legal and constitutional protections for privacy, confidentiality and proper oversight and governance. In the age of information technology, the ability of any state to use personal information for nefarious purposes has extended. The linking of data sets has become a much easier proposition than it was in the past, leading to a higher functionality for state systems in a variety of use cases. In the case of domestic surveillance of the population, new frontiers have opened and been pursued by governments internationally. That must be opposed and condemned, and I join anyone in that mission.

Notwithstanding Ireland's unique peaceful and lawful experience in these areas, there is always a risk that a future government or administration could use the infrastructure of the State to encroach on civil liberties, to target minority populations, for instance, or suppress political dissent. Furthermore, should the data be accessed by unscrupulous actors like hackers, compromised individuals within State bodies or foreign state actors, especially in the age of supercharged invasive AI, individuals could be targeted using the information held by the State without proper protection. There is a real risk that the infrastructure we build today could be misused.

From the perspective of the Oireachtas it is difficult to make an assessment of the proper governance of this data, or its future uses without more information on how the Department is using it, so I sought to do just that. I recently corresponded with the Minister for Social Protection on issues that have been raised in pre-legislative scrutiny, namely the uses, governance and future plans for public services card infrastructure. The information he provided was helpful and I sincerely thank him and his officials for being transparent, clear and comprehensive on these matters. I have some follow-up questions that I will return to him in due course. One part of the correspondence did cause me some concern, however. Under section 41(b) of the Data Protection Act 2018, the Department of Social Protection can supply any public services card data to An Garda if deemed, "necessary and proportionate for the purposes [of] (a) of preventing a threat to national security, defence or public security [or] (b) of preventing, detecting, investigating or prosecuting criminal offences." That does create a wide applicability without oversight, judicial or otherwise, and may be used as a pretext for law enforcement powers to use the data for means beyond what we might reasonably expect for social protection purposes. International experience would suggest this can be misused. While I have every faith, as I believe most people in this country do, that An Garda acts with probity in its role, that unfortunately may not always be the case in the future.

In summary, I welcome most of the provisions in this Bill. I still have some outstanding concerns on the identity infrastructure in Ireland, in particular how it might be misused in the future. I encourage the Minister to engage with the Data Protection Commissioner and other concerned citizens on their concerns about civil liberties and privacy, and on how we build a modern state that works for all of us and protects us all.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026. While the Bill is largely technical in nature, it really matters to the people it impacts. The changes to the civil registration are straightforward and welcome. Tusla will be able to re-register a father's details for a child in its care on foot of a court declaration or order. The notification of deaths is

modernised so a hospital or doctor can authorise another person to notify the General Register Office within five working days. These are sensible and practical reforms, and I support them. The most important changes in this part of the Bill are for people whose births were illegally registered. For decades babies were placed with couples and registered as if they had been born to them. There was no adoption order. There was no record they could find. For many, there was no knowledge at all. In 2018, Tusla identified 126 illegal registrations in the records of St. Patrick's Guild, covering the years 1946 to 1969. That number has since risen to 151 confirmed cases. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 gave those affected the right to an accurate birth registration and legal recognition of the identity they have lived. That was real progress, and I acknowledge the work of successive Ministers, Tusla and the General Register Office in getting there.

This Bill builds on that. Under the current law an incorrect entry on the register of births is cancelled. For people who have lived their whole lives under the name, that word was deeply hurtful to them and to their families. It suggested that their identity had simply been struck out. This Bill removes that, and I welcome it. Instead, the entry will be noted, kept on the record, but no longer issued as a certificate. A certificate from the new registration of lived identity will serve wherever a birth certificate is required. The Bill also lets people choose who can see their record, namely family members, or the public if they wish. That is their direction and decision, and it is right that the law now respects it. I welcome that the Department consulted survivors on these changes earlier in the year. That should be standard and not the exception. It would be helpful if survivor groups were consulted at every stage of this legislation, and I hope Committee Stage will assist in that regard.

There is one gap I ask the Minister to look at. Only the affected person can nominate someone or open their record. Where that person has passed away, their children and grandchildren have no way to make that choice. A provision allowing a personal representative or next of kin to exercise it would be a reasonable amendment, and a helpful one. I ask the Minister to consider it for Committee Stage. Survivors and their families want to see the outstanding issues resolved. The youngest of those in the St. Patrick's Guild records are now in their 50s and the eldest are approaching 80 and time is ticking. I have raised the case of Susan Kiernan in this House before. Sadly, Susan has passed away. I know the Minister is aware of the case, as are many who have been in his position. These provisions also need a commencement order, and I urge the Minister to make it as soon as possible when the Bill is enacted.

I turn to the social protection appeals. The Bill sets a two-year window for requesting a review of a decision by an appeals officer or the chief appeals officer. That is sensible and it is in line with the approach to reviews elsewhere in the system. This Bill also gives the chief appeals officer a new power to annul a flawed decision and send it back to an appeals officer for fresh consideration. However, the bigger issue for most people is how long an appeal itself takes in the first place. I will return to that, and I know the Minister is prioritising it.

I turn to the public services card. Its establishment was messy. As an old Irish saying goes, "If I were going there, I would not start from here." I have always said that the Government should have introduced comprehensive and clear legislation at the outset. That said, I welcome the provisions allowing the card to be used as proof of identity, and as proof of age where the holder asks for their date of birth to be added. Passports and driving licences cost money and

many young people have neither. This will help them to prove who they are, to open a bank account and join a credit union, etc. It must remain the cardholder's choice, and the Bill keeps it an offence for anyone outside the public services to demand it.

A card is only useful if you can get one, however. Anyone without a current Irish passport cannot register through the MyGovID app, so they need an appointment in person. The most common public services card issue raised with me in my office is simply getting that appointment. The Minister will know that I have raised this on many occasions and in parliamentary questions. A proper online booking system available at every public services centre is necessary. My constituents in Dún Laoghaire and those around the country should be able to book a slot online, at a time that suits them, as they already can for driver's licences. I would welcome progress on this.

Equally, I would welcome progress on the time taken to process appeals. Behind every average is a person waiting. I have constituents who have waited significant periods for a final answer with no income in the meantime. Many of those appealing are people with disabilities, carers and families on low incomes. For them, every week of delay costs money that they do not have. Better first decisions would mean fewer appeals. Clearer information on how long an appeal would take would ease a great deal of worry. The appeals office should have the resources in it to clear the caseload.

Finally, as I have the Minister here and budget 2027 is approaching, I would like to highlight a number of points. It is clear households are going to face a very challenging winter. The war in the Gulf has doubled wholesale gas prices compared with last year. Electric Ireland raised its prices in July. SSE Airtricity's increase adds an average of €310 a year for 296,000 customers, and Bord Gáis Energy's increase will add an estimated €317 to the average household bill from 9 October. Gas prices are already around 90% higher than they were four or five years ago and electricity is around 70% higher. The situation has further deteriorated recently and a general energy credit needs to be examined to shield householders from the worst of the increases. We also need to see generous increases in pensions, social welfare payments and child benefit, so that income keeps pace with the cost of heating a home and feeding and clothing a family.

I ask the Minister to build on last year's progress in the budget, in particular on the fuel allowance, which rose to €38 a week in January, and families on the working family payment now qualify. That was the right decision. This year the rate should rise again and the income thresholds should be extended so that more households on modest incomes are brought in.

In the last few minutes remaining to me I wish to raise the amendment to the Charities Act 2009. I am aware of a recent case where a charity with no assets at all went through a huge rigmarole to try to merge with another charity. That needs to be streamlined. It might not be addressed in this particular amendment, but it is something that we need to be cognisant of. I accept there need to be safeguards around charities and a whole system around it but there needs to be a varying degree of charities, some of which can easily either cease to trade or merge with others because that is going to come more to the fore as time goes on.

I thank the Minister and his officials for their work on this Bill and in modernising services in the Department. I look forward to continuing to engage with him as this Bill progresses during and before the budget preparations.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House today. I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026. The Minister will be very much aware that in July of this year, I and other members of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development published our pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of this Bill. I want to address those key considerations that were brought forward from those who appeared before the committee. I note that the Department is taking into consideration the recommendations brought forward by the committee ahead of Committee Stage of the Bill. A change to the public services card is an important part of this Bill and has been subject of a lot of debate in the past. Witnesses before the committee raised concerns about the use of the public services card as a form of age verification. Will the Government give due consideration to these concerns? This is particularly important given the revelation that the Data Protection Commission found the Department of Social Protection unlawfully processed facial biometric data of approximately 70% of people over 15 years of age.

The second point made by members in the recommendations made by the committee was that:

"the scope, limits to the scope and intended use of the Public Service Card be clearly set out in legislation.

- Any proposals to extend the use of the Public Services Card to additional services be subject to appropriate legislative processes and oversight.
- the use of the Public Services Card be supported by clear safeguards and transparency measures, including clear rules on [the use of] data
- the voluntary nature of the Public Services Card be maintained in practice and monitored on [an] ongoing basis, to review that individuals are not disadvantaged where they choose not to use the card as a form of identification.

Given these, I seriously question whether this is necessary. The public services card had a clear rationale: it was for accessing social protection payments and services, and then it was broadened to Government services. Now, the Government is going further and extending this to the private sector, in effect, becoming a de facto national identity card. As a national Parliament, we cannot allow this debate to go on without the Government addressing this fact. Is this in any way linked to the Government's so-called digital wallet and any forthcoming online safety measures? I seriously question whether this is necessary and if it is, the Government should outline its point and not bypass a debate on what is, for all intents and purposes, a national identity card. The Government must outline its intention now, and as quickly as possible.

I note that a key part of the Bill deals with digitalisation. That being said, it is important to consider the impact this could have on a number of different cohorts, particularly older people and those in rural Ireland. According to the CSO, in 2025 34% of people aged 75 and over had never used the internet, while 17% of households said they did not have access to the internet because of a lack of digital skills. Furthermore, Age Action has also said that 62% of people aged 65 and over face digital exclusion.

Equally, many parts of rural Ireland have poor internet connectivity, if they have any at all. The CSO reported that in 2025 only 84% of households in the midlands, which includes my county of Kildare, had access to fixed broadband. This is below the national average of 87%. Also, the percentage of those without internet access because it is unavailable in their area has only decreased by 1%, from 5% in 2024 to 4% in 2025. While I welcome the aims of the Bill regarding digitalisation, as TDs we cannot allow digitalisation to become an additional barrier for older people and those who live in rural Ireland. Digitalisation can only be done with inclusiveness at its centre, and alongside further improvements in internet connections and digital literacy skills. An example of this challenge is with the roll-out of the MyWelfare online service. This is, again, a very welcome modernisation of access to social protection, but it has become a barrier for many older people who are trying to apply for critical payments but find it difficult to print forms and fill them in. Any further development and expansion of digital services must only be done in a way that is inclusive of all people accessing services, in particular older people. This was one of the recommendations brought forward by the committee, and to ensure that the design and delivery of online services takes these barriers into consideration, while also allowing for opportunities to upskill older people in their digital skills.

Are the provisions of head 8 of the general scheme now gone? That head would have allowed the Minister to put the existing code of practice for determining employment status on a statutory footing. I note that this is a follow-on from the Supreme Court's *Karshan* ruling, which has tightened the legal definition of self-employment. Putting the code on a statutory footing would fall short of what is needed to be done to tackle bogus self-employment and to protect workers in the gig economy. My Labour Party colleague, Deputy Marie Sherlock, previously introduced a Bill to address this in 2021. Could the Government clarify whether head 8 is gone from the Bill, or if it intends to use a different legislative mechanism?

Like other colleagues, I welcome the aim of the Bill to make technical amendments to improve the work of the appeals office. This is something I have spoken to the Minister about for a long period. I have raised the long waiting time for processing appeals, which is having a detrimental impact on family carers, people with disabilities, lone parents and older people who are waiting to access vital payments. I am aware the Minister has carried out some work on this but could he continue to work on the length of time people are waiting for a decision on their appeals? I note that according to the most recent reply we have received from the Department of Social Protection the average waiting time is around 13 weeks. However, my office has been supporting people who have been waiting for up to a year to hear about their appeals. That is simply not good enough. In the past the Minister has agreed with me about this. I sincerely hope the proposed changes will go some way towards bringing down the waiting time for appeals, especially for those people who need the payments most.

This is a very small piece of legislation but, as has been said by other colleagues in the Chamber tonight, there are much more urgent issues facing many low-income, vulnerable households.

I am particularly concerned about the Taoiseach's recent comments regarding child poverty and the statistics. Ireland is a rich country, so when we hear that the rate of child poverty is increasing it should be of concern to us all in the House. The Government should not be scraping the bottom of the barrel by talking about definitions of poverty when we know so

many children are suffering. If this Government is serious about tackling child poverty and supporting low-income households, then budget 2027 should be a children's budget.

We need fundamental reforms that support households with the rising cost of living. The Government needs to bring forward a second tier of child benefit payment to support those on lower incomes. That cannot be done alone because many working families are also struggling. They are struggling to pay bills and to put food on the table. These are the people who are keeping this country going and they are the people that we and the Government need to support.

We need to see progress on reforming parental leave entitlements for working families. Ireland is very much out of step with the rest of Europe when we look at the duration of leave on offer and the rate of payment that obtains. This is a big issue for new dads in particular. Unfortunately, new dads are only entitled to two weeks' paid paternity leave, for which the rate is €299. The latter is not enough to support a family. That is why dads cannot spend time supporting their partners in those key early weeks and months. I raised this issue recently with the Minister for children regarding a mother who could not cope due to having a Caesarean section and needing extra support at home. The Government must take the first step in reforming parental leave entitlements by extending paid paternity leave for new dads and work towards introducing a pay-related payment that actually supports workers to spend more time with their child. Recently in the House, the Minister for children indicated the Department of Social Protection is working on this. These reforms must also include supporting lone parents who cannot access the same amount of leave as two-parent families. Lone parents should be entitled to the same leave because the care needs of a child do not change regardless of whether there is one parent or two in the home.

I cannot let this opportunity go without raising with the Minister the need to increase the age threshold for domiciliary care allowance from 16 to 18 years of age. The Minister is very familiar with the number of times I have raised this with him. I know it is something he has committed to consider. I hope he will consider it in the context of the upcoming budget.

I am also concerned about the number of older people who have been in contact with my office and who are struggling with their energy bills. This issue has been raised a number of times already. I refer in particular to older people who live alone. This is a massive issue for my office. The Government must look at increasing welfare payments for older people, starting with increasing the fuel allowance, extending the season and increasing the household benefits package.

I look forward to continuing the debate on the merits of the Bill as it progresses through the House. As already flagged, there are a number of critical issues that must be clarified by the Government.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I rise to support the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026. As the Chair of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development, I had the opportunity to see at first hand the detailed work that went into the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. The committee considered the general scheme of the Bill on three separate occasions. We heard from officials in the relevant Departments and, importantly, we also heard from a wide range of stakeholders and experts, including the Data Protection Commission, the UCD Centre for Digital Policy, Age Action, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and Digital Rights Ireland. This engagement was extremely

valuable. The committee submitted its pre-legislative scrutiny report to the Minister for Social Protection on 2 July. The report contains 24 recommendations covering areas such as digital public services, the public services card and the operation of the social welfare appeals office. I acknowledge the work of committee members in producing the report and I welcome the fact that the recommendations will be considered on Committee Stage.

At its heart, the Bill seeks to modernise and improve a number of important areas of public administration. There are a number of technical amendments to the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, including with regard to outdated references and formally repealing the pre-retirement allowance scheme, which closed to new entrants almost 20 years ago.

There are also important changes proposed in relation to the public services card. I particularly welcome the proposal that a person can, at their own discretion, use their public services card as a form of identification with a non-specified body such as a credit union, a bank or a utility provider. There is also provision for a person's date of birth to be included on their public services card where they request this, allowing the card to be used as a means of verifying their age. However, these changes also underline the importance of getting privacy, data protection and individual choice right. The committee's engagement with the Data Protection Commission, digital policy experts and civil liberty organisations was particularly important in this regard. Digitalisation can make public services easier and more accessible but it must always be accompanied by strong safeguards. People should have confidence that their personal information is being handled properly and that they retain appropriate control over how their identification is used.

I also welcome the amendments designed to improve the operation of the social welfare appeals office. For people who are depending on a social welfare payment an appeal is not simply an administrative matter. It can have a very real impact on their ability to meet everyday household costs. An appeals system must, therefore, be fair, accessible and efficient. I welcome the efforts made to improve its operation.

The amendments to the Civil Registration Act are important. The Bill will make a number of practical changes to improve the functionality of the General Register Office, including provisions relating to the registration and reregistration of births, notification of deaths and the information required when registering a birth online. I particularly welcome the provision enabling Tusla to register or reregister the birth of a child with the father's details on foot of a court order. There are also important provisions for people who have been affected by incorrect or illegal birth registration, including changes in terminology in the legislation. These are very sensitive issues that affect people's identity, family history and personal lives. It is important that our legislation reflects this reality and provides an appropriate framework for dealing with these cases.

I welcome the amendments to the Charities Act 2009. The charitable and community sector plays an enormous role in our communities across Ireland. From large national organisations to small local community groups, charities provide services, supports and opportunities that make a real difference to people's lives. The proposed changes relating to the Charities Appeal Tribunal, including the provision for a quorum, the nomination of a deputy chairperson and the protections relating to witnesses, are important in ensuring this tribunal can operate effectively. A properly functioning regulatory appeals framework is essential to maintaining confidence in the charity sector.

This Bill does not make one major change. Rather, it makes a collection of important amendments across social welfare, civil registration and the charities sector. That does not make it any less important. Good legislation also means keeping our existing laws up to date, removing provisions that are no longer relevant, improving administration processes and ensuring our public bodies can operate effectively. I believe the Bill makes progress on all of these fronts.

I reiterate that the work undertaken by the joint committee has provided an important opportunity to examine these proposals in detail. The 24 recommendations contained in our report should continue to be considered carefully as the Bill progresses. Where improvements can be made, we should make them. Where stronger safeguards are required, we should put them in place. Where legislation can make people's interaction with the State simpler, fairer and more efficient, we should try to facilitate that. For the reasons outlined, I am happy to support the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026. I look forward to its further consideration.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank all of the Deputies for their contributions, particularly those who serve on the joint committee. I thank Deputy O'Shea for chairing it and I thank the clerk and the team. I will respond to a number of the issues raised; a number of specific issues were also raised, about which I will engage with Deputies also.

Over the years the Department has been asked why the PSC, which is State issued, cannot be used by a cardholder to prove identity if they wish to do so. Other Government documents, such as a passport or a driving licence, can be issued in this manner. This is why we are introducing the Bill; it is to give people the choice, if they wish, to use the PSC for this purpose. The public services card is a token that is issued on the completion of a safe registration process. It is the evidence of a substantial level of assurance of a person's identity. One of the benefits of the public services card is that it is available free of charge. There is no fee associated with getting or renewing a PSC.

I am very mindful of the cost a person incurs when they need a passport or driving licence or need to renew either. We receive queries from cardholders and voluntary bodies, as well as from many people in this House, asking why it is not possible to use a PSC to verify a person's identity if that person chooses to do so. We get about 100 queries a month over the phone from individuals and various bodies asking if the PSC can be used as proof of identity. This does not include the informal queries that come through the Department's network. Cardholders who have expressed a wish to use their PSC to verify their identity for purposes such as opening a bank or credit union account or for utility contract purposes, often cannot afford another form of identity. To date, it has been an offence for those bodies to accept a PSC. These changes are to deal totally and purely with those situations where people want to use their PSC for identity purposes in the circumstances referred to. Clearly, it is for those individuals themselves to use it for themselves.

The processing of personal data, including sensitive personal data, is already subject to clearly specified safeguards under the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, and in accordance with the GDPR. Additionally, my Department actively implements a range of oversight arrangements for the processing of all personal data held by the Department. The Department provides very clear information, including through our privacy statement, which

is across publicly available information materials, and in communication to PSC cardholders. The proposed amendments do not alter these safeguards. They simply enable an individual to voluntarily use their PSC as proof of identity or age with non-specified bodies if they choose to do so. It remains the case that in law only specified bodies may request a PSC and non-specified bodies cannot request a PSC.

In relation to the Data Protection Commission there are two inquiries into the processing of personal data in relation to the PSC. One has been completed and the other is before the courts, so I will not refer to it at this point. In its August 2019 decision, the Data Protection Commission found that the Department could only authenticate the identity of and issue a PSC to its own customers and not to anyone who wanted a PSC to transact with other public bodies. Subsequently, the commission accepted in December 2021 that the Department could continue to process personal data to authenticate the identity of and issue a PSC to any person who requested one and not just the customers of the Department of Social Protection. It remains the case, therefore, that we await the outcome of the other court case. I have listened carefully to the concerns raised today in relation to the PSC, but I again emphasise that today's amendment is a voluntary one that relates with giving people the capacity to use this card in respect of bodies currently not allowed to accept it.

A couple of issues came up in relation to some specific things. Deputy Hayes raised the issue of data repositories and making them interoperable with other Departments. There are no proposals under this Bill to create any new interoperability arrangements beyond those that already exist in legislation. Again, as per the existing arrangements, the sharing and verification of PSC data are governed by the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended. There are no plans to provide access to PSC data to non-public entities. Any sharing of PSC data is governed by legislation and is restricted to the bodies authorised in law.

Turning to the other provisions of the Bill, in relation to social welfare appeals I acknowledge the three Deputies here in the House. I am sure other Deputies raised queries as well, but the three social protection spokespersons, Deputies O'Reilly, Wall and O'Shea have constantly raised the issue of appeals with me. We are very focused on appeals. In relation to Deputy Ward's remarks on domiciliary care allowance appeals, we are very focused on that and we are dealing with it. It is often the case, however, that the appeal is not the same and extra information is provided. I want to get to a situation where we get clarity on what information is needed in the first place. We have put a particular focus on domiciliary care allowance appeals, and I thank the appeals officers.

Turning to Deputy Wall's question, at the end of June 2026, the average processing time for social welfare appeals was 12 weeks. The average processing time for social welfare appeals in 2025 was 21.2 weeks. We will be dealing with a parliamentary question on this issue from Deputy O'Reilly on Thursday. Ahead of that, I will seek to get the breakdown of the schemes in order that we can identify any particular challenges. There should not be a situation where it takes a year. I am happy to engage with the Deputy around that issue. I thank the chief appeals officer and her team. They are continuing to monitor processing times, and we are making every effort to reduce the time taken to process an appeal. We will be able to engage on this issue more during parliamentary questions on Thursday.

In relation to the issues around the charities legislation, no change in policy proposed as part of these amendments. Deputy Devlin raised this issue. The Charities (Amendment) Act

2024 revised and updated the existing charity legislation. When it is fully commenced, it will improve the ability of the Charities Regulator to conduct its statutory functions and to provide greater transparency, clarity and fairness in terms of the regulation of charities. This is something that the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, as the line Minister of State with responsibility in this area, has engaged on in the context of the delays involving charitable bodies and the Charities Regulator. We are focused on that.

I assure Deputy Wall and all other Deputies that in the midst of the budget negotiations, we are very focused on child poverty. I secured a specific €320 million child poverty package for budget 2026. We are working on budget 2027. We worked yesterday on the school meals programme, which is a major initiative on the child poverty side. The Department of Social Protection is involved in the school meals programme in order to bring that element to people.

I have tried to deal with as many of the issues as possible. I look forward to the engagement on Committee Stage. I thank the officials from the three Departments who worked on the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: It is proposed to refer this Bill to the Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development, pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development, pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

5 o'clock

Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time".

Families and workers across the State are being ripped off by the cost of home heating oil. Prices are going up and up and for months, the Government has refused to act. This is not happening in isolation. At the same time, petrol and diesel prices are rising. Energy companies are hiking their bills and groceries are getting dearer day by day, stretching household budgets.

A fill of home heating oil is now approximately €700 more expensive than it was at the start of the year. The cost of home heating oil has jumped up a number of hundreds of euro in the last three weeks alone. This is money that many families simply do not have. That is why my legislation is so important tonight. It is why every TD should support this legislation and give relief to families and workers out there. It is a straightforward piece of emergency legislation.

It is a measure that removes all excise duty and all carbon tax from home heating oil and provides immediate relief to people who desperately need it.

This is not a new argument. This is the eighth time that I have brought legislation before this House demanding that the Government act and reduce the cost of home heating oil. Eight times I have called on the Government to put workers and families first. Eight times I have called on the Government to cut the taxes on home heating oil - something that could be done with the stroke of a pen - and on every occasion, this Government has voted "No". Again and again, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents who prop them up have voted against the interests of the Irish people.

I will not stop bringing this issue up here on the floor of the Dáil because too many families are struggling out there, too many families are stretched to the limit, and too many people are wondering how they will afford their next delivery of oil and are, right now, sitting in homes with empty tanks. When I met those families in different parts across the State, I made them a promise. I said that I would keep fighting for them. I told them that I would be their voice here in the Dáil, and that is a promise I intend to keep. That is why my legislation is before us today. That is why this is the eighth attempt to try to get the Government to see sense.

The Government needs to wake up. It needs to understand the needs of the Irish people out there. This is not a radical proposal, folks. This is common sense. It is not extreme. It is the bare minimum that people should be able to expect from a government at a time like this.

Simon Harris has the neck to go out in the media and say that the Government cannot fully insulate households from energy prices. This is the same Minister for Finance who has not reduced a single cent of tax on home heating oil. How dare he, while people are telling me that they have to buy home heating oil to keep their homes warm in 5-gallon drums because they can no longer fill their tanks? They can no longer afford a half-fill, never mind a fill. It is astonishing, after months of warning and after all the pressure, that the Government still does not recognise that it needs to act.

Let me tell the Minister of State that the people cannot wait any longer. They need relief now. By God, if the Government does not act on the pressure that people are under, I have no doubt that the people will rise and give the Government their message when they take to the streets.

In the past three weeks alone, the price of home heating oil has gone up by €300. That comes on top of an increase of €500 since the start of the year. People are not blind to what is happening out there. People have heard enough talk. They do not want more promises; they want action. They do not want excuses; they want lower bills. They want relief. They want my legislation enacted.

The Government could do this immediately. The Government could do this with the stroke of a pen. Tonight, the Government could vote to pass all Stages of this legislation and reduce the cost of home heating oil for 700,000 families across the State. A Government that was serious about putting workers and families first would do exactly that.

Let us be clear. This issue goes way beyond home heating oil. The Government also needs to get its act together on petrol and diesel. Let me say it again, and I will not stop: the Government needs to cut taxes on diesel and petrol further. It needs to get the price of green

diesel, to support our farmers and contractors, down. The Government needs to cut the taxes further and it needs to take away carbon tax from home heating oil. We will not give up until the Irish people get what they deserve, namely, the implementation of this legislation.

Deputy Pa Daly: There is a sense of *déjà vu* around at the moment. There was some excuse, in March and April of this year, when the Government was off around the world and left nobody in charge and ignored the calls of the people to reduce the cost of home heating oil. Families in every corner of the country have continued to be squeezed since that time while the Government has sat on its hands and done nothing. Our proposal will remove carbon tax from home heating oil and cut the cost of a 1,000-litre fill by €183. It is a simple measure. At a time when oil prices have soared by over €700 and household budgets are under unbearable pressure, that is not only justified, but essential.

We have brought forward, as Deputy Doherty said, this proposal eight times and each of the eight times, it has been rejected and ignored by the Government. The Government keeps repeating *ad nauseam* it wants to help the people in the here and now, but again, it is sitting on its hands. This is the Government's chance. If the Minister of State has the courage of his convictions and if every TD who supports the Government has the courage of their convictions, they can stand with ordinary workers and families, or is the Government to turn its back on them yet again?

For seven months, this issue has been staring Government in the face. For seven months, workers, families, pensioners and people living in rural Ireland, in particular, have shouldered the burden alone, but for seven months, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the supporting Independent Ministers of State have refused to take meaningful action and reduce the costs. Older people are still worrying about when they can afford to turn on the heating. They are reducing the oil that they are buying, even only filling 5-gallon or 10-gallon drums to keep them going from day to day and from week to week. Families are cutting back on groceries to save for the delivery of oil. People are already struggling with rents, mortgages, childcare and rising energy bills, but look around for help from the Government, which has a record surplus, and there is nothing.

The cost of 1,000 litres of heating oil has risen from approximately €900 to over €1,600 in the space of a year, an increase of almost 75%. People are in crisis. What makes it even more outrageous is that, as the prices rise, the State is taking in record amounts of revenue through taxes such as VAT.

Families are paying more and the Government is collecting more while refusing to provide the relief people desperately need. Is the Government going to act?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: We are seven months into this particular crisis with the increase in the price of oil and families are dealing with almost a doubling of the cost of home heating oil. I am dealing with families who are deciding whether to restrict spending on other essential parts of life, for example, whether they will cut down on the grocery shop, whether they will do a grocery shop this week, or how they will feed their children, so that they can put oil in the tank because prices have gone from approximately €900 for a fill last year to an average price of €1,600 for a fill this year and the Government has done absolutely nothing to reduce the pressure on families or reduce the cost. It has not removed one cent of excise duty

from home heating oil, despite Sinn Féin having brought forward a proposal eight times. This is the eighth time we have brought forward a proposal while the Government has sat on its hands and made out it is not a problem.

The Government talks around the subject, flies kites and says it might do something, but that is of no use to new parents with a newborn baby who need hot water and a home. It is of no use to older people who are living the twilight years of their lives in one room because they cannot afford to heat the rest of the house. It is no good to the people who are already in arrears on their electricity bills, cannot afford oil and are wondering how they will stay warm this winter. That is the reality facing people on the Minister of State's watch and that of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents propping them up. It is simply not good enough.

It is a disgrace that not one solitary Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael backbencher or Independent Member is in the House as we discuss this modicum of respite for hard-pressed families across the State - rural and urban - when it comes to the cost of heating their homes. It is an absolute disgrace. They might come down and do the right thing by supporting this legislation. It is not too late. We are here. We are putting it forward and they have a choice to make.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Is iad costais fuinnimh an t-ábhar inní is mó atá roimh theaghlaigh agus gnólachtaí faoi láthair. Energy costs are the biggest worry facing families and businesses at the moment. Seven months into this energy crisis, the Government has not removed a single cent of carbon tax from home heating oil. For rural households, particularly in my and the Minister of State's constituency of Mayo, this is devastating and unsustainable. Does the Minister of State know how many women have done themselves injury by trying to carry 5-gallon drums of oil to last them a few days until they are paid? We have no access to the gas network. We have no alternative to filling the oil tank and people are now facing bills of more €1,600 for 1,000 litres of oil. That is €700 more expensive than it was this time last year. It is simply unaffordable for the people we represent.

It is not just households. Small businesses are being crippled by energy costs. Many are barely able to keep their doors open. One bad winter could finish them off altogether. All of this comes in the context of today's report that wholesale electricity prices are 77% higher than they were this time last year. The pressure is coming from every direction. A record number of households are in energy arrears.

This is the eighth time my Sinn Féin colleague has brought forward legislation to cut the cost of home heating oil and on every occasion the Government has voted "No". The Government has voted against the people of Mayo and the wider country. Our legislation would remove all excise duty on home heating oil. People cannot heat their homes with Government promises about what might happen in the budget and they certainly cannot afford another round of half measures. The Government has had its opportunity. It has an opportunity to act tonight.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Tá teaghlaigh ar fud Chill Dara Theas ag streachailt le billí fuinnimh, go háirithe iad siúd atá ag brath ar cheirisín agus gan an dara rogha acu foinse eile a úsáid. Tá praghas ceirisín tar éis ardú suas le 75% gan faic déanta ag an Rialtas chun na teaghlaigh seo a chosaint ó na hathruithe ar phraghsanna. Caithfidh an Rialtas éisteacht le cosmhuintir na tíre agus tacú le réiteach Shinn Féin ar an bhfadhb. Families in south Kildare

are struggling with their energy bills. We are heading into another difficult winter and families desperately need support. Home heating oil prices have skyrocketed in the past 12 months, rising by as much as 75% in some cases. A fill of 1,000 litres of oil will now set families back more than €1,600 compared with €900 for the same amount of oil one year ago. The latest price spike at the end of summer has once again caused huge anxiety for households who rely on kerosene to heat their homes.

Rural families across south Kildare are disproportionately affected by these increases and in many cases have no alternative heating source available. Constituents have contacted me to say they simply will not be able to afford to fill their tanks this winter if current circumstances continue. Incredibly, we are seven months into this crisis and the Government has done nothing to help these vulnerable households. Not a single cent has been lifted off excise duty or carbon tax.

I appreciate that the fuel allowance is intended to support those most in need. However, I have received correspondence from many working families who do not qualify for the support, but are still struggling to pay their bills. This comes against the wider backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis with electricity, housing and insurance costs all continuing to rise. Sinn Féin is bringing forward a simple proposal to ease the pressure on these hard-working families by temporarily removing all excise duty on home heating oil. The price of 1,000 litres of oil could be reduced by €183. This is the eighth time Sinn Féin has brought forward proposals on home heating oil this year, yet the Government continues to bury its head in the sand. It is time for the Government to listen and put workers and families first.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister of State and the Government have had their heads in the sand about the cost-of-living crisis and squeeze for far too long. In recent years, Sinn Féin has used every opportunity we could to point out the challenges facing workers and families, with groceries, insurance costs, rents, mortgage costs, and petrol, diesel and home heating oil going up. Every time we raise these issues, the Government has to be dragged kicking and screaming to react. Even when it does react, it is a crisis response. It is temporary and does not deal with the problem. Then it comes back with its tail between its legs having to correct to what it should have done in the first place.

We warned the Government last year and this year that this was reaching a tipping point, that it would spill onto the streets and there would be protests. It ignored us. What happened? There were protests. Then it blamed the protesters and took no responsibility for the fact it had failed. We have been saying to the Government for years now that the cost of home heating oil is extreme. It is far too high. For the 700,000 homes that depend on home heating oil, it is unbearable at the moment, with all the other costs, yet the Government is doing nothing. In fact, it fought Sinn Féin tooth and nail saying carbon tax could not be touched, and now we are hearing that the Government might do something on carbon tax.

What it could do tonight is accept an Teachta Doherty's Bill and give people certainty by moving on this issue. All people have seen from the Government is delay and delay. I have made this point over and over again. Fine Gael in particular does not like it. The Minister of State's party represents a cosseted, privileged class. It always has and always will. That is why I work tooth and nail so that, one day, we will have a Government that will do the right thing and support people in a cost-of-living crisis and not continue to keep its head in the sand.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I want the Minister of State to come to Longford-Westmeath and meet the families who have been looking at empty oil tanks for months, hoping against hope the Government would move as prices got higher and higher. The Minister of State has the gall to ask them to hope a little more and to hold on a little longer so that the Government might just get a notion of doing something in the budget. That is not good enough. For seven months, the price of home heating oil has been in crisis.

I remember banging on doors in the run-up to the last general election when it was -4 degrees Celsius, and when people opened them, no heat came out. This has not just been going on for that length of time. The price might have been lower, but it was still biting. For all those seven months, the Government has failed to act each time Sinn Féin has put proposals in front of it. It has failed to recognise the pressure families are under or to comprehend what its actions are doing to families the length and breadth of the country.

In my area, 1,000 litres of oil will set you back €1,600 today. That is not another household bill; that is a second mortgage. Many people simply do not have it. It hits rural areas like mine so much harder than urban areas because we do not have a choice. In my area, you cannot simply connect to the gas network because it does not exist. You cannot simply magic solar panels onto the roof because the waiting lists are eight, nine or ten months long. No responsible government would tell a family who is sitting in a cold home tonight that it might help, hinting that there will be something in the budget when that family needs heat and needs oil today. Tonight, the Government has a very simple choice. It can tell those families, including those families in my area, to keep paying or it can actually stand up, do something constructive and take action today. Winter will not wait and neither should the people of Longford-Westmeath.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tonight's motion is about the here and now. This Dáil has an opportunity to cut the price of oil tonight. The facts are very clear. People cannot pay their bills. They cannot afford to put fuel in their cars. They cannot afford to put oil in their tanks. That has happened on the Minister of State's watch. He is from the west of Ireland just like I am. He understands the impact that storms and sudden changes in the weather can have. The Government is telling people that it might do something in a number of weeks, although it has voted this measure down several times. My colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, has brought it before this House eight times. The Government says it might do something at some point. The people cannot wait because the people cannot pay. They cannot wait because there might be a sudden change in the weather. What will the Government say to people then? Will it tell them they can freeze in their homes?

Pensioners cannot afford this. Every single year, we have a discussion in here about pensioners who are struggling to heat their homes. That started before this crisis. The numbers of pensioners in poverty, in insecure housing and in homelessness are all increasing. There is certainly going to be a serious rise in the number of pensioners who cannot afford to put oil in their tanks to keep their houses warm. That is most certainly going to be on the Minister of State. He needs to listen to what the people are saying. He needs to listen to what we on this side of the House are saying. He needs to do right by the people. The people cannot wait any longer for the Government to decide whether it is going to act on oil. This disproportionately affects the people in the west of Ireland. The people in the west of Ireland have had enough. They should be allowed to heat their homes.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann declines to give the Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026 a second reading on the grounds that related matters are being considered as part of Budget 2027 on 6th October 2026".

Ireland has a strong economy. The job of Government is now to make sure that people feel that strength in their everyday lives. We fully recognise the pressures high energy and fuel costs are placing on households, on farmers and on businesses. These pressures are real. They are being felt at the pumps, in home heating bills and in the cost of running farms and businesses. The conflict in the Middle East has created economic pressures far beyond the region itself. De-escalation would have the single biggest impact on international energy prices. No Irish government can fully insulate people from a global energy shock. Anyone who claims otherwise is not being honest. However, Government can take action to protect households and key sectors and it has done so.

Budget 2027 is now only 14 days away. When Deputy Farrell talks about the here and now, it is just political theatre. By the time this Bill could take effect, budget 2027 would already have been announced----

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The budget is for next year.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----and the winter heating season would already be under way. I think Sinn Féin knows that.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Minister of State is talking about budget 2027. It is 2026.

Deputy Alan Dillon: This is the appropriate mechanism through which the Government can examine these pressures comprehensively and decide what further assistance is warranted. The budget allows us to take a full view across a range of energy costs and across all affected households and sectors rather than dealing with one fuel or one tax measure in isolation. We should not pre-empt discussions that properly belong in the budgetary process, the product of which is only days away. The Tánaiste has been clear that Government is examining the best way to assist people whose home heating oil costs have already risen considerably. These include possible taxation measures and targeted supports such as the fuel allowance. The Department of Finance has also published options on how the carbon tax framework might be modified for particular products, including home heating oil. These are decisions for budget day.

In the budget, this Government will use the resources available to help people who work hard and who want to get ahead and not simply get by. We want people to feel the benefits of hard work in their own pay packets. Our priority is to reward work and to reduce everyday costs facing families, including energy and childcare costs. We are also very much focused on supporting older people, carers and people with disabilities, recognising their contribution and

the security they deserve. We will build more homes and deliver infrastructure and public services to continue meeting this country's needs with faster delivery, less bureaucracy and better value for every euro. We will do so responsibly, protecting the public finances for the long term.

This is not a government that has stood back. Since the beginning of the crisis seven months ago, we have provided approximately €1.4 billion in supports and delivered one of the largest packages across the European Union on a *per capita* basis. We deferred the 1 May carbon tax increase on home heating fuels. We have reduced excise duty on petrol, diesel and green diesel. We have enhanced the diesel rebate scheme for hauliers and passenger transport operators. We have supported road transport operators, farmers, farm contractors and fishers. We have reduced the NORA levy. We extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks from 28 to 32 weeks, with the weekly rate increased from €33 to €38. Eligible households now receive €1,216 over the extended season. Eligibility was widened to almost 50,000 additional households, including families receiving the working family payment, with approximately 470,000 households now benefiting. That is close to one in every four households across the State. The Tánaiste has also made clear that the planned phased restoration of excise duty due to begin in November must be considered in light of the current prices. If elevated prices persist, proceeding as originally planned may not be prudent. Again, the judgment should be made in the round, through the budget.

Turning to the Bill itself, Sinn Féin promises an emergency period during which the mineral oil tax on kerosene used for home heating would be set to zero. The Minister for Finance would, therefore, have no discretion over that rate. This would reduce the Government's flexibility to target limited resources where they can make the greatest practical difference. The Bill also raises serious legal and policy questions. Heating fuels such as kerosene and natural gas fall within the scope of the European Union's emissions trading system for buildings and road transport, ETS2. Ireland's arrangements are designed to avoid double taxation, provided our national carbon price meets the relevant European conditions. Those calling for the outright abolishment of the carbon tax must, therefore, be conscious of these consequences. A blanket removal could mean carbon revenue being collected and controlled through the European system rather than retained and spent nationally. Nobody in this House should lightly support transferring control of those revenues away from the Oireachtas.

There are also further practical flaws. One is that the increase in the price of home heating oil is principally driven by the international wholesale price of oil and not by new Government tax. The carbon tax accounts for only a limited share of the current average price while the non-carbon element of mineral oil tax on kerosene is already set at zero. The Bill cannot offset a global market shock and it does not offer the same approach to households that heat their homes using natural gas or other fuels. The proposal suggests that one tax measure provides a complete answer when the responsible course is to assess home heating, electricity, transport, income tax and targeted welfare supports together. Carbon tax should not be viewed in isolation. Its revenues are recycled into measures that continue to protect people from energy poverty and reduce our dependence on expensive imported fossil fuels.

These revenues support the fuel allowance, fully funded home energy upgrades, the wider retrofitting scheme, investment in our electricity grid and measures to help farmers transition to lower carbon practices. Since 2020, more than €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue has been

allocated to the just transition and decarbonisation measures. Demand proves these programmes matter. Last year alone, 58,000 homes were retrofitted. Since 2019, more than 287,000 home energy upgrades have been delivered, including over 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty. Solar PV applications, heat pump applications and insulation upgrades are all rising strongly. This is the contradiction at the heart of Sinn Féin's position; it consistently opposes the carbon tax but its alternative budgets have repeatedly relied on the revenue it generates. It cannot credibly promise to abolish the source of funding while continuing to count the same money to pay for social protection and retrofitting.

People need practical help, not a false promise that one Bill can control international oil prices. The Government has acted to reduce costs and protect vulnerable households. We are examining further supports for home heating oil, energy costs and the wider cost of living. We will be making those decisions in budget 2027 in a comprehensive, targeted and responsible way. The long-term answer is also clear: Ireland must reduce its dependence on imported fossil fuels, strengthen our energy security and invest in warmer homes, renewable electricity and a stronger grid. This is how we protect households from future price shocks. For those reasons, I again press the Government amendment that Dáil Éireann declines to give the home heating oil Bill a Second Reading.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We are now many months into this crisis and Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents have still not removed a single cent of excise or carbon tax from home heating oil. That is the reality facing workers, families and pensioners right across this State. The facts speak for themselves. The cost of home heating oil has soared by as much as 75% in the past year. A household ordering a 1,000 litre fill today is paying more than €1,600, compared with around €900 for the same amount a year ago. We are heading into winter and a record number of people cannot pay their energy bills. A total of 320,000 people cannot afford electricity, one in four cannot afford to pay their gas bill and hundreds of thousands more are racing every day just to keep up.

People have to be able to heat their homes and that means cutting prices. The emergency legislation we are debating this evening would remove all excise duty on home heating oil, removing the carbon tax entirely. This is the eighth time Sinn Féin has brought forward proposals to cut the price of home heating oil this year. At every opportunity, the Government has voted against them; six times against these very measures. The Government now indicates it may move on this in the budget. That U-turn is the direct result of sustained political pressure from Sinn Féin and others and growing public anger. However, we know what is likely to follow - there will be more half measures and tinkering around the edges. It is far too late for that. People cannot afford for the Government to wait any longer. Days and hours matter in these instances. The Government needs to put workers and families first and support the Sinn Féin legislation this evening.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, for bringing this Bill forward at such a crucial period in ordinary people's lives. It is a time when people are facing into a winter dominated by the cost of living crisis. Inflation is running at 3.7%. Petrol and diesel prices have increased day by day, with forecourts displaying prices of €2.14 per litre and upwards. Electricity, gas and other fuels are up 8.5% while rents increased 9.1% alone in

the past year. Public transport fares are being increased by 15%. Carbon taxes are being increased again on 1 November. Over 1.5 million people rely on home heating oil, with approximately 53% of them living in rural areas. The cost of home heating oil has risen by 50%. These are the facts. Clearly, something needs to change and change rapidly. The wait and see brigade are not cutting it any more. The present economic conditions need to be addressed now. People must be given hope, certainty and assurance that someone has their back. To be blunt and honest, that was far from the form of the last budget.

It is in the power of this Government to cut the cost of home heating oil by accepting the emergency legislation put before it by an Teachta Doherty. This gives the Government a direct line of action on a six-month basis, with the option of an extension should the high prices of home heating oil continue. I will finish up on a sentiment from one of my constituents in Wexford, George, who is an OAP. George told me that, as an OAP, filling a standard domestic oil tank now places an immense financial burden on his household. With the current average of 1000 litres sitting well over €1,600, heating his home has become a major financial strain rather than a basic necessity. By rejecting this Bill, the Minister of State has once again demonstrated the mentality of live, horse and you will get grass. This is disgraceful.

Deputy Ann Graves: Eight of the largest oil companies have made war profits of more than €79 billion in less than three months. This is at a time when workers and families are struggling with fuel prices. In 2008, the price of crude oil reached record levels of \$145 per barrel. The price today is \$101 per barrel, almost one third cheaper, yet consumers are paying exorbitant rates for their fuel. The biggest driver of cost is tax. Ordinary workers are being forced to dig deeper and deeper into their pockets to pay for these profits. I understand the Government cannot control global conflicts but it must protect Irish workers and families from the effects of those conflicts. This is the eighth time Sinn Féin has brought forward legislation to reduce the cost of home heating oil. At every opportunity, the Government has voted against it. I hope, for the sake of the people I represent in Fingal East, that the Government votes in favour of struggling families.

From media leaks, it appears that the Government will make some sort of move in the forthcoming budget but this is only as a direct result of sustained pressure from Sinn Féin and the growing public anger in our communities. Voices demand action. People's voices are growing louder and people are growing more impatient with Government inaction. The cost of home heating oil has soared by as much as 75% in the past year. Last Saturday, people took to the streets of Dublin to demand an Ireland where we can all afford to live. It was a coalition of political parties, trade unions, disability organisations and community groups, all demanding that the Government respond to the cost of living crisis. This Bill will have an immediate effect on the cost of oil for the public. It would reduce the cost of a 1,000 litre fill by €183. I urge the Government and all TDs to listen to the voices of ordinary workers and families and vote in favour of this Bill. People are struggling now and the Government needs to act now.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I was speaking to a taxi driver today in Cork. He said that it recently cost him €74 to fill his taxi. This morning, it cost him €110. He asked me how they can survive. They cannot keep putting up the prices of taxis because it will price them out of the market but what will they do if they do not get help from this Government? Our Bill is here. We are trying to be constructive and help ordinary, hard-working people and families. I was

down in Little Island recently and I met a man who was so angry. He has a couple of vans on the road and a couple of fellas working for him, making deliveries. He said he is working seven days a week. Do you know what he told me? He said he has four children between the ages of 11 and 23 and he has told them that the minute they are finished college or their apprenticeship they should get out of this country because there is no future here. That is not what I am saying; it is what people are saying on the streets. The Minister of State is shaking his head. I am telling him what these parents are telling me because they do not see a future here in this country with the cost of living, petrol, diesel, home heating oil, the highest electricity costs in Europe and the cost of gas and food. Everything has gone up. We are trying to provide solutions. We are trying to provide help. The Government comes in and blocks us every time.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The budget is in 14 days.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The budget is the budget. That is no good if you do not have the money in your budget to put food on the table, pay the gas bill or pay the electricity bill. The Government has its budget but what about ordinary working families? What about their budget? What do they do next?

People are looking for hope. That man down in Little Island said to me that he would be better off on the dole. He is working seven days a week. He has his own vans and his own workers but he said every time he breaks his melt he has nothing left. What is the Government's answer? It is to wait for the budget and forget about what Sinn Féin is trying to do.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Home-heating oil in Meath was an average €480 for 1,000 litres back in 2020. The average price this year is €1,330 for 1,000 litres with that price for 1,000 litres currently today at €1,649. Families across Meath are being hammered by massive increases week on week. People across Meath have been contacting me each week in shock at the huge jump in the price of home-heating oil and fuel for their vehicles. Seven months into the crisis and, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents have still not removed a single cent of excise or carbon tax from home-heating oil. Sinn Féin's proposal would save homeowners €183 on a fill of home-heating oil. People need to be able to heat their homes and this Government is removing any alternative to oil such as turf, another tradition taken away by this Government.

Energy prices continue to rise with no action being taken once again by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents. Energy companies make massive profits while households suffer. They dread to see their electricity bill come through the door. The cost-of-living crisis has hit many people in Ireland. People with disabilities and the elderly must choose between eating and heating. These people need heat in their homes all year round.

Workers in Ireland have never worked so hard but had so little. Inflation has eaten away at any wage increases they may have got. Workers are worse-off now than they ever were before. The Government must take direct action to protect households. It has the chance to intervene and support Sinn Féin's Bill to reduce costs for people and families who are struggling. People in Meath need a government that has their back. Right now, it does not and it is not supporting workers, families and the people of Ireland. This is the eighth time Sinn Féin has brought

forward proposals to cut the price of home-heating oil this year. At every opportunity the Government has voted against our proposals. People cannot afford to wait any longer.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill. It is absolutely true that people across this country really are struggling. This Government appears to be completely out of touch with the scale of their struggling. Barnardos recently released figures from a survey it did on families and children. It was very sad to see the lack of coverage it got and particularly from the Government. That survey found that in one in five families the parents are skipping meals so that their children can eat. This is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and we have tens of thousands of families where children are going hungry. There is something deeply wrong.

One of the reasons it is so bad is because this Government is completely out of touch with what people are going through. It has completely failed to do a number of things. First, it needs to tackle the issue of price gouging and massive profiteering that is going on. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Ministers stand up here and say, "What can we do about the cost of living? Energy costs are going up. It is because of the war in the Middle East. It is because of rising fuel costs." However, it is not rising fuel costs that are causing rents to rise by 10% a year. That was the Government's decision to allow the rents to rise at local authority level but also by removing the rent cap for the vulture funds.

How much profit would the Minister of State say AIB made last year? AIB made €2 billion in profit last year, which is utterly scandalous. That is not including the other banks. How much profit was made by the big investor landlords? They made hundreds of millions of euro. How much profit was made by the ESB? It made €500 million. Literally billions are being taken in profit and the people are paying for it. They are paying through higher energy bills, rents, bank fees, insurance premiums and food costs. During the cost-of-living crisis, profiteering and price gouging are going on and we have seen an absolute failure of the Government to tackle that.

There are other things the Government could be doing to tackle the cost of living, particularly its promise around childcare. Where are the reduced childcare fees? Where is the real delivery of affordable childcare? We in the Social Democrats have put forward a public childcare model that would actually deliver affordable childcare. Simon Harris has now been in government for 12 or 14 years. Where is his promise to reduce the cost of GP care for children? Someone with a child who is eight now has to pay the full cost of GP care. Where is the most basic promise of children and families being able to go to the doctor without having to be worried about the cost of it? It is scandalous. Families are choosing between paying the rent or paying electricity and gas bills, and bringing their child to the doctor. It is absolutely unacceptable in a so-called wealthy country that families are deciding whether to pay to eat or to pay for GP care. The Government could be doing so much more.

The other area is the issue of energy costs. We in the Social Democrats believe there should be a targeted €400 energy credit. We could pay for that by a windfall tax on the energy companies. It is extremely frustrating that European leaders wrote to Simon Harris, the Tánaiste, to put this on the table for discussion at the recent meeting but he did not want to know about it. Why does he not want to put a windfall tax on the energy companies? Who is the Government afraid of? Everyone would back the Government if it put a windfall tax in the

energy companies. Why is it not doing this? I believe it is still captured by an ideology about not interfering with the market. Not only does it not interfere but it actually helps the market when it comes to housing and rents. It subsidised the big investor funds. It is the same thing with the energy companies. It believes it cannot interfere and will not interfere. It is the same thing with the banks. The Government will not increase the levy on them and will allow them to screw people. The people have to pay for all this profiteering and the Government is not standing up for ordinary people who are really struggling.

It is an absolute scandal and a shame that seven in ten young people say they see no future in this country. They say they just want to leave because it is the only way they would get a better quality of life. A nation has failed. We are a failed nation when the majority of young people say they see no hope and no future in this country. The Minister of State can shake head but that is the truth. Young people see no future in the country of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael because they have taken their hope from them and taken their future. They gave it to the vulture funds. They hammered young people during the austerity years and they continue to do so. Some 90% of them say they are negatively affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Every single young person in country is struggling and what is the Government doing for them? It is absolutely failing to give them a sense of a future to give them hope.

Despite all the GDP growth and all the budget surpluses our young people say it clearly. What is the outcome of decades of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government? It is that they see no future here. It is very sad. I hope those young people stay and fight to change this country. I hope they demand it to be different and join with those of us who are trying to push for a very different type of Ireland. The Government has failed them and we need to see substantial transformative change in this budget that reduces rents, provides genuinely affordable homes, provides targeted energy supports and really tackles those fundamental issues of the profiteering and price gouging that is going on in this country.

Deputy Ged Nash: I will be sharing time with my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny. I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this Bill this evening. I know it is very much anchored in Sinn Féin's position that it has opposed the imposition of carbon taxes over a number of years.

It is also very much anchored in the consistent position it has enunciated over many years in relation to local property tax, USC and so on. We in the Labour Party take a different view. Our view is based on how we can best provide the supports required for people who will need them the most through what will be a very difficult winter. I recall very well debates in the convention centre - God help us - several years ago, when we were setting out the ten-year agenda for incremental and predictable increases to the carbon tax as a means of reducing reliance on fossil fuels at that time and out to 2030. I remember the view being expressed by Ministers at the time that this was a means by which we could broaden the tax base. This was very much bedded in the principle of ensuring the polluter pays - an important principle - but also that by the time we got to the end of this process in 2030, we would all be rolling in renewable energy. We would have cheap energy shipped in from out at sea, connected into the grid and we would be supplying half of Europe with cheap energy because of the investment we were going to make into offshore wind.

This Government and the previous Government have missed two, if not three, targets for offshore wind at this point and will not generate a single kilowatt of offshore wind until the

early 2030s. That is the position we are in, yet energy bills climb continuously without any respite. We were also told we could expect a retrofitting revolution, that homes would be warmer and cheaper to heat and those who needed the most help for a genuinely just transition - because we do not have a genuinely just transition - would get it through this system and Exchequer revenue-supported schemes.

I accept that the past two energy shocks had nothing to do with this Government but what has been its response? We saw reports today of a 77% surge in electricity wholesale prices. That is only going to - excuse the term - add fuel to the fire over the next few months. We will not see the impact of that until early next year - an early new year present from the energy companies which, at this present time, are popping the champagne corks and celebrating excess profits that are being generated not because of the genius of their engineers and business managers but because of the volatility of international energy markets and our reliance in this country on gas and oil. Almost half of our electricity is generated by gas. This is absolute madness. From an economic, social and climate point of view, it is absolutely crazy. We have not moved the dial on that. We cannot control in any way the price of the commodities we import, but we can do what we can as a state that has the resources to support those who need support the most. The jury is out as to whether or not, for example, carbon tax increases - blunt instruments used across the board - are the best way of addressing the needs of those on low and middle incomes.

I have just come from a meeting of the budgetary oversight committee where Professor Alan Barrett of the ESRI said the worst way one could possibly help struggling families and businesses at the moment with their fuel costs at the pump is excise cuts. He more or less said it is bananas. There are other ways of doing it. An ESRI report last week said very clearly, and I am paraphrasing here, that there are of course impacts on the imposition of carbon tax, but the best way to mitigate that, to deal with the issue lower and middle income workers are experiencing and to keep those resources to ensure they are used for retrofitting, fuel allowances and so on, is through the tax and social welfare systems.

We have to also ask ourselves what we have got. We have 700,000 homes dependent on kerosene across the country. It is not just a rural issue either. It is an issue in my home town of Drogheda and Deputy Ó Murchú's home town of Dundalk. The reliance on kerosene is also an issue in urban Ireland. What are we going to do about that? We all want to provide people who are reliant on home heating oil with some breathing space this autumn and winter. This is going to be an extremely difficult winter. The question is how we do that and do it efficiently, sustainably and effectively. The second question is how we deal with that structural problem of moving people away from kerosene and innovating to ensure we can get to a sustainable alternative.

I will return to those questions in a moment but the crystal ball tells us two things. We have seen the media briefings today. The first is that Government will no doubt push the planned excise restorations on petrol and diesel out to next year. This is the *Realpolitik* of the situation. That is what is going to happen and I will be more than surprised if it does not. The second is that it will do something on carbon tax in terms of home heating oil in the budget. Can we stop the shadow boxing going on at the moment and get real about this? We need to stop pretending and stop spoofing. People understand the direction of travel of this and where it is going. Let us have a bit of honesty about this debate. We cannot simply continue to subsidise fossil fuels

in the way we have. People are looking for alternatives; they want the safe and sustainable alternative. We cannot continue, in all reality, to chase the price of petrol and diesel over the next few years. In many ways, that will leave people less well-off. Why do I say that? We are going to see people dependent on social welfare in the next few years. With the funds available through carbon taxation and excise, we are going to see retrofitting, the fuel allowance and so on competing with other Exchequer revenue resources that are ordinarily used for other social welfare systems, such as the pension and so on and also through the PRSI system. There are going to be those kinds of trade-offs and we need to be honest about this debate in the coming period.

From our point of view, there needs to be an increase of at least €7.50 on the fuel allowance this year and an extension of it out by another four weeks. That will add another €400 to the fuel allowance for families who need it in the coming period. That would address the issue of the proposed rises to the carbon tax - which I do not believe will happen, by the way - over the next while. We need those energy credits paid for by the imposition of a levy on the excess profits of the energy companies. This is an issue we will be returning to. It is the issue *du jour*, as it were, and I look forward to engaging with Government on the budget in this respect in the next period.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: As my colleague Deputy Nash has outlined, the Labour Party has provided significant costed budgetary proposals that would help people in the here and now. I do not think any of us in this House can justify raising taxes or increasing the price of petrol, diesel or home heating oil on ordinary working people any further in the midst of a years-long cost of living crisis.

For families across Ireland, the cost of living, the cost of the very basics, is continuing to spiral. The costs of simply getting to work, getting children to school, attending appointments, doing the weekly shop and keeping daily life moving are keeping many people in poverty and dragging people into energy arrears, bringing them to a paycheck-to-paycheck battle. There is deep frustration among the public and it is hardworking ordinary families who are being put to the pin of their collars, trying to make ends meet. Ordinary people are being squeezed from every direction. For many, there is no easy alternative to using a car. They have to drive to work and they have to bring their children to school or childcare. They have to travel to access healthcare, shops and essential services, yet they are being asked to absorb additional costs that many simply cannot afford. Families across this country are at absolute breaking point. People are doing everything right. They are working, paying their taxes and trying to provide for their families, but they are still falling behind as costs of fuel, groceries, energy and housing continue to put pressure on household budgets. That is where our focus must be.

We also need to consider what these policies mean for younger people. According to a survey by the National Youth Council of Ireland, 68% of those aged between 18 and 24 years surveyed said they were considering moving abroad, while 71% said they believed they would have a better quality of life outside of Ireland. I have been receiving more and more texts and emails from young people in Cork who are around my own age about the state of living and working here. They are asking a very basic question: how are they expected to build a future here in Ireland? Young people are facing enormous pressures from the cost of housing, energy, transport and everyday life. Many of them are working hard, paying their taxes and contributing to their communities and society, yet they do not feel they are getting on. Costs

keep going up while too many public services continue to struggle. A basic necessity such as getting to a GP appointment or being seen in a hospital is a wait.

6 o'clock

Schools are struggling to meet even their most basic running costs, with principals being forced to make difficult decisions about how limited resources are spent. Roughly 30% of households are experiencing fuel poverty. Many Irish homes are older, poorly insulated, and have low building energy ratings. Those homes require significantly more energy to heat.

The people most vulnerable to increases in fuel and energy costs are often those least able to pay for them. They include older people living alone, lone-parent families, unemployed people, people with disabilities or chronic health conditions who may have higher baseline heating needs, and private renters who can face particular difficulties because they cannot make decisions about retrofitting or improving the energy efficiency of the homes that they live in. These are the people we need to think about when we are discussing the likes of increasing carbon taxes on home heating oil.

Of course, we must take climate change seriously. Ireland needs to reduce emissions and improve energy efficiency but we cannot simply continue adding costs to households and telling people to absorb them when alternatives are lagging far behind. This is a perfect storm that the Government has a heavy responsibility for. The Government cannot control geopolitics but it can control how rapidly it invests in renewables and implements their usage broadly. The Government should focus on practical measures to help people change their behaviour without making it harder for them to make ends meet, including properly funded home retrofits, better public transport, affordable alternatives to car dependency, support for rural communities and targeted assistance for households facing energy poverty.

We need policies that protect families, support workers, help young people build a future here and deliver genuine reductions in emissions. People are already paying enough. That is why I cannot simply support further increases in carbon tax when so many households are already struggling with the cost of living. They deserve a good government that recognises the pressure that they are under and focuses on solutions that are fair, affordable and practical, just like the solutions that the Labour Party has presented.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The cost-of-living crisis has been building in this country since Covid. It is now at gale-force strength, battering families right across the country. The Government made the crisis even worse by withdrawing the cost-of-living supports in the last budget, costing families up to €1,400. This year, 2026, has seen more huge increases in the costs of all essentials and families are under increasing pressure, trying to make ends meet. They are put to the pin of their collar. The position is so bad that half a million families are in arrears with their electricity and gas bills and seven out of ten young people see their future abroad.

The price of home heating oil has increased by 15% in the past two weeks, and it is up 70% on this time 12 months ago. A total of 500 litres of home heating oil is €100 more costly today than it was two weeks ago. A total of 700,000 houses, mainly in rural Ireland, are affected by this. It is another indication of the discrimination against rural Ireland. Carbon tax must be removed from home heating oil and VAT should be reduced from 13.5% to 9%. Oil companies

are making obscene windfall profits and they must be subject to a windfall profit tax. The eight largest oil companies have made \$93 billion in profit in three months. It is immoral.

Electricity credits are essential for the coming winter and I believe a €500 electricity credit must be introduced. Data centres are paying electricity charges at half the household rates and they must be made to pay at least the same as householders. Groceries are also up significantly, costing a family an additional €2,500 over the past few years. We need price caps on energy and groceries.

The budget in two weeks' time must protect families. We have the money. The Government found over €2.5 billion down the back of a sofa in October 2024 to buy the November 2024 general election. This is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. The budget in two weeks' time must, as a minimum, reduce the cost of home heating oil by removing the carbon tax and reducing the VAT rate, introduce a windfall profits tax, make data centres pay the same electricity rates as households, pay a €500 energy credit to households, introduce a second tier of child benefit for poorer families, increase the fuel allowance, implement the living wage and increase social welfare rates by €15.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Families need help with their energy bills this winter but deferring the carbon tax is the very worst way of going about that. Irish households are suffering from a cost-of-living crisis that, at its heart, is driven by our country's dependence on fossil fuels. The carbon tax remains the only part of our entire taxation system which is designed to help the country and help individual families break that dependence on fossil fuels. To defer the carbon tax at this point would fundamentally undermine this goal. Some 26% of Irish households are dependent on home heating oil, and the price of kerosene has risen by 59% in the past year. That is not driven by the carbon tax. It is driven by international events. Even if the government was to defer the carbon tax, this fuel continues to be subject to volatility, with Iranian attacks in the Strait of Hormuz, or Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

Neither the Bill proposed by Sinn Féin today nor the motion from Independent Ireland tomorrow have set out how the revenue lost through carbon tax deferrals will be made up. Without this, the Sinn Féin Bill will mean that in 2027 fewer homes will get new renewable energy systems and fewer low-cost solar panels will be installed. Reducing funding for these measures is the worst thing that could be done in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and the Green Party will not support any legislation that has the effect of doing this.

There are alternative ways in which we can help Irish households this winter and in the future. The Green Party has proposed a fossil fuel inflation fund of €2.5 billion in 2027 from the surplus. This would fund targeted energy credits through 2027 for households with the lowest 70% of incomes, ensuring support goes to those who need that support the most. The fossil fuel inflation fund would also be deployed to support extra long-term measures to increase the retrofit of homes, increase the installation of low-cost solar panels, and see more replacement of oil heating systems with renewable systems. Those are the sort of long-term measures that, to date, have been completely missing from the Government's response.

The budgetary surplus that the country enjoys right now provides us with an incredible opportunity to ensure energy security for tens of thousands of Irish households and take major steps to reduce our carbon emissions. We need a Government that will go beyond the short-termism that we have seen since the Iran war started in February and a Government that will

actually use budget 2027 to dramatically increase the level of funding for home energy measures.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Households were never under pressure like this before. Middle and low-income households that coped in the past are under increasing pressure. Domestic home heating oil's sky-high cost is a huge contributory factor. In Laois, 41% of households are totally dependent on kerosene home heating oil and do not have an option. We have tracked prices, which have skyrocketed by 79% or more since last autumn. One political party claims that they went up 50%. I am not too sure where the data is coming from but the hard facts and the prices that are advertised and people are paying contradict that.

Before the energy crisis, kerosene was approximately 95 cent per litre. This week in Laois, the cost is €1.68 per litre. For households which are under pressure and cannot afford to buy 1,000 litres or 500 litres at a time, which are instead buying 200 litres at a time, the cost is between €1.75 and €1.82 per litre. The poorest hard-pressed households are paying up to €1.82 per litre. People are afraid to turn on their heating. I acknowledge that fuel allowance and the thresholds for eligibility have been increased. The Government can go further with that in the budget. I accept that. All those workers and middle-income people who do not get fuel allowance are caught with increased rents, mortgages, college fees, insurance, childcare, grocery, and public transport costs, at the very time when we are trying to reduce carbon emissions and to get people onto public transport.

We need solutions. We need to impose a levy on the big energy companies. We are talking about it and the Government is talking about it, but we need to act. The Government could reduce or stop the carbon tax on home heating oil under EU law. That is one of the things it can do. It should certainly reduce it or put the brakes on. The Government could reduce the VAT on home heating oil from 13.5% to 9%, as some in the industry are calling for. This would give immediate relief to hard-pressed families and households. The Government's take from the carbon tax on home heating oil has doubled in six years. That is some of the extra revenue that is coming in. A targeted energy credit is needed for those households that do not get the fuel allowance but whose incomes are below €75,000. I am not in favour of a blanket energy credit across the board, which would include well-off households. Some parties are. I would not support that. I do not think it is a good idea. It needs to be targeted.

On renewable energy, the quickest and most efficient gains can be obtained by installing solar panels. Improved grants are needed for those households caught in the middle or at the lower end. They are the ones who do not qualify for the fuel scheme, etc. We need to take on plug-in solar energy in a serious manner.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill. People Before Profit is happy to support it. We would go further. We think price caps - and we have said this for some time - need to be imposed on home heating oil, petrol, diesel, electricity and gas. Our proposal is to bring the price of kerosene back to €1 per litre by imposing price controls that would eliminate the nearly 70% increase that 700,000 households in this country have had to endure as a result of Donald Trump's actions. Shame on people in this House who celebrated and supported Trump and who have refused to apologise - I am not talking about Sinn Féin in this regard - for doing so. People in this House have supported the policies of this

man. Those policies will result in every household in this country having to endure higher fuel and energy bills this winter, as they have done for the past year.

The supposed friend of the small person turned out to be the friend of the oil magnates, billionaires and oligarchs. While other people were concentrating on what he was saying about whiskey when he was here last weekend, they should have heard what he said about oil and about going to war against Venezuela in order to get its oil. He also encouraged us to buy the American weapons that were so successfully deployed in taking out the President of Venezuela in order that America could grab that country's oil and profiteer from it. The Americans are profiteering while ordinary people are suffering because they cannot pay their bills or, in the case of those who rely on home heating oil, experienced a 70% increase in the cost of heating their homes thanks to Donald Trump and the Israeli regime. The Government should not unload that cost on the people who can least afford it.

Carbon tax is a regressive tax. The ESRI said a few things today. The one thing it categorically stated is that the tax is regressive. There is no getting away from that. The people who hurt most as a result of carbon tax are those least responsible for the cost-of-living crisis and least able to bear the increases that are happening. The Government should tax the profiteers. DCC Energy made €740 million in profits last year. It is a major supplier of kerosene in this country. It can afford to take a bit of a hit. Let us make it and the other energy companies, the electricity companies, the oil companies and the data centres pay a little more tax. We should make them pay some tax, and we could give a break and put price controls on energy and home heating oil.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I welcome the Bill. We have to talk about carbon tax. It punishes those who have the fewest choices in society. It punishes the families living in rural parts of Cork whom I represent. It punishes families at the lower end who cannot afford retrofitting. There is not much comfort in retrofitting when a person has to pay €18,000 for panels and gets €1,800 back from the Government. Some people in this House say that retrofitting is fantastic, but many people in the constituency I represent, which stretches from Ballincollig to Glanmire and Ballyvolane to Mayfield, cannot afford to get involved in retrofitting.

The price of home heating oil which increased by 44.6% in one year. A total of €160 in tax is taken on a fill of 1,000 litres of home heating kerosene. That is not sustainable. What the Government does not say out loud is that despite every excise reduction that it has made during this crisis, namely the 15 cent and 12 cent in respect of petrol and diesel and the 3 cent and 2.4 cent in respect of green diesel, not one cent was taken off the price of kerosene. There is a simple reason for that. It is because there is a non-carbon tax on the mineral oil and kerosene, the rate of which is zero. The Government decided that it was going to skip over home heating oil, knowing that the winter was coming, knowing how difficult it is for people to heat their homes and knowing about Members using the phrase - perhaps it is overused - about choosing between heating and eating. Many of my constituents in Cork are choosing just that, namely heating or eating.

Ministers House tell us that we have a surplus of €9 billion and that we have never been as wealthy. My constituents and the people I meet on the streets of Dublin, Sligo, Limerick and Wexford tell me a different story. They say that they are struggling at the till, at the pump and day to day. Some 500,000 people are in arrears with their gas and electricity bills, yet the

Minister for Finance cannot pass a microphone without making some sarcastic comment and telling us how well off we are and that we should start saving. There is nothing to save. There is no money for a lot of people. There is very little in the back pocket. People are choosing poorer types of ingredients and products of a lesser quality because they cannot afford to do it any more. It has crept in, and not just in the social welfare class that some people like to talk about. It has crept into every part of society. It has crept into people who are continuously obliged to choose whether they will feed their kids or not. People are choosing what they can feed their kids. People are choosing whether to go to bed an hour earlier because of the cost of heating their homes. That is the reality of life. I sometimes feel that those who operate with in the bubble of this House do not understand what people are going through. We talk about free school meals, the books system and all the rest of it, yet the Government has dictated that most schools will now have to pay, on average, €600 per student for laptops and iPads. They have to sign up to packages. People are struggling continuously, and the Government has done nothing when it comes to kerosene and home heating oil.

This is a short Bill. It sets out provisions for six months in respect of mineral oil tax and a zero obligation in respect of home heating kerosene. The one fault I can see is that it states that the Minister must make a decision and sign it. If it is voted through this week, it is up to the Minister to bring the Bill forward. Truly, I do not trust the Minister to do that. That is the reality of it.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Carbon tax is regressive taxation. It punishes the poorest people in society. The people who are paying the most carbon tax and most fuel taxation are those in diesel and petrol cars, many of whom will never be able to afford solar panels or electric vehicles. Many are renters who will never have the opportunity to retrofit their homes. That is the truth. Carbon tax punishes the poorest people in society. I want to be clear. Five years ago, every party in this Chamber, with the exception of Aontú and a few good Independent TDs, voted in favour of the climate action legislation. Everyone with a bit of cop-on knew that this would lead to an aggressive carbon taxation policy. I welcome the U-turn and rhetoric change across this side of the House, but the level of groupthink in-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There has been no change. We have always been against carbon tax.

Deputy Paul Lawless: ----- this Chamber must be addressed.

Introducing climate action legislation that contained legally binding targets was wrong and must be called out. The U-turn and the change in rhetoric are welcome.

Over the past few weeks, I have done quite a bit of research on taxation on fuel that I want to put on the record of the House. I want to be honest and transparent with the people of Ireland in the weeks ahead because I have no doubt that the Government will make every effort to outline to sectors that it cannot afford this or that because of the changes in fuel taxation. This Government is on track to take in more in carbon taxes this year than it did last year, even if the planned increase in carbon tax goes ahead in October. This Government is projected to take in more on VAT on fuel this year than it did last year. Figures released to me in recent days show that the Climate Action Fund, the fund into which moneys from the NORA levy are

paid, is in surplus by €250 million, even though it has effectively been reduced significantly since April. The Government wants to reintroduce the NORA levy in six weeks, even though, despite it having had a significant reduction over the last five months, that fund is in surplus by over €250 million.

It is time that the spin and the rhetoric end. The Government is not in danger of running the accounts dry if current excise rates remain in place and the pause in carbon taxation continues. Carbon tax is not a means of redistributing wealth. It is a stick that the Government is using to beat the poorest commuters and the country's poorest citizens.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Home Heating Oil (Emergency Mineral Oil Tax Reduction) Bill 2026 targets the specific burden of the carbon tax on kerosene. Others have provided figures. I looked at a 500 litre fill, which is about 80.41 cent in carbon tax alone. When you add VAT of nearly 23%, you can see that the entire bill is made up of Government-mandated levies. In principle, I support the Bill in terms of the attempt to try to give hard-pressed people who have no other option a dig out. Whether it is a temporary reduction in carbon tax or a retention of the tax and some form of rebate, I do not think it necessarily matters once the money ends up helping people.

Carbon tax is an easy target for some sectors. It is the devil incarnate for some political groupings. Carbon tax, if done properly, represents an attempt to encourage those who can afford to do so to spend their money on cleaner, greener ways of living, thereby reducing the country's carbon emissions, which would have a knock-on effect for everyone. A just transition means that when you bring in money from carbon tax, you help the poorest in society. That has not always happened. For example, there are people in local authority houses who are waiting for them to be insulated. The roll-out of insulation works for such housing is absolutely abysmal. Some people are benefiting more from the way the carbon tax has been rolled out.

We have to have measures in terms of our EU and global climate obligations and in the context of the way climate change is manifesting, but we also have to look at the wars in Ukraine and Iran. Both have a lot to do with Trump, whether it is directly in terms of putting pressure on the Russians or specifically in relation to assisting Israel in targeting Iran but not getting anything out of it. I have said before that I have no grá for the regime in Iran, but Trump's policies have caused mayhem everywhere and are hitting Irish people left, right and centre.

It is very hard for people to get by. That is why, one way or another, I hope the Minister of State will take on the spirit of the Bill and look at people, particularly those in rural areas. I live in an urban constituency, but I know that rural areas have a higher level of oil usage. People in such areas do not have access to natural gas and it is harder for them to get a one-stop shop in a semi-detached kind of setting. As a result, their bills tend to be higher and they do not necessarily get supports. It can cost €15,000 to €18,000 for a very basic retrofit, up to €80,000 if you are doing it properly and more if you are getting the whole house refurbished. It is not something you can just do and say, "My bills have gone up by an extra €2,000 that I do not have this year, so therefore I am going to get the house wrapped or put in solar". It does not work that way. There is a middle ground in terms of rolling out loans that pay back. In other words, your energy bill stays the same and whereby, over ten to 15 years, you start to make a saving. We need more of that type of model as well as direct interventions in respect of local

authority housing. Given the way Trump is going on and in view of the uncertainty globally, over the next six months we have to help people who are suffering. Reducing their cost of home heating oil is one way of doing so. That is why I support the thrust of this Bill.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on home heating oil and the very real pressure energy costs are placing on households across Ireland. This is an issue that I hear about every day from constituents in County Kerry. For many families in rural Ireland, home heating oil is not something that can be simply replaced overnight. It is the main source of heating in their home and when the tank needs to be filled that can mean finding a significant amount of money at one time. This is a very real cost-of-living crisis. We all know that household finances remain under enormous pressure. The latest CSO figures show that 8.3% of households with utility bills had fallen into arrears in 2025 while of households experiencing enforced deprivation, 38.6% had failed to pay a utility bill on time because of financial difficulties. I do not think anyone in the House should underestimate the pressure families are facing.

We also have to recognise the circumstances in which the increase energy prices is being driven. The current energy shock has been significantly influenced by international events and volatility in global energy markets. The Government cannot control the price of oil on the international market but it can decide how best to support households through periods of exceptional pressure. There has already been a substantial Government response. In budget 2026, the weekly rate of the fuel allowance was increased and the qualifying criteria were extended. There has also been record investment in home energy upgrades and retrofitting, with €558 million for residential and community energy upgrades provided in budget 2026. These measures matter because, ultimately, the best way to protect households from high energy prices is not just to respond when those prices rise but also to make homes warmer and more energy efficient and reduce the amount of energy families need to purchase.

Budget 2027 is just two weeks away. The Government has already indicated that the measures relating to cost of living and home heating oil and further energy supports will be central to the budget. Changes to mineral oil tax can be dealt with through the budget and the financial resolution process. The responsible approach is to recognise the genuine hardship being experienced while allowing the Government to consider the full range of measures in the forthcoming budget for families in Kerry and right across rural Ireland who depend on home heating oil. I will be looking very closely at what budget 2027 delivers. We need to make sure that those who are under the greatest pressure get meaningful support while continuing the investment that will make our homes more energy efficient and that will reduce the pressure on people in the longer term.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm deis a fháil labhairt ar an mBille seo anocht. Tosóidh mé ar na rudaí atá sa Bhille. Before addressing the substance of the Bill, I want to make a simple point to the Government. If Ministers are unwilling to support this Bill because of the potential cost to the Exchequer, why are they equally unwilling to embrace measures which would cost the State absolutely nothing?

Why, for example, does the Government continue to maintain the ban on the commercial sale of turf? There would be no significant Exchequer cost involved in reversing that policy. In my county people were criminalised for cutting turf, as they were in surrounding counties, like

Galway and Tipperary. It is simply wrong. Those of us who are practical suggested at the time - it was common sense - allowing people to continue to cut turf because many homes still depend on fossil fuels. That is fact and that is reality. This needs to be lifted and that policy needs to be reversed. It is disappointing to see that, despite continued and repeated concerns from rural communities, older people and those who still rely on traditional fuel sources such as turf, the Government has remained determined to restrict another means by which people heat their homes. This needs to be looked at and common sense needs to prevail here.

That speaks to a deeper issue as well. For many years now, successive Governments have pursued policies that have consistently made household energy more expensive, more regulated and more difficult to access. Whether it is carbon tax increases, restrictions on traditional fuels, rising energy levies, increasing network charges or new obligations that ultimately feed through into consumer bills, the direction of travel has always been the same. Ordinary households are expected to carry the burden at all times, which is simply wrong, as are working people, who are being taxed out of existence. Whether it be, as I said, the carbon tax increases or rising energy levies, it is unfair. It is tax after tax. It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that this is not simply about revenue; it is about a long-running policy approach that regards higher energy costs as a legitimate tool for influencing household behaviour, regardless of the hardship that approach creates.

That is why today's debate really matters. At its core, this legislation recognises a reality that every Deputy here understands: hundreds of thousands of households continue to depend on home heating oil, particularly in rural Ireland. As I said, for those families home heating oil is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Then we have the reliance on fossil fuels, which is also a necessity. Many of these households have no realistic alternative available to them and they simply cannot replace an existing heating system overnight. They cannot undertake costly retrofit works at the drop of a hat and they cannot continue absorbing endless increases in energy costs without consequences for their household finances.

I am particularly concerned about the waiting lists for the warmer homes scheme, which is run by SEAI. Most elderly people are waiting two years. Something needs to be done about that to speed up that waiting list for anyone who is waiting to have their home insulated or wrapped.

The objective of reducing the tax burden on home heating oil deserves serious consideration here tonight. I have consistently argued that the Government must use every available lever to reduce energy costs. Following recent international instability and the impact on fuel markets, I called on the Government to implement mineral oil tax reductions similar to those introduced during the 2022 energy crisis. There exists a precedent here. I recently remarked that if Ministers were to fight energy suppliers with the same determination and vigour they display when confronting social media companies, families would be considerably better off. Unfortunately, many consumers feel they have been left largely at the mercy of rising energy costs while the Government continues to take a soft-touch approach.

I also have concerns about the proposed renewable heat obligation scheme. If compliance costs associated with that scheme ultimately end up on household bills, consumers will once again pay more without any certainty that meaningful additional benefits are being delivered.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Agus mé i m'oifig, bhí mé ag éisteacht le go leor daoine ag caint faoin ábhar seo. Mar is gnáth, táim an-bhuíoch de dhaoine a thagann isteach anseo le solutions. Níl na daoine atá ag tabhairt amach ag rá aon rud a bhfuil muid in ann a dhéanamh faoi láthair. Táimidne sa Teach seo anseo ar son daoine na hÉireann chun a saol a fheabhsú. Tá daoine áirithe sa Teach seo ag díriú isteach ar political point scoring seachas ar solutions.

I think everyone in this Chamber knows that the current price of oil and fuel is being driven by what is happening across the conflicts of the world, be it Ukraine and Russia or the Middle East. All we can do in this Chamber is give as much of a cushion and as much protection to the Irish people as possible. It is the reason I continue to offer solutions to the Government. I am very grateful for the work the Independents have been doing on plug-in solar. I love hearing Members on all sides of the House speak about the benefits of plug-in solar and how it will help those who are struggling with bills in apartment blocks and those who cannot afford a couple of thousand euro for a solar system but who want to spend €400 or €500 on a kit that will have a payback period of two years rather than one of six to ten years. It makes sense. The UK did it on 27 August and I look forward to seeing it brought into Ireland.

In relation to the budget and home heating oil, one thing I urge the Government to prioritise - and I have been doing this in my work on the committee and in my emails and parliamentary questions - is the living alone allowance. It costs the same to heat a home whether someone is on their own or whether there are two people living in it. The tank is the same size, the rooms are the same size, and the winter will be just as cold. If we could bring in one thing that would really help, it would be to help those older people, the widowed, those with disabilities who are living alone and those with disabilities who are struggling with the cost of living at the moment. If we could put pressure on bringing in a higher income limit for a single person, I think that would really benefit the pensioner living alone whose pension has just put them above the threshold which then makes them lose the fuel allowance. They then lose access to the free warmer homes scheme. That is why I ask for a fairer income assessment. In a parliamentary question I submitted I asked how much it would cost if the Department increased the threshold by €4. The Minister responded that it would cost the State €52 million for the full year. That is targeted and affordable and will help those elderly and those living alone to get through these harsh months. When older people are warm they are comfortable, they stay at home, they stay in the community they have lived in and they stay around their neighbours. It helps their mental health and their routine and it is very good for their longevity.

I urge this Government to address targeted help. That is why I will keep plugging plug-in solar with the Independents. I will keep using my influence as an Independent for solutions. I really welcome the work of the regional Independents on the programme for Government commitments and on the programme for Government we negotiated. I look forward to seeing it deliver for the Irish people.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I welcome the opportunity to respond to some of the issues raised in the debate on the Bill put forward by Sinn Féin regarding the taxation of home heating oil. As this House understands, Ireland, as a small, open, successful economy with a reliance on fossil fuels, is especially vulnerable to global energy price shocks. No government anywhere in the world can fully insulate its people from price shocks of the magnitude we have seen over the past seven months. However, as a Government, we have

moved to support households, to support the most vulnerable with regard to these price shocks and to support key sectors such as our farmers, our hauliers and our fishers. Our actions so far have clearly shown that we have listened to our citizens and have been responsive to their needs.

In fact, we have provided one of the largest packages per head of population in the entire EU, with supports of more than €1.3 billion. Every man, woman and child in Ireland has received one of the largest packages of support in the EU. That is action. That is not talk. That is not an empty promise. That package has assisted many people in Ireland and, crucially, has included targeted measures to support the most vulnerable. That is why, in budget 2026, the Government acted to broaden eligibility for the fuel allowance. An extra 50,000 households have benefited. We now have more than 470,000 households benefiting from the fuel allowance and an additional four weeks' payment of €38 per week was also given to each one of those households. That is targeted action for those who need it most. That is why, in budget 2027, this Government is committed to supporting those most vulnerable to energy poverty while recognising that the tax system can only do so much.

I have noted the discussion this evening and want to respond by re-emphasising once again that the factors behind the increasing cost of energy are global in nature. It is not just the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. It is the Houthi attacks and the war in Ukraine. All of these ongoing conflicts are pushing up the price of oil. However, this Government accepts its responsibilities and fully acknowledges the challenging and uncertain times in which we are living. We also recognise that people look to the Government to manage the impact of this global price disruption in a fair and equitable way. Therefore, on 6 October, this Government will deliver budget 2027 with the aim of making every person's life that bit easier. That is where the changes will come about - not tonight, not tomorrow, but on budget day. That is where the decisions will be made.

Today, during Leaders' Questions, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, outlined some of the broad brush-strokes of the budget. Of course, nothing is definite until budget day, but the Minister already listed an income tax package to reward workers and a Government response on the cost of disability and the cost of childcare. He also said that the wider issue of taxation on fuel and energy was under review, and that the Government was giving specific consideration to the cost of home heating oil. Decisions on the cost of home heating oil will be voted on, not tonight, but in the context of budget 2027.

Just as important as helping to alleviate some of the increased costs people are facing is the need to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels where possible. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, also spoke today of the need for a greater uptake of grants to improve energy sustainability. He said the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, would act on this. We cannot approach this issue from one side only. We must reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and progress will be made on this issue in the forthcoming budget. I was pleased to hear my colleague, Deputy Heneghan, once again call for the introduction of plug-in solar. In my opinion, the sooner the better. His idea, supported by the Independents from day one, can make a real difference and I hope to see it as soon as possible.

Despite all of the accusations we have heard from the Opposition tonight, the facts do not lie. Once again, I reiterate that this Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU, per head of population, with a total of €1.3 billion available. That is the

reality. Since the beginning of this crisis, the Government has deferred the 1 May carbon tax increase on home heating fuels. It has not reduced it but has deferred it. It has reduced excise duty on diesel, petrol and marked gas oil. It has enhanced the diesel rebate scheme for hauliers and passenger transport operators. It has funded payments to road transport operators under the road transport support scheme. It has funded payments to farmers, farm contractors and to fishers under the fuel income support scheme. It has also reduced the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy. However, nobody should forget that the work of that agency is to ensure that Ireland has adequate oil reserves. In these uncertain times, to continue funding that agency is prudent. Before this crisis, the Government was already acting to protect households with changes that were made in budget 2026, such as an extension until 2030 of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills, enhanced social protection payments and an increase in the fuel allowance.

I will make a comment about carbon tax. Carbon tax is based on the “polluter pays” principle. That is something I am sure everyone in this House agrees with. It is an important part of Ireland's overall commitment to tackling climate change and lowering our dependence on fossil fuels. As of budget 2026, the Government has allocated more than €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue for those kinds of scheme since 2020. The ESRI analysis consistently shows that the lower income deciles are better off as a result of the social protection measures funded by increased carbon tax. Why would we want to get rid of a tax measure that benefits the lower income deciles, which is what the ESRI tells us, as a result of the social protection measures funded by this tax? In budget 2026, more than €1.1 billion was allocated to climate action measures. For example, there was €566 million for retrofitting, €350 million for targeted social welfare interventions such as the fuel allowance and €173 million for green and sustainable farming measures such as the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES. These funding programmes show that the Government has a proven track record of supporting the most vulnerable, and on budget day, it will be no different.

I once again say that the appropriate time to deal with the cost of fuels and home heating oil is in the context of budget 2027 in two weeks' time. It is on the basis that budget 2027 is two weeks away that the Government does not support the Opposition's Bill and again presses that the House decline to give this Bill a Second Reading.

Deputy Matt Carthy: For the benefit of bringing the Minister of State down from her ivory tower and into the real world, I will read into the record an abridged email I received from a constituent:

Hi Matt,

From a worried working family mother of three children, one just did his Leaving Cert ... a fifth year student and a first year student, I'm self employed and my husband is a full time joiner, we are scraping the barrel to stay above paying our bills, keeping food on the table and running a car, we are truly grateful that we have work but honestly hand on heart we haven't the price of a meal out when we have our bills paid. Winter is upon us and we have oil heating, it isn't going on we have an open fire but that just purposes the living room, but at least we have it definitely no coal been bought just plenty of sticks ...

We are in 2026 and where we should be getting by nicely but we are crippled and that is down to Government.

What about us working class; my husband leaves the house at 4.45 a.m. each morning for work to keep us afloat but out of his wages he pays almost half of it in taxes.

I suppose I'm making contact for you as part of the opposition to fight our corner in the Dail, we are at knife edge and I'm so afraid with stress and worry some of our health will deteriorate, we need help.

When the Minister of State and her colleagues pontificate about political manoeuvres, this woman's story and the hundreds of thousands like it are the reason Sinn Féin has brought this motion tonight. We will make no apologies for demanding that workers and families get the break they deserve because, as the Minister of State said, the facts do not lie. The facts are that last year the Government introduced and supported a budget that included €9 billion of additional spending and families like this were left worse off. They are the absolute facts, so we will do everything we can to force the Government to abolish carbon tax on home heating oil; to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel; abolish the USC on the first €40,000; to tackle the soaring cost of energy, insurance and groceries; and to finally begin easing the pressure on families like this. It is the least they deserve from the Government.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Yesterday, when I was in Kilkenny city the price of diesel was a staggering €2.16 a litre. These prices are crippling ordinary people right across the State. The rising cost of fuel has a knock-on effect on nearly every aspect of our lives, be it getting to work, taking the kids to school, driving them to training or simply doing the weekly shopping. Ordinary people are being squeezed tighter and tighter. We need to call out the double standards at play by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. When the bankers wanted a break, they got a sweetheart deal to pay just 1% tax. When the big property developers looked for a break, they got mega tax cuts. The Government did the same for the likes of Starbucks and McDonald's, but when ordinary working people or the elderly look for help, they are told it is just not possible. It is time the Government started to stand with ordinary people, not with the elites. A fill of home heating oil is up over €250 in the past two weeks. No one can afford to fully refill a tank any more. Every week I hear from people across Carlow and Kilkenny who are struggling, especially the elderly and those living with a disability - people with little to no alternative to heating their home with home heating oil. They are the people who do not have the thousands of euro they would need to carry out a retrofit. The motion we have brought before the Dáil to remove the carbon tax from home heating oil will help those people. It would make a real noticeable difference. It is time to give people certainty and hope as we head into what without doubt will be a very tough winter for so many people.

The Minister of State said the Government has helped people. I can tell her that people are just not feeling it. If the Government is to get a clap on the back, the only thing it could be for would be putting record numbers in arrears and record numbers in homelessness. That is nothing to be looked up to.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: The home heating oil Bill seeks to remove the carbon tax from home heating oil to help households struggling with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have not removed a single cent off home heating oil and they and Independent TDs have voted Sinn Féin down eight times this year as we sought to bring down the price of fuel.

Every week people are faced with rising grocery bills, higher insurance costs, increased household expenses and energy prices far above what families can afford. For those relying on home heating oil, filling the tank has become a huge financial burden. This is particularly true in rural communities in my constituency. I regularly meet people across south Wicklow - from Arklow across to Aughrim and from Redcross down to Carnew. It is the same in north Wexford, from Ballyfad down to Ballindaggan and Killinierin down to Kilmuckridge and everywhere in between. Thousands of households are dependent on home heating oil as the primary source of heating and they do not have the option of switching to a gas network. When oil prices rise, they simply have to pay more or go without. Many families are already making impossible choices – basically a choice between heating or eating. They must decide between topping up the oil tank, paying for school costs, childcare expenses and weekly grocery bills. Older people living alone, working families on modest incomes and those depending on social welfare are all exposed to the increases. Many pensioners are afraid to turn on the heating as winter approaches.

The purpose of the Bill is very simple. It is to remove the carbon tax element from home heating oil and give families a breathing space. It is a practical targeted measure to protect people from excessive costs and it recognises the reality of rural Ireland. The Government has shot us down eight times this year. Maybe this time it will do the right thing and back our Bill instead of opposing us for the sake of opposing us.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I listened to the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, and I listened to the other Minister of State who came in here. Nobody else from the Government benches had the brass neck to come in and face us down on this issue. Listening to the Minister of State, I wondered what planet she is living on. She said the facts do not lie. Here are some facts for her. The price of a fill of home heating oil has increased by €700 since the start of this year. Here is another fact. The Government has not reduced the tax by 1 cent to help any one of those families that are pushed to the pin of their collar with the rising costs.

Another fact is that there are hundreds of thousands of families right across this State, from Donegal right down to Cork, and everywhere in between, that are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. It is not just fuel or home heating oil; it is the price of groceries, rent, insurance and electricity. Life is just bearing down on them and they are finding it really difficult.

I have been in so many homes where people have told me their facts. They have showed me their tanks that are running dry. They have showed me the 5 gallon drums, because that is now how they have to heat their home. They are looking at a Government that has billions of euro of surplus yet it will still not reduce the taxes on home heating oil to help families keep their homes warm this winter. It is a shame on it. The Government is completely detached from where ordinary people are at. The next time they sit around the Cabinet table, every single one of the Ministers, all of whom are in public jobs that are paid by the public purse and all of whom are earning in excess of €200,000, should think of what it is like to be that mother who cannot fill her oil tank. They should think of what it is like to be that father who cannot afford to put diesel in his car to drive to work without making other sacrifices in his life. That is the Ireland that we are living in today.

This is the eighth time I have brought this legislation before the Dáil since March of this year, because those prices have gone up and up. People need a voice and we in Sinn Féin will

be their voice. We will fight their corner. We will have their back. We are not going to give up until they get what they deserve. What they deserve is a Government that understands the pressure they are under, one that understands they are being ripped off left, right and centre, including by the Government. It was not lost on the woman whose home I went to, whose tank is running dry, that as the price of home heating oil, diesel and petrol goes up the Government takes in more money in tax.

It is shameful that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents will line up again for the eighth time to vote against reducing the cost in order to help people heat their home. The Government has lost touch with the Irish people. The people will rise if the Government does not act, if it does not get this right and understand the pressure people are under. I have no doubt about it. They are at the pin of their collar, at breaking point, and they will rise, just like they did before. I remember the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, standing over there telling me that we were isolated; that we took the wrong decision; that not one party or Independent voted the same way as Sinn Féin on the fuel issues. By God we were far from isolated when my colleagues and I were standing with protestors right across this State, who rose up and said they were taking nothing more.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is a saying in Irish which I will finish on – is maith an rud é an eagla. Fear is a great thing. I know the Government fears the risen people. By God if it does not get this right the people will rise again.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 23 September 2026.

7 o'clock

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Data Centres

2. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if, in the interest of transparency, he will instruct his Department to publish the original unedited report (details supplied) on the value of data centres to Ireland. 67206/26

3. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the reason a recent report (details supplied) published by his Department on the economic impact of data centres in Ireland did not address the net impact on the economy of increased costs of energy caused by data centres, the opportunity cost of supporting data centres instead of other infrastructure, or sustainability targets on water and energy use for data centres. 67205/26

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Over the summer the Department published a report prepared by KPMG that set out the economic case for data centres in Ireland. Freedom of information requests made by Lynn Boylan of Sinn Féin, and I acknowledge all her work in this area, revealed that officials from the Department sought to make amendments to the draft prepared by KPMG in order to cut concerns about the impact of data centre expansion on housing, utilities and farmland. In the interests of transparency will the Minister release the full draft report prepared by KPMG where these concerns have not been removed?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 2 and 3 together.

I thank the Deputies for their questions. I propose to take these two priority questions together as they concern the recently published report, *The Value of Data Centres to Ireland*, which was prepared independently by KPMG for my Department.

The first issue raised is regarding the publication of draft versions of the report. Officials from my Department and members of the steering group provided comments and feedback on draft versions in line with standard practice for commissioned research. Draft reports are subject to review and refinement to test assumptions, challenge analysis, seek clarification where required and ensure that findings are robustly supported by evidence and clearly presented. In line with standard practice, this is the approach that my Department takes in delivering independent research studies, including, for example, *The Sectoral Analysis of Future Hydrogen Demand and End Use in Ireland*, *An Evaluation of Deadweight in the DETE Economic Appraisal Model (EAM)* and *An Economic Assessment of Green Energy Park Concepts*.

Assertions that the KPMG study on data centres was designed to reach a predetermined conclusion are incorrect. Responsibility for the methodology, analysis and findings contained in the final report rests with KPMG, following its evidence gathering, stakeholder engagement, expert challenge and quality assurance processes. I do not intend to instruct my Department to publish draft versions of the report. Drafts are working documents that form part of an iterative research process and do not represent the considered final views of the authors. Publication of drafts without the context of the review and quality assurance process could create confusion regarding the final conclusions of the study.

I will now turn to the issue raised regarding the economic impact of data centres, the associated energy costs and the scope of the study. The report was commissioned to address a knowledge gap regarding the economic contribution of data centres to Ireland, including their impact on employment, gross value added, tax revenues and wider economic activity. It found that data centres supported an additional 7,636 operational jobs between 2010 and 2024 and are enabling infrastructure supporting significant economic activity in Ireland.

The terms of reference for the study were to determine the economic impact and wider societal benefits arising from existing and planned data centres in Ireland up to 2030 and explore options for the evolution of the data centre landscape beyond 2030 with a view to optimising future economic and societal benefits. While the report was required to consider trade-offs and opportunity costs associated with future data-centre development, it was not commissioned as a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis comparing the economic benefits of

data centres with electricity costs, nor was it designed to assess the net economic benefits of data centres against alternative uses of electricity, land, water or infrastructure capacity.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is a 12-and-a-half minute slot for two questions and each Deputy will have two minutes to speak.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: People need transparency because they are researching how many data centres are enough and how do we get a sustainable balance. In 2025 data centres consumed 23% of all metered electricity, which was up from a figure of just 5% ten years ago in 2015. This is more than the total metered electricity used by all urban dwellings in 2025, which accounted for just over 18%. All rural dwellings accounted for 9%. At this rate, the electricity usage of data centres will surpass the total used by all homes within a few years. I do not think this is sustainable.

The pressures these data centres are placing on grid capacity cannot be understated. I am sure the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment can recognise that where grid capacity is unavailable it jeopardises potential investment and job creation in smaller businesses. Delays in securing electricity or water connections mean investment will go elsewhere to competing economies. Businesses need places for their workers to live. If we cannot match this housing demand due to grid constraints we will lose out.

It is vital that decisions on new data centre connections take account of the electricity requirements of housing, businesses, public services and future industrial development in that area. This is why last week my colleague, Deputy Pa Daly, brought forward a Bill that does just this. It prioritises homes and businesses over these energy and water consuming data centres. More data centres mean higher energy bills for households. Earlier this afternoon Lynn Boylan, MEP, and Eve Ryan from Trinity College presented the findings of their research on how data centres impact on the cost of electricity.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: When the KPMG report on data centres was initially published it raised serious questions around whether a meaningful cost-benefit analysis was being undertaken in relation to the economic impact of data centres, particularly when it coincided so closely with the publication of academic analysis that showed households have seen their energy bills increase by hundreds of euro due to data centre demand driving up wholesale prices. Now it appears, through freedom of information requests, that the conclusions of the report were determined from the beginning and that the rougher edges were shaved off to present a more palatable picture.

The tender document that set out the specifications of the report asked KPMG to assess the challenges and potential disadvantages of further data centre development. The same terms of reference specifically provided the example of rising electricity prices as one such potential challenge, stating there is a potential for increase in electricity prices related to any grid infrastructure developments required to support further data centre development. Why, then, was this analysis absent from the final report? Were the consultants not asked to conduct a full net economic analysis, including the costs as well as the benefits of data centre expansion? Did the Department specifically instruct the consultants not to assess impacts on electricity prices for households and businesses?

Was any assessment carried out by the Department of the opportunity costs of dedicating grid capacity and public infrastructure to data centres rather than housing, transport or industrial development? Why were sustainability targets, which include measurements relating to energy use, water consumption and emissions, not included as core metrics within this report?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank both Deputies for their responses. Critically, as I pointed out in my earlier contribution, our report was not a cost-benefit analysis. It was principally about the added economic value that data centres would bring to the economy, or not. We had a gap in evidence in relation to their economic value. We have a body of evidence from the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, the CRU, EirGrid and the Environmental Protection Authority, EPA, in relation to grid capacity, electricity demand, emissions and all those areas, and it is intended to offer a view on the economic analysis. There is a gap in this regard, and it is an area where the Government should have impartial evidence to make a determination. It was not, therefore, a cost-benefit analysis.

As I outlined in my opening contribution, in the context of reports that come from the Department, there are steering committees, terms of reference and a responsibility to ensure that reports meet the terms of reference as required by the Department. All the methodology, assumptions and quality assurance have to be stood over by KPMG. That is key.

In relation to demand and competing interests, I am very much aware that there are huge challenges with data centres, particularly in the context of grid capacity. That is why I changed the rules. In the context of our large energy user plan, I said very clearly that any new data centres will need to use 80% renewable energy. That is going to drive forward our renewable energy transition. If we are going to breathe life into the five projects on the east coast, which will produce a total of 5 GW, we are going to need large energy users. Critically, to finance the projects, we are going to need the money and the opportunities that present in this regard, both of which are key. We are also very clear that for the security of the grid, data centres must have 100% of their demand in dispatchable energy generation on site. Again, this builds up resilience in the system. As I have pointed out previously, we have an opportunity to book value for our citizens in energy that is utilised through data centres and to build resilience in the digital economy. I know that there are challenges. We are mitigating those challenges by having a strong policy response.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Has a cost-benefit analysis been done in respect of data centres? Perhaps the Minister can answer this question. We need a thorough cost-benefit analysis. It may be that the information is there and I have not seen it. I ask this question because households are footing the bill for network upgrades to increase capacity for the expansion in the number of data centres, effectively subsidising the power supply for some of the most profitable companies in the world. Network charges currently represent 30% of household bills and are set to rise by an average of €41.25 annually from October. That is not fair. The Government's *laissez faire* approach cannot continue. Housing, energy security and infrastructure serving the public must be prioritised over the endless number of data centres. How many data centres do we need? How many are we going to have and where are they going to be located? The current arrangement of socialised costs for privatised profits cannot continue. I really think that we need to look at this whole area of data centres, where they are, how many are needed and what the cost-benefit analysis is.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Good policy requires that we assess benefits and costs. If the Government is confident in its approach towards data centre expansion, then it should have no need to place its thumb on the scales, as was done in the case of this report. The Minister may disagree with some criticisms of the approach, but many people will think it is reasonable to ask whether a report that was intended to inform public policy should have examined the benefits and the trade-offs associated with further data centre growth.

It is very clear from the terms of reference released that the report had been intended to address these issues. Why, then, were they removed? Given that data centres account for such a huge share of national electricity demand and are already increasing electricity bills, this is not an abstract question. We have had one useful admission from the Minister, who stated that the KPMG report was not commissioned as a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. Is it not time that the Government commission a comprehensive report on the benefits and costs of data centres?

Deputy Peter Burke: That is not an admission; it is a statement of fact, and I am on record as saying that. It is in the programme for Government. There is a comprehensive piece on the economic value of data centres. That is what the research and the report were about.

On increased energy prices, various Deputies quoted reports which state that data centres are responsible for increased energy prices. We saw the report from Friends of the Earth. Notwithstanding that, from 2015 to 2023, we had a war in Ukraine and a huge energy shock, but the report in question blames data centres. We have to ask ourselves whether that is credible. This is the key thing on which people are being misled. Let us look at the contribution to the grid that data centres bring in the context of capital infrastructure and at grid capacity, the temporary emergency generation scheme and the amount that data centres have to pay. If a family is building a new house, there is a charge to be paid to put in an electricity connection. The charges for data centres are multiples of that amount. So they should be, because their infrastructural and capital costs are huge.

Obviously, data centres are buying energy on the wholesale market, which is like comparing apples and oranges. An amount is certainly asked for from them, and that money can drive forward our offshore renewables. This is a question that a lot of people advocating for our offshore renewables are not answering. How are we going to finance them? Are we going to say, for the five projects I mentioned, that we are not going to use that demand here? What about the 9 GW of onshore energy we are looking to bring in and the 8 GW of solar energy? Where are we going to have that energy demand? Are we going to rely on exporting energy to other countries that are increasing their renewables and their own energy independence or are we going to look at the potential of booking that value for Irish citizens?

There will be challenges along the road, and we have to be very careful that we do not get into a situation where there is a trade-off with housing or industry. The Government's new policy manages that quite well because we are driving renewables. We know it is set out in the report that there is a challenge with emissions, about 4%, from data centres right now, but the opportunity costs in bringing fully renewable energy onto the grid are very significant and no one wants to mention that.

Aer Lingus

4. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the engagement he has had with the management of a company (details supplied) regarding reports of increased cabin crew redundancies in Dublin and Cork; and the steps he is taking to protect jobs and ensure meaningful consultation with workers and their representatives. 67207/26

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister of State will recall that Aer Lingus announced substantial job cuts in July affecting hundreds of workers across the country. My office has been contacted by some of those affected workers facing redundancy. They are extremely concerned regarding the transparency of the restructuring at the airline, while others face significant changes to their current working arrangements. Can the Minister of State provide an update on his engagements with Aer Lingus since July concerning these job cuts? Will he outline what steps he is taking to protect jobs and ensure meaningful consultation with workers and their representatives?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for her question. My thoughts are with all workers facing potential redundancy. I understand this is a very difficult time for those involved.

Ireland has a robust suite of employment rights legislation in place to protect workers impacted by redundancy. The Redundancy Payments Act 1967, as amended, requires employers to pay a statutory redundancy payment to eligible employees who are being made redundant and have more than two years' service. The rules governing collective redundancies are set out in the Protection of Employment Act 1977, as amended. The 1977 Act imposes a number of obligations on an employer that proposes a collective redundancy, which arise when certain thresholds are met. These include undertaking a 30-day information and consultation process with the employees' representatives and notifying the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment of the proposed redundancies at least 30 days before they take effect. My Department received a notification of proposed collective redundancies from the company concerned on 16 July 2026.

The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is the organisation which is mandated to secure compliance with employment rights legislation. Employees have the right to refer complaints to the WRC on a wide range of employment law breaches for adjudication and compensation where appropriate. This includes the right to make a complaint where they believe their employer has failed to fulfil its obligations under the Protection of Employment Act 1977.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I do not think that a hands-off approach is going to work in this case. Aer Lingus announced in July, as the Minister of State rightly said, that 500 jobs would be lost at the airline. That would impact pilots, cabin crew and ground staff. The company said this was due to the €34 million loss reported for the first six months of 2026. Aer Lingus, though, is a very successful company, having recorded operating profits of €282 million last year.

The company is also expected to make an overall profit in 2026. Its parent company, IAG, enjoyed operating profits of over €5 billion in 2025. The workers in Dublin, Cork, Shannon and around the country who have contributed to that success deserve every effort to be made to secure their jobs or to protect their livelihoods. I understand that Aer Lingus is a commercial company, but that cannot be the end of the Government's responsibility. The Tánaiste told me on 16 July that he would ask the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, to come back to me on the Government's engagement with Aer Lingus.

Deputy Alan Dillon: As already stated, Ireland has a robust suite of employment law to protect workers who are impacted by this redundancy programme. That includes the right to statutory redundancy payments for eligible employees with more than two years' service. It also includes the right to a 30-day information and consultation process during the collective redundancy process and, indeed, a certain level of minimum notice prior to dismissal. These protections are in place. They are really important. Given the independence of those who manage these through the WRC, they are exercising their statutory function. If there are any issues, they have the right to refer complaints to the WRC on a wide range of employment law breaches. That is the first port of call. We have robust industrial relations mechanisms and it would not be appropriate for me, as Minister of State, to intervene in that process in light of the independence of the entities involved.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Taoiseach told me that the Minister of State would follow up on this. Will the Minister of State confirm that he did so? What engagement has he had since the announcements were made and what concrete commitments have been secured from management? The Minister of State also needs to confirm that he will meet directly with the affected workers and representatives and ensure that Aer Lingus management engages in genuine consultation.

The proposed redundancies at Aer Lingus are causing enormous uncertainty for workers and their families. These are skilled individuals who have contributed enormously to the airline over the years. They deserve transparency, fair treatment and a genuine opportunity to influence decisions affecting their livelihoods. Workers need more than assurances that this is a commercial matter. They need to know what concrete action the Government is taking to protect their jobs and rights. Will the Minister of State meet with the workers, see what the situation is and find out what can be done to protect them and their livelihoods? The Government has a responsibility here, notwithstanding what the Minister of State said about the mechanisms that are in place.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I answered that question previously. The legislation sets out clearly the requirements of what the consultation involves. The consultation process includes discussions around avoiding redundancies where possible, reducing the number of redundancies and mitigating the consequences for those affected. Employers are also required to provide employees' representatives with specific information relating to the process of redundancies and to facilitate meaningful engagement and transparency.

Nothing has been communicated to me in regard to intervening. Ultimately, the obligation is that they fulfil their requirements in respect of certain matters. It should not be up to the

political system to intervene. Indeed, it is a matter for the independent WRC to conduct its work professionally. That is appropriate in the here and now.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am very disappointed with that answer.

Cross-Border Co-operation

5. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the way in which his Department will address the challenges outlined in a recent report (details supplied). [67208/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The recent IBEC-CBI report identifies serious barriers to all-island labour mobility, including complex tax arrangements, restrictions, hybrid working, incompatible work permit systems and a lack of clear guidance for employers. I thank my colleague the Minister, Dr. Caoimhe Archibald, in Stormont, who has already written to the British Treasury about this and who has discovered that significant progress has been made on the new double taxation convention between the UK and Ireland. I am interested to hear an update from the Minister on these talks.

Deputy Peter Burke: IBEC and CBI Northern Ireland's Joint Business Council published the All Island Labour Mobility - Obstacles and Opportunities report in July. The report calls for the establishment of a joint forum to develop a bilateral approach to all-island labour mobility and discusses a range of issues such as taxation arrangements, social security, and mobility for non-Irish or British workers. The Government's Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, which is chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, is considering this report. This forum, which is attended by all relevant Departments, including the Departments of foreign affairs, Social Protection and Finance, has a shared island working group dedicated to examining issues relevant to economic and labour market policy across the island of Ireland. The LEEF shared island working group commissioned an all-island labour market study in 2024 to examine the condition of the labour market across the island of Ireland. Officials in my Department have been engaging with the State enterprise agencies, the shared island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Finance on the issues highlighted.

My Department has responsibility for economic migration policy and the employment permits legislation, protection of workers' rights in the State, and achieving fair labour standards and freedom of movement across borders for workers are key priorities. Ireland engages with the European Commission, the European Labour Authority and member states with regard to ensuring fair, simple, and effective enforcement of EU rules on labour mobility and social security co-ordination. The Government also engages regularly with its relevant counterparts in Northern Ireland and the UK in order to foster a unified and cohesive response to labour mobility and cross-Border issues. My Department and other Departments will continue to engage on this matter.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am asking the Minister for a timeline for when the recommendations in the report will be implemented. The report rightly addresses the barriers preventing workers and employers from taking full advantage of the all-island labour market.

Both organisations involved called for urgent action on hybrid working and taxation and immigration arrangements, including the establishment of the forum, as the Minister said, to develop solutions.

Brexit has led to significant issues for workers in the Six Counties and the wider Border region. The North voted to remain in the EU in 2016, yet, ten years on, we are still dealing with the consequences of that disastrous vote. Eighteen thousand workers face significant obstacles navigating the Border on a daily basis. Cross-Border trade amounts to €17 billion annually, but the potential for growth is restricted by the availability of labour. Forty-two per cent of IBEC-CBI members sampled said that mobility barriers are making it harder to fill those skill gaps. We need urgency on this.

Deputy Peter Burke: I do not have a timeline because LEEF has not yet considered fully the contents of the report and formulated a response. However, I concur with what the Deputy said regarding the all-island economy and the growth in the value of cross-Border trade to €17 billion. I sense that an opportunity in this regard is being left behind. As a member of LEEF, I know it has been stated previously that taxation issues are causing difficulty in the context of cross-Border work. However, I would point out that LEEF has all the relevant people present to consider this. Obviously, the taxation issue has been highlighted as a fairly significant concern.

As soon as LEEF comes forward with a resolution or a response to the report and a set of actions, which we need, it will help us in developing a bilateral approach to all-island labour mobility. This will be key, particularly in resolving the taxation arrangements as well as those relating to social security, which will be key to help the Department of Social Protection as well.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for that and for the work that is being done. I just think there needs to be an urgency in respect of this matter. I accept that the double taxation convention is primarily a matter for the Department of Finance and the British Treasury. However, the consequences of the barriers extend directly into enterprise and employment policy, recruitment skills shortages and the ability of businesses to operate across the island.

The IBEC-CBI report is not simply a taxation report. It identifies wider barriers affecting the operation of the all-island labour market. I ask that the Minister urgently address the recommendations made within this report. I acknowledge the work that has been done to date, but there is an opportunity cost around all of the delays with regard to sorting this out ten years after Brexit.

Deputy Peter Burke: LEEF has a shared island working group dedicated to resolving some of these significant challenges and putting significant capital funding in. However, I concur with the Deputy that we need to make it easier for enterprises to flourish on both sides of the Border and workers will be key. This has been discussed at the LEEF and we are working collectively to formulate a response to the IBEC and Confederation of British Industry, CBI report at the joint business council. I am doing absolutely everything I can to further North-South relations, particularly with the Deputy's colleague, Caoimhe Archibald. The cross-

Border work we have been doing in tourism and other areas is quite striking, particularly investing in significant projects that will bring mutual benefit, such as bringing the lakelands of Fermanagh into Ireland's Ancient East, the work on extending the causeway coastal path and the Wild Atlantic Way. There is a huge amount of opportunity in that area. Equally, we have challenges in business which we have to make progress on. I am up for doing so and will raise the Deputy's concerns at the LEEF.

Departmental Programmes

6. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment when the successor to the current regional enterprise plan for the west will be launched; and whether additional measures are being considered to support enterprise development in regional and rural areas. [67196/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: The western regional enterprise plan has been a successful endeavour. Regional enterprise in the west has continued to go from strength to strength. However, the plan ended in 2024. I accept that it was extended to 2025 for an independent review. However, we are now in September 2026. When will we see a revised, updated and ambitious western regional enterprise plan?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. Balanced regional development is a Government priority. The Department and its agencies contribute to this agenda in several ways, including through the regional enterprise plans, REPs. The REPs are bottom-up plans, developed and led by regional stakeholders, which focus on collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise environment. Each of the nine REPs was tailored to reflect regional strengths and opportunities and aligned to national enterprise policy priorities such as decarbonisation and digitalisation. The most recent REPs ran from 2022 to the end of 2025, following agreement to extend them by one year to support implementation and to enable consideration of the future of the REPs. The western REP covers the counties of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon and was overseen by a steering committee that included the enterprise agencies, local enterprise offices, LEOs, local authorities, education and training institutions and private industry.

The Department commissioned an independent review of the REP initiative last year. The review included significant engagement with regional stakeholders, analysis of the plans and implementation reports, and consideration of international approaches. It also provided recommendations and options for the future of the REPs. The final progress reports for the latest REPs will be published in the coming weeks and my consideration of these, along with the review's findings, have informed my decision on the future approach to regional enterprise development.

The approach will align regional enterprise priorities more closely with the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSEs, of the regional assemblies. This will strengthen the links between enterprise development, skills, infrastructure and wider regional planning, supporting a more integrated approach to regional enterprise development. A memorandum on the overall approach was submitted for the information of the Government in June of last year.

My officials are currently working with Departments, agencies and authorities to develop a framework statement to give effect to this approach, whereby any future regional enterprise actions will operate as focused implementation programmes aligned with the RSEs.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the report and that the plan will be published in the coming weeks. That is a huge step forward and will allow us to take things to the next level in east Galway, the rest of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. Let us consider the reality of what has been achieved in just the past two years with the Dexcom facility in Athenry. There are more IDA Ireland lands in east Galway from Athenry to Tuam and Loughrea. We want them to be unlocked and brought into use. The one request I have for the Minister of State is that, in advance of publishing the plan, when he reviews the western REP, he please ensure he does not hold back on ambition for what could be achieved in the west over the lifetime of the next plan.

With that plan, what will be proposed in terms of new ideas, AI and climate and environment?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his support and his ambition for the delivery of enterprise and business solutions to the west, especially Galway. Galway has been one of the major drivers of the success of the regional enterprise plans and the county has benefited significantly from closer collaboration across enterprise, education and innovation sectors. One only needs to look at the likes of the PorterShed, the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, and Platform 94 to see that. The ambition is to continue to support the life sciences sector, medical technology and engineering and for closer alignment between agencies and third level institutions.

We are not standing still. We are currently working on getting the framework right, not simply on replacing the old enterprise plan. Project managers are located in each of the regions. They are now *in situ* in each of the local authorities are working with the private sector and State agencies to drive the regional enterprise framework statement and continue to deliver across the nine regions.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome that commitment. It is important to say that we in Galway have an ability to deliver life sciences like no other area of the country. It has become what we are known for. Galway is seen as a medical devices and medical technology hub and we should pursue that by continuing to attract more talent from across the globe to that region.

I do not need to explain this to the Minister of State, but none of that can be achieved without the adequate infrastructure. It would be remiss of me not to raise with the Minister of State that he should reach out to Galway County Council and Galway City Council to ensure they try to improve the traffic situation in Galway so all the employers there see the benefit of Government investment in common sense infrastructure that leads to a better quality of life for the people working in those factories.

Deputy Alan Dillon: That is a fair point. The new Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, along with the Critical Infrastructure Act will certainly unlock key large-scale infrastructure. There is no better example than the Galway ring road and other key

infrastructure that will support the expansion of, not just County Galway, but the west as a whole. That includes the western rail corridor and many other significant strategic projects. Galway has a strong ecosystem, like Mayo, in medical technology and pharmaceuticals and in working with the likes of the enterprise agencies, including IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the LEOs, we can continue to harness new start-ups. There has been a huge uptake in participants in the new frontiers programme and that has been of huge benefit in collaboration with the University of Galway and ATU. We need to continue to support that pipeline in the various accelerated programmes, which are delivering real jobs in Galway.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): Question No. 7 is in the name of Deputy O'Dea, but Deputy Dolan is taking it.

Economic Policy

7. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will report on the implementation of the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity. [66657/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Last week in Galway, a meeting was held by IBEC with all the Oireachtas representatives from right across the political spectrum with the site leads in Galway and some of the CEOs of the organisations. It was a fruitful meeting. Competitiveness was the lead item on the agenda so I would appreciate an update on the implementation of the action plan.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, an item in the programme for Government, was published on 10 September 2025. The action plan reflects a whole-of-government approach to the domestic drivers of competitiveness and focuses on areas that are firmly within national control. Its development was informed by extensive consultation across Departments and with external stakeholders.

Accountability, monitoring and oversight are key to the successful delivery of the actions set out in the action plan. Each of the 85 actions is assigned a specific owner and has a timeline for implementation. Just under half of the actions are due for delivery in 2026. The remaining actions were delivered in 2025 or are scheduled for delivery between 2027 and 2030. The project team is in the process of drafting an update report, which should be published before the end of the year.

Broadly speaking, of the total of 85 actions, 24 actions have been completed, 24 actions are on track for completion within their original timelines and 35 actions are in progress and expected to be delivered as scheduled. The remaining actions are at various stages of development, given differences in the implementation timeline. The most recent updates received demonstrate that the implementation of the plan is progressing as scheduled.

It should also be noted that strong progress has been made in the implementation of the 26 priority actions, with 19 either implemented or on track to be implemented and the remainder being in progress and expected to be delivered on schedule. Key examples include an action to implement the outstanding recommendations from the civil justice review group report, with the general scheme of the civil reform Bill being published in January of this year. The research and development and innovation compass was also published in February of this year as part of an action to encourage the adoption of innovative technologies by the SME sector.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome that the actions are being implemented. I believe the Minister of State said that 24 have been completed to date. That is welcome, but there are 85 actions included in that implementation programme so there is work to be done. I know it is a body of work that will be worth doing.

The companies we met with outlined something to us. From small and medium enterprises right up to the largest of enterprises, when talking about competitiveness, they spoke of a fear about the speed at which Government has brought in changes over the last few years. They said it felt like there was a compounding of costs arising from that. If you speak to those involved in businesses, you hear that revenues remain strong and businesses are performing well but that the margins have gotten tighter. That is where the concern is coming from. Many cost burdens have been placed on businesses over the last few years. Is that going to accelerate or decelerate? Does the Minister of State have a comment on that?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his response. It is a priority within our Department to focus on enterprise and the small business sector. That is why we established the cost of doing business advisory forum. We published that report last month. It had huge input from regulators, representative bodies, businesses and the private sector. It was broadly well received. It looked at the structural costs within businesses. We need a whole-of-government approach to drive the implementation of those recommendations. Some 63 recommendations were made. The Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, are very anxious to drive that agenda and we will. That is alongside the action plan on competitiveness. It is not just about identifying the competitiveness challenges; it is about actively implementing practical measures that will be felt to address them and ensure that Ireland is the best place in the world to do business, to invest and to create jobs.

Deputy Albert Dolan: One other thing that the Minister of State and all of the Ministers in the Department of enterprise will be aware of is that multinationals and Irish companies that are competing on a global scale are also competing internally. They are competing with sites in the US, sites in Asia and other European sites. We have to be conscious of that internal competition that is taking place. Part of the success story of the med tech and life sciences sector in Galway is the fact that we do research and development really well. If possible, I ask that the research and development tax credit be extended to related costs as part of the budget. It is not just the research and development costs that arise in Galway or in the west that count; it is also all of the related costs that go into making that research and development viable and allowing it to happen. I ask the Minister of State to give consideration to enhancing that tax credit in the budget. I would appreciate any comments he can make without giving away the budget.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I take the points the Deputy has raised. In the last budget, we made a decision within our Department and the Minister, Deputy Burke, brought forward an increase in the research and development tax credit, bringing it to 35%. That was broadly welcomed. The industry had campaigned for it. The Minister will bring forward a new life sciences strategy in the coming months. This will focus on our strengths but also try to implement practical measures to continue to make Ireland an attractive place not just for indigenous Irish companies within the life sciences sector but also for continued foreign direct investment, allowing many established companies that have embedded themselves within communities across the country to continue to expand, innovate and create jobs. That is where we are at our best. With the talent we have within our universities and the investment going into skills development, we can continue to support that very important sector.

Enterprise Support Services

8. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the progress made on adjusting the mandate of Enterprise Ireland to better support small indigenous exporters; and the specific changes being considered. [66665/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: I am very supportive of this Government's ambition to grow our indigenous enterprise base. The programme for Government places a very strong emphasis on backing small businesses, scaling indigenous firms and increasing Ireland's export capacity. Will the Minister of State update us as to progress on expanding the mandate of Enterprise Ireland to better support our small businesses?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Boland for her very important question. Supporting the growth and internationalisation of small indigenous exporters is a key priority for my Department. Through Enterprise Ireland and the local enterprise office network, whose mandate includes supporting small businesses to develop and grow, our Department provides a continuum of supports to assist businesses at every stage of their export journey.

Our Department's White Paper on enterprise to 2030 sets out a target of 2,000 new exporters by 2030. To help to achieve this objective, Enterprise Ireland established Get Exporting, a new national export accelerator programme, to build ambition, capability and market-entry readiness among potential first-time exporters. Get Exporting provides expert-led workshops, digital resources and one-to-one guidance to develop an actionable export plan for small indigenous companies with little or no export experience or sales. Get Exporting is delivered in partnership with the local enterprise offices, Údarás na Gaeltachta and InterTradeIreland, ensuring that companies with export ambitions can avail of consistent and clear support to simplify their export journey regardless of their existing agency relationship.

Enterprise Ireland also offers a range of market access grants to assist companies that are starting out on their export journey. These supports include the digital marketing capability grant, the evolve strategic planning grant, the market discovery fund and the strategic marketing review. Enterprise Ireland works with more than 4,500 Irish companies that are exporting or are in the early stages of their exporting journey. Of these EI client companies, some 3,000 are small businesses with fewer than 50 employees. These companies can benefit

from EI's international trade missions, trade event programmes and buyer visits, which are instrumental when growing and scaling internationally.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the target of 2,000 new exporters. The Minister of State might update us on how much of that might be made up of SMEs or even microbusinesses. I have worked as an SME and I supported SMEs in my own business. Many report a gap between the supports provided by the LEOs and Enterprise Ireland. They are often seen as too small for Enterprise Ireland. We really need to make sure we are supporting all of our businesses right across the sector. For example, an agrifood business in Fingal needs to get supports not only from the LEO or Enterprise Ireland but also from Bord Bia. We need to make sure that these supports are joined up and that we are not asking businesses to complete three different sets of application forms or go through three different channels. We need to help them. They do not have extra capacity to deal with the administrative burden. We need to do everything we can to make it easy for them to access supports and new markets.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I concur with those sentiments. From dealing with businesses, I know that the jump when you go from an LEO to Enterprise Ireland can be a challenge because a business may not meet the criteria. We are looking at all of that within the upcoming budget to see what we can do to make sure our agencies do not allow anyone to fall through the cracks as a result of the criteria businesses must meet when moving from the local enterprise office to Enterprise Ireland.

Enterprise Ireland market advisers provide client companies with access to local market expertise, market intelligence and business connections to support export growth and international expansion. Through this network, companies can receive practical advice on market entry strategies and introductions to potential customers, partners and other key stakeholders in overseas markets. In a similar way, our LEOs, which operate in each of the 31 local authority areas, provide advice, mentoring and financial supports to early-stage exporters through initiatives such as the export business advisers network and the market explorer grant.

The export business advisers assist companies in researching, planning and commencing exports while the market explorer grant supports businesses to investigate and enter new international markets by covering up to 50% of the eligible costs, to a maximum of €10,000 over an 18-month period.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister of State. I have two quick questions. Are there any plans to develop tailored, specific supports for certain sectors? I think of sectors like food innovation, new methods of construction technology or even medical devices, as we have many medical device companies in Ireland and it is a growing area. In terms of market diversification, with global uncertainty, it is really important that we support our businesses and in particular our SMEs to diversify. What is the plan for diversifying in Europe and outside of Europe?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The point the Deputy raised about supporting businesses so they are not going to three different agencies for the same type of support, and having that co-ordination, goes right back to the ethos of what the Minister, Deputy Burke, has been trying to do on diversification and simplification. For a long time, we know businesses have felt burdened by

the bureaucracy that can be involved in going after these grant applications but also who they go to for what. There is a concerted effort being driven by the Minister, Deputy Burke, and through our Department to ensure there is simplification, which is not just an Irish objective. The EU Presidency this year gives us a great platform to drive that right across our 27 member states. That is certainly one of our ambitions as well.

Over the past decade, exports by EI-supported indigenous companies have increased by 94%, reaching a record €38.86 billion in 2026, an increase of 8% on the previous year. This demonstrates the significant progress being made in developing a resilient and internationally competitive cohort of indigenous exporters, well-positioned to seize new opportunities and navigate an increasingly complex global trading environment.

Tourist Accommodation

9. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for an update on any engagement he has had with stakeholders, including hospitality and local government sectors on the introduction of an accommodation tax-levy. [66683/26]

Deputy James Geoghegan: I ask the Minister for an update on any engagement he has had with stakeholders, including hospitality and the local government sector, on the introduction of an accommodation tax or levy.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for the question. The introduction of a visitor accommodation levy was proposed in Foundations for the Future, the report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare, published in September 2022 and more recently in Capital City, the report of the Dublin City Taskforce, published in October 2024, specifically for Dublin city centre. In the case of the latter, the proposed levy was presented as part of the funding mechanism to support implementation of the actions in the Dublin City Taskforce report. The programme for Government commits to implementing the Dublin City Taskforce recommendations and to apply the task-force model to other cities, towns and regions in need of revitalisation.

The interdepartmental group on the Dublin City Taskforce report, which is led by the Department of the Taoiseach, published its report and accompanying roadmap in June 2025 and these provide a course of action to implement the task force's recommendations. An oversight board led by the Department of the Taoiseach, with broad representation from across Government, was established to oversee the implementation of the roadmap and associated actions. The board established a financing subgroup to consider and report back on a number of funding mechanisms, including a visitor accommodation levy, to support the implementation of the actions from the Dublin City Taskforce report. I understand that both the oversight board and the financing subgroup have met on a number of occasions throughout 2025 and 2026. To date, a proposal for an accommodation levy has not been submitted to Government for consideration.

Through my regular engagement with industry representatives, the issue of an accommodation tax or levy has arisen periodically. The principal concerns highlighted by stakeholders have centred on its potential impact on visitor numbers and the additional

administrative burden that such a measure could place on accommodation providers. Given the significant contribution of inbound tourism to Ireland's economy supporting employment, regional employment and economic activity across both urban and rural communities, any proposal to introduce an accommodation levy would require careful and balanced consideration. This would need to include a comprehensive assessment of its potential implications for Ireland's tourism competitiveness, visitor demand and the long-term sustainability and resilience of the sector.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister. I agree with his last point. Clearly, it is the case that if we were to ever introduce an accommodation levy, there would have to be a proper examination of the impact on competitiveness. Understandably, on the local authority side and the Dublin side, they are more focused on what the revenue could bring for the city. Perhaps there has not been enough focus on what the impact would be on the sector itself. At any of the engagements I have had with the hotel sector when it hosts its events in Buswells, it is about making clear that any levy would be beneficial to the hotel sector, particularly in Dublin city, which is absolutely booming. There are record levels of investment in the hotel sector. It would have to be beneficial to the visitors who stay in their hotels but generally beneficial to the city.

There are ways to address the administrative issue. In Edinburgh, there was a refund on the percentage of revenue that was being generated that went right back to industry so that the cost was not borne by business. That would be exceptionally important were we to introduce this. The benefits for the city could be quite significant were a tax like this to be introduced.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his response. I will point out one or two things. From my 13 years of experience in private practice as an accountant and from studying tax, one of the key things I always have in my mind is that I would never introduce a tax when a sector is reducing in numbers. That was the case in 2025. If we remember back to before we brought in our tourism strategy, A New Era for Irish Tourism, visitor numbers and visitor spend were going down and, by default, I would never introduce a tax against that backdrop. In 2026, we have seen a significant increase. Numbers are going up well. We saw 626,000 visitors from foreign countries in July alone. It is up 5% on 2025 and about 3% on 2024. Critically, we will be considering this right across Government but I want to be very clear that at this point in time, we have about 38,000 hotels in planning. For the viability of those to work out and for them to be delivered, we have to be careful about what new taxation measures we bring in. We have to get the backdrop right and, hopefully, with the tourism policy we will keep increasing our numbers at the moment.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): All Ministers and Ministers of States should finish within their time because we have to get to as many questions as possible.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister. I take every point he is saying. I am heartened that the strategy the Minister is implementing is working. More visitors are coming to this country. This has to be looked at from a Dublin-centric view, to put it simply. There is a different market in terms of the investment horizon for hotels in Dublin compared to other parts of the country. Obviously, any law made in these Houses that would permit a local

authority to introduce an accommodation levy would have to be mindful of every region in the country and ensure there is balance. We would have to ensure that for any local authority that introduces the levy, it would be in an area where tourism is thriving and would not act as a disincentive for the tourism industry. On the revenue side, and what we could do for Dublin city with that level of investment, the implementation of some of those recommendations of the task force would be quite significant.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his important contribution. I know he was central to the Capital City report and he wants to see investment. I share that vision with him. Local authorities also need to demonstrate responsibility. Many local authorities have revenue raising powers they do not use. Some actually cut funding and shirk their responsibility. The one key thing is I do not want to see a mechanism of taxation being seen as a soft touch to bring forward a funding stream that can be lost. We have to bring forward a body of evidence.

I absolutely share the Deputy's ambition through the report. I am happy that tourism is in a better place so we can consider options like this whereas in 2025, I would have had a very different view on considering them. At least we can move forward and try to achieve the aspirations in the report to have a strong capital city, which is in all our interests. I know the Deputy does so much on driving forward support for the Dublin City Taskforce. Hopefully, we can together ensure it has a viable funding mechanism to grow and breathe life into the recommendations of it.

8 o'clock

Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.

Tourism Industry

11. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he has plans to simplify and streamline the regulatory requirements in the hospitality sector. [66815/26]

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the opportunity to raise the very real challenges facing our hospitality and tourism sector. I acknowledge the Government's decision to reinstate a 9% VAT rate. I have spoken to businesses in Killarney, Cahersiveen, Killorglin, Dingle, Castleisland and elsewhere in Kerry and I have been told very clearly that the return to 9% has made a considerable difference. It is giving businesses some breathing space. It is helping them manage their costs and plan with greater certainty. However, the 9% VAT rate does not exist in isolation. Businesses are facing an ever-spiralling circle of increasing costs. We have seen increases in labour costs, insurance, energy, fuel and other inputs.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): The Deputy can come back in. He should allow the Minister of State to reply.

Deputy Michael Cahill: The latest research shows hospitality electricity costs increased by 61.7% between July 2023 and July 2026 while labour costs increased by 15% and insurance by 26.6%.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputy Cahill for his really important question on the hospitality sector. As set out in A New Era for Irish Tourism: National Tourism Policy Statement, the Government will continue to take all feasible steps to reduce the administrative burden for SMEs and the costs of compliance. This recognises that many small businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector can face productivity challenges arising from administrative complexity and regulatory requirements that may be time-consuming and costly.

In support of this objective, Fáilte Ireland will embed better regulation principles and streamline its working practices by reviewing the administrative requirements placed on businesses, employees and consumers. Fáilte Ireland will also work with other agencies and bodies to advance the simplification agenda across the tourism sector.

Better regulation and simplification are a priority for this Government and one which we have made progress on. Actions taken by our Department include grant simplification, faster approvals, progressing EU regulatory relief, which exempts 80% of small business from the scope of the EU corporate sustainability reporting directive and the expansion of the SME test. We also continue to strongly engage with business on streamlining regulation.

Our national regulatory framework needs to be a focus for the Government as we strive to support competitiveness at a time of international economic uncertainty. The regulatory burden on business was highlighted by the chair of the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council at the annual competitiveness summit on 13 July 2026. The cost of business advisory forum report, published just last month, also highlighted excessive and overly complex reporting and compliance obligations, while analysis from the OECD shows that Ireland scores below average in its ex-post evaluation of primary laws and secondary regulations. My Department will shortly follow up with relevant Departments on progressing implementation of the forum's recommendations.

Deputy Michael Cahill: The situation with energy is particularly concerning. Figures published today show that wholesale energy electricity prices were 76.9% higher in August than there were a year ago, having increased by almost 10% in August alone. Eurostat data also show that Ireland had the highest non-household electricity prices in the EU in the second half of 2025. I am hearing consequences directly from businesses all over Kerry. I know of one business in Killarney that has reduced its headcount from 125 staff to 105 but is still trying to deliver essentially the same level of output. It is stretching its assets, staff and resources as far as it possibly can simply to keep its head above water. This cannot continue indefinitely.

The Irish Hotels Federation has made the point that tourism and hospitality support approximately 270,000 livelihoods with around 70% of those jobs outside Dublin. These are not just businesses. They are employers, they are part of our towns and villages, and they are a fundamental part of the regional economy. Having delivered the 9% VAT rate, what further steps can the Government take to tackle the wider cost of doing business, particularly energy, labour and insurance costs in order that the benefit of the 9% VAT reduction is not simply swallowed up by increases elsewhere?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The action plan for competitiveness and productivity published last September includes a range of measures to ensure a more effective regulatory system,

supporting sustainable economic growth while controlling overall cost levels. This includes a red tape challenge across government to reduce the regulatory and administrative burden for all SMEs, including those in the hospitality sector.

In July, the Taoiseach together with the Minister, Deputy Burke, wrote to all Ministers requesting that each Department, and relevant agencies under their remit, identify actions which can reduce the regulatory and administrative burdens placed on SMEs, which as the Deputy knows, impact their costs.

As part of their considerations, Ministers were asked to take account of recommendations from the cost of business advisory forum report and other feedback from their own stakeholder engagement. This exercise is currently under way and progress will be overseen through the Cabinet committee on the economy, trade and competitiveness.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the response and I reiterate the appreciation I am hearing from businesses all over Kerry for the restoration of the 9% VAT rate, which has made a considerable difference. However, we need to make sure that our hospitality businesses can continue to employ people, invest, remain competitive and provide the tourism product on which communities such as those across County Kerry depend. The concern is that we are now caught in an ever-spiralling circle of the cost of doing business. VAT comes down but energy goes up. Labour costs increase. The cost of insurance increases. Input costs increase and businesses are forced to try to absorb these increases.

As I mentioned already, one business I have spoken to reduced its workforce from 125 to 105 while still trying to maintain the same level of output. It is stretching every available resource to keep the business viable. The energy figures published today should concern all of us. Wholesale energy electricity prices were 76.9% higher in August than a year ago.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Certainly people in Kerry will not be lost while the Deputy is here to keep the flag flying for them. The Minister, Deputy Burke, has done incredible work on this. As I already said, he and the Taoiseach wrote to all Departments and Government agencies to ensure that they eliminate all unnecessary administrative burdens that hinder enterprise growth. One of the key highlights in that was the grant simplification. The newly established small business unit has reviewed all LEO grant schemes, including a reduction in application questions, down 47% for the business expansion grants, 30% for the green for business grants and 28% for the feasibility grant with further reductions targeted.

Another key piece that the Minister, Deputy Burke, has followed up on is the once-only principle. Work is under way to merge application processes across different grants ensuring businesses only need to provide their data once, which comes back to Deputy Boland's point that we do not have duplication across various grant schemes. Enterprise Ireland has been enabled with achieving faster approvals and a 24-hour turnaround. I can give the Deputy further information to follow up on that.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Job Losses

13. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide details of the communication he has had to date with the new owners of a company (details supplied) which employs 1,100 workers in New Ross, County Wexford; if he will give assurances to all employees that their jobs are secure; the plans the new owners have for the company; and if he will undertake to visit New Ross and meet with the workers there. [66772/26]

Deputy George Lawlor: I ask the Minister to provide details of the communication he has had to date, if any, with the new owners of Integer Holdings Corporation, which employs 1,100 workers in New Ross, County Wexford; if he can give assurance to all employees that their jobs are secure; the plans the new owners have for the company and if he will undertake to visit New Ross and meet the workers there.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. He will be aware that in August 2026, KKR announced its intention to acquire Integer Holdings, with the transaction expected to complete later this year. Integer's facility in New Ross is a significant employer in the south east and is an important part of Ireland's internationally recognised medical technologies sector. The company has a long-established presence in the region and continues to make a valuable contribution to the local economy and employment base.

IDA Ireland has confirmed to my Department that it maintains regular and ongoing engagement with Integer, both in Ireland and internationally. Integer New Ross is a valued IDA Ireland client and the agency's medical technologies team continues to engage closely with site leadership in New Ross regarding its ongoing operations, business transformation activities and future development opportunities.

Neither I nor the Minister, Deputy Burke, nor officials in my Department have had direct engagement with KKR on the proposed acquisition. However, IDA Ireland is closely monitoring developments and will continue its proactive engagement with the company as the transaction progresses. As is standard practice, IDA Ireland will remain available to work with both the existing company leadership and any new owners to support investment, innovation, competitiveness and future growth opportunities in Ireland.

As the Deputy will appreciate, questions regarding employment levels, commercial strategy and the future plans of the new owners are ultimately matters for the company itself. It would not be appropriate for me to speculate on operational decisions that have yet to be made or comment on matters that remain the responsibility of the company and its shareholders.

The Government remains firmly committed to supporting enterprise and employment in Wexford and all other regions of the country. Through the IDA's strategy, we have a strong focus on securing further investment and supporting existing client companies across the regions, including the south east.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State, but I am somewhat disappointed in that response. As a rural-based public representative, Minister and Deputy himself, he can appreciate the impact a factory employing 1,100 workers in a town like New Ross can have not just on the town itself, but on the entire region.

There is a fear the company that has proposed to buy Integer Holdings Corporation for some €4.9 billion is not in the medical device field. In fact, it is a global investment firm. I believe a pre-emptive strike by the Government to show how seriously it is invested in Integer and its workers is paramount. We cannot say that it is not up to us to make a move in this scenario or area. There are 1,100 workers in New Ross and we need assurances that their employment is secure. We also need to know what this new global investment company's plans are, given it is not a medical device company.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy again for raising this important matter. I appreciate what a valuable employer Integer is with regard to New Ross and the wider region. However, as I said earlier, let us not over speculate the situation. The IDA stands ready to engage with KKR. It is very important we continue our engagement with the senior leadership team at Integer as that acquisition continues in process. We will closely monitor developments and continue to ensure we have proactive engagement with the company as the transaction progresses. I very much hear the Deputy's concerns but, as is standard practice, the IDA is available and flexible and any new owners will be supported on investment and innovation, competitiveness and future growth opportunities.

Deputy George Lawlor: I appreciate the Minister of State's concern and his comment that the Government and IDA stand ready. However, it would not do any harm, given the scale of this company, if the Government was to take the first step and meet with the new ownership to find out what its plans are and how much it is going to invest in New Ross, if anything. What are its plans for this huge employer, which is probably one of the biggest, if not the biggest, in the entire county of Wexford? This is beyond the pale when it comes to the context of investment in a county like Wexford and a town like New Ross. This is a hugely important employer and we really need to be the ones making the approaches to this global investment fund as new owners to ask, "Are your intentions to remain within the medical device sphere? Are your intentions to invest and continue investing in Integer in New Ross?" We do not want to wait until such a time as it is making the decisions unilaterally. We need to be there to show it our intent and seriousness.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. I am certainly open, as I am sure the Minister is, to visiting New Ross in the future to engage with existing and future management as part of this operation. Of course, we will continue to engage with our key State agencies, including IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. We will ensure County Wexford continues to be supported. FDI investment has increased by over 15% in the past five years, which shows the level of interest and intent within that region. We will continue to market the IDA business and technology park in Drinagh, as well as Wexford business park in Whitemills. I know Wexford County Council is also related to the advanced planning on the Enniscorthy business and technology park.

We will stand ready to engage at any stage and will ensure IDA Ireland also monitors this transaction as closely as possible.

Enterprise Support Services

14. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will report on the number of jobs currently supported by IDA Ireland in each of the midland counties. [66656/26]

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will the Minister to address the lack of IDA-supported jobs in County Laois? There are a lot of jobs in the midlands and over 300,000 IDA-supported jobs throughout Ireland, but only about 150 of those are based in the county. Given the size of the county and its central location, this is totally unsatisfactory and I need the IDA to step up to the plate on this matter.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his question.

Balanced regional development is a key element of Government's enterprise policy, as set out in the programme for Government and the White Paper on Enterprise, and is a key focus of the work of my Department and our enterprise development agencies. In this regard, the IDA prioritises balanced regional development, recognising the importance of attracting investment to regional areas and supporting employment opportunities across the country. Over the period of its previous strategy between 2021 and 2024, IDA Ireland supported the delivery of 973 investments and the creation of 76,790 jobs, with 54% of these investments secured in regional locations. The midlands region, comprising counties Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath, exceeded its investment target during this period, securing 31 investments against a target of 25.

Under the current strategy, Adapt Intelligently: A Strategy for Sustainable Growth and Innovation 2025-2029, the IDA aims for 550 of 1,000 new investments to be in regional areas, including 40 for the midlands. In 2025, the first year of the strategy, IDA Ireland secured a record 323 investments, a 38% increase on 2024. These investments are expected to create more than 15,300 jobs in the coming years. IDA's strong regional performance has continued in 2026, with 190 investments approved in the first six months of the year, supporting more than 10,400 job approvals. Regional locations accounted for 52% of investments during this period, in line with our objective. Employment figures for IDA client companies are compiled on an annual basis. As of 2025, the midlands region was home to 51 IDA client companies for 7,501 people. Of those, 156 roles were in Laois, 1,572 were in Longford, 1,299 were in Offaly and 4,474 were in Westmeath.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Minister for that. He actually proved the case I had to make when he pointed out that one county in the midlands has almost 4,500 IDA-supported jobs, while a county of a similar or larger size has 150. It is by far the lowest figure for any county.

This is IDA policy, and if it is not policy, there is somebody not doing their job. It has decided Laois is okay for some reason. It probably even thinks, "Sure, Portlaoise is only an hour from Dublin. Let them commute every day to work in Dublin." That is not a sustainable solution. More people are coming to build houses in County Laois and we have had a massive increase in population in recent decades, not matched by IDA site visits. I know it has purchased a significant site in Portlaoise, and will spend the next ten years telling us it will

develop it and bring in the services, and it will put in lights and roads. It will make another five years out of that, but it is jobs we want.

Deputy Peter Burke: As I pointed out, we have an additional land bank in Portlaoise. I assure the Deputy it is not a policy decision, and it has been challenging to get new capital investment. We are seeing around the country that existing sites are sweating their assets. There is a lot of investment in research, development and innovation on current sites, but the new bricks and mortar sites have been very challenging, particularly in the current geopolitical backdrop. However, I will raise the Deputy's concern regarding County Laois with the IDA, which I hear.

Through Enterprise Ireland, about 2,100 people supported in employment in Laois. Through our LEOs, we are also at a very strong level of 837 jobs supported in 2025. Our enterprise agencies are working hard on the indigenous sector there, albeit the IDA is challenged in getting new capital investment. However, with a new land bank and the working infrastructure attached to it, this will hopefully improve and enhance the value proposition of the area.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I acknowledge the work of Enterprise Ireland and the local employment office in bringing and supporting jobs in native Irish companies but that is happening in every county. I am specifically here to deal with the IDA.

I will ask the Minister to ensure that he contacts the chief executive of the IDA about this, to make sure that he is aware of this conversation. State agencies might not be following what is happening in the Dáil this evening. I do not think there is any other solution but him coming to meet us directly in County Laois. We do not want to hear about developing a site. That will go on forever. We want to hear about real proposals to bring jobs into County Laois. We are as good a county as any other. We are a well-educated county. We have the best of roads and the best of trains to go wherever you want. The location is good. People are moving here, but they are having to commute back every morning to go to work.

Deputy Peter Burke: I hear the strong case that Deputy Fleming is making for County Laois and the road and rail infrastructure it has for connectivity. I have no issue in contacting the IDA again. I know the Deputy has raised this on numerous occasions previously, regarding a meeting with him about County Laois. I assure the Deputy that we will do all we can to seek as many opportunities as possible for Laois in the future. I have to be cautious in saying that I see new capital investments in bricks and mortar as a challenge right now in the environment that we work in. Notwithstanding that, the county has a huge amount to offer, and critically, it has significant assets in its population. We will work with the enterprise agencies, particularly IDA Ireland, to try to drive more visits and more job opportunities, and to ensure that the new land bank, which is the new capital acquisition in Portlaoise, gets a strong value proposition on the register of some exciting new company.

Questions Nos. 15 and 16 taken with Written Answers.

Business Supports

19. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps being taken to support Irish enterprises facing rising global cost pressures, supply chain volatility and geopolitical uncertainty; and the specific supports being developed for SMEs to maintain competitiveness in the current economic climate. [66780/26]

Deputy George Lawlor: I ask the Minister about the steps being taken to support Irish enterprises facing rising global cost pressures, supply chain volatility and geopolitical uncertainty, and the specific supports being developed for SMEs to maintain competitiveness in the current economic climate.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Ireland remains one of the most competitive economies, ranking seventh in the world competitiveness rankings. However, significant challenges remain. The Government is committed to ensuring that Ireland's strengths are not taken for granted. In recent years, a range of measures have been introduced to support competitiveness and help businesses, particularly our SMEs, to manage rising costs and adapt to changing economic conditions. The key element of this work has been the establishment of the cost of doing business advisory forum and the publication of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity. The forum's report, published in August, contains 63 recommendations aimed at addressing business costs and pressures across areas such as energy, insurance, regulation, planning, financial services and compliance obligations. Recommendations include measures to improve competition in the banking sector, reduce the reporting burden for SMEs and explore options for lower energy costs for business.

The action plan on competitiveness and productivity, published in September 2025, adopts a whole-of-government approach to addressing domestic competitiveness challenges. The plan contains 85 actions, many of which are focused on SME creation and growth. Key measures include the establishment of startup Ireland as a co-ordinated body for the startup ecosystem, the creation of an SME scaling fund to address financial gaps, the Government-wide red tape challenge to reduce regulatory burden, enabling innovation to support SME digitalisation and the adoption of technologies such as AI.

The Government is also focused on strengthening Ireland's resilience in an increasingly uncertain global trading environment. As a small open economy, Ireland is particularly exposed to disruptions in international supply chains and global trade. In response, the Government's action plan on market diversification is supporting businesses to expand in new markets, deepening engagement with existing markets and reducing dependence on any single region. Along with this, the Government is promoting the constant application of the SME test across all Departments to ensure the impact of proposed legislation on SMEs is fully considered.

Deputy George Lawlor: The key to this issue is our indigenous Irish industry. We have seen, particularly in regard to the geopolitical tensions that have been built up through the actions of President Trump in particular, be it through war or through his tariffs that have threatened the whole global economy, that we need to ensure our indigenous industry grows and develops. We need a national competitive package for SMEs. We need targeted energy supports. We also need a temporary working capital scheme for firms hit by supply chain delays or price spikes. We need accelerated capital allowances also, particularly for

digitalisation, automation and productivity-enhancing investments. We need to ensure that our indigenous entities and businesses and SMEs are the ones that are our first port of call for supports.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I could not agree more. Our small businesses and SMEs are the backbone of the Irish economy. They account for 99% of all job creation in our communities the length and breadth of the country. We recognise that many businesses are feeling significant cost pressures. That is precisely why this Government, the Minister, Deputy Burke, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and I have been proactive in bringing forward the cost of doing business advisory forum, establishing the small business unit within our Department and publishing the action plan on competitiveness and productivity early last year. We have done this in order to drive action and implementation in a structured roadmap, while ensuring that businesses are part of that process. This is about helping Irish businesses to remain resilient and capable of creating and sustaining quality employment. That is really important for Irish indigenous companies. We cannot take that for granted. As a result, we have a strong economy and we have good employment, but we need to continue in that vein.

Deputy George Lawlor: One thing that we need to focus on is regional resilience measures. For towns like Wexford, New Ross and Rosslare in areas like mine, regional enterprise hubs are vital because they are particularly focused on supply chain and digital adoption. We need localised upskilling programmes, particularly for a county like Wexford in the area of logistics, with the enhancement and development of Rosslare Europort as a port of strategic national importance. We need support for clusters too. In a county like Wexford, these clusters include the agri-tech, med-tech and green industries, which will only grow in future. We also need to ensure that our SMEs have strengthened access to finance and have that ability to grow sustainably. We need to expand the growth and sustainability loan scheme. That would really benefit our SMEs.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with many of the points that the Deputy has raised. Scaling funds are really important. That is why we will bring forward measures to support SMEs and businesses to access finance and capital. Enterprise Ireland is now ramping up the startup Ireland programme. We have invested significantly in recent times in the new frontiers programme, especially in the likes of the south east. We have funded Enterprise Ireland to support local startups and the accelerate programme, which is managed on behalf of Enterprise Ireland in the south east. It is important that we can continue to support new startups and enterprise hubs as indigenous Irish companies are critically important not just because they support foreign direct investment companies, but also because many of them are established outside our main cities and our main hubs. We want to continue to support them, ensure that their export focus can create jobs, and not just in Ireland, and ensure they can expand in the future.

Business Supports

17. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment further to previous parliamentary questions the initiatives he or his Department or associated State

agencies have taken to encourage prospective new owners to establish a business at the former (details supplied). [66907/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I ask the Minister to outline, further to previous parliamentary questions, the initiatives that he and his Department have taken to encourage prospective new owners to establish a business at the former site of the Bose, subsequently Newbaze, factory in Carrickmacross.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Enterprise Ireland supported the owners of the factory in Carrickmacross over a number of years as they sought to establish themselves as an infant formula and nutritional powders manufacturer. In March 2025, the company informed Enterprise Ireland that the business was no longer viable in Ireland due to inflationary pressures and market conditions.

As a result, the owners of the factory took the decision to sell the plant in Carrickmacross and appointed an Irish agent to support the sale process. They are actively seeking interest from potential purchasers of the facility and discussions have taken place with a number of interested parties. This process remains ongoing, and Enterprise Ireland continues to support the company by facilitating introductions to potential buyers, where appropriate. The Department keeps in regular contact with Enterprise Ireland on this important site, as I do myself, as Deputy Carthy knows.

Enterprise Ireland has had further discussions with both the owners in China and the company representatives at the facility in September and is continuing to liaise closely with the company to support efforts to secure a buyer for the site as a priority. The company has also confirmed that its team is available to facilitate site visits from public representatives if required. My Department remains committed to driving balanced regional development, including the north east. Enterprise Ireland supported 84 companies in Monaghan and 66 companies in Cavan in 2025. These companies are employing over 14,000 people. The north-east regional enterprise plan is focused on delivering a range of collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise environment in the region. More locally, however, this is an issue that is incredibly important to the Deputy, me and everybody else in the local area. We will continue try our very best to find buyers that will bring new business and new employment to the Carrickmacross area.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister of State. I am a bit disconcerted. There seems to be a takeover by the wee county, with plenty of Louth heads in the Gallery. They are very welcome.

I am surprised the Minister of State needed the script at all. She should nearly know that off by heart at this stage because that is the exact same answer that has been provided to me in respect of this building for several years. Of course, the only distinction is that in 2025 we finally heard what had been suspected for quite some time, namely, that the Newbaze factory, despite all the fanfare around opening up and providing substantial employment, was not actually going to happen at all. The Minister of State mentioned that there have been prospective new owners. It would be useful if this House could be told how many have been actively engaged with and how many are currently actively engaged with taking over what was

the heart of the south Monaghan economy for a long period, which was the Bose factory. It has tragically been left idle for far too long. I do not believe that we have seen the necessary type of urgency that would actually ensure that we find a new owner for that site.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy. As he knows, we have sat down together and spoken about this and with Enterprise Ireland. It is owned by a private company. Yes, Enterprise Ireland did support and give financial support to the current owners, but it never got up and running, as he knows, in terms of what the original vision had been from the people who own it currently. I consistently keep in close contact with Enterprise Ireland and regularly seek updates. It is a private facility that will be sold privately, but with the support of Enterprise Ireland trying to promote it as a facility with some fantastic facilities in the actual building itself. Carrickmacross, like many other towns, has a talented workforce in the local area. There is a growing population in south Monaghan. Any employment that we can create that will help County Monaghan and east Cavan is important. Newbaze has the potential to do that. Anything I can do to ensure that we can drive that forward and find new prospective buyers for it, I will certainly do that, and the Deputy has my word on it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is all very well and good, but we need to actually see the evidence of it. It is an absolute scandal. If a factory of this prominence was in the centre of Dublin, we would not have the senior Minister refusing to engage on it at all, despite my repeated requests for him to take a hands-on approach. We would not have the same answer regurgitated by Enterprise Ireland time and again, talking about something perhaps happening. It is not good enough for Ministers to say that is Enterprise Ireland's remit. If this factory secures a new owner, the Minister of State would be the first down with the video to commend herself on delivering that. What I am asking for, and what I have been asking for repeatedly, is engagement across all elected representatives from County Monaghan with the Department and to prioritise this issue. The Bose factory site reared more families in my town and surrounding areas than we could even begin to count. The economic impact of its closure has been profound and real. I do not see, and have not seen, the type of urgency that I believe would happen elsewhere if a central economic pillar of a local community was gone that is warranted. I am asking the Minister of State again to prioritise this issue at a Government level and engage with all elected representatives to secure an alternative owner for this site.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Deputy equally knows my very good colleague, Councillor PJ O'Hanlon in Carrickmacross. As we call him lovingly-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is PJ going to buy it?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: He is lovingly known as Mr. Carrickmacross. However, as the Deputy well knows, Councillor O'Hanlon, along with the Deputy and his brother, who is an energetic councillor on the ground there too, are doing everything they possibly can to try. It has to be said that we are doing everything we possibly can. It is not an Enterprise Ireland building or an Enterprise Ireland facility. It is there as a Government agency to try to find the buyer to do that. I assure the Deputy that it is one of our regular conversations. I invite agency staff in on regular opportunities to meet, discuss and look for progress, as well as liaising and

working with the county manager in Monaghan County Council. We are looking as far and wide-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: "We", or Enterprise Ireland?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: -----and throwing the net for as far and wide as we possibly can to try and ensure this. Ultimately, I want to get new buyers into it. I want to get new employment to the area. Carrickmacross is a growing town-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: It has been idle for ten years

Deputy Niamh Smyth: ----- with growing population and there is a talented and skilled workforce there. I want to see that there are new buyers in it. I assure the Deputy of that. I am sure he would be happy to come and cut the ribbon with me.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): That concludes Question Time. Before I move on, I just want to say a special welcome to Deputy Butterly's guests, the Louth women's and ladies GAA team, staff and management. I congratulate them on the semi-final. Have I got that right?

Deputy Paula Butterly: They did not quite get through to the final. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon's Mayo beat them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Well done to them on getting there.

Deputy Paula Butterly: It was a wonderful achievement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As a Monaghan man, I object to that.

Question No. 18 taken with Written Answers.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): 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 John Connolly - To discuss the proposed expansion of the TFI bike rental scheme in Galway city.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the funding of CCTV schemes for Limerick city.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss lack of resources and staffing issues at Cork University Hospital.

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.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss public transport services in the east Cork area.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the omission of a building in Dún Laoghaire from interim remediation for apartments and duplexes.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan - To discuss the failure of Breastcheck to achieve mammogram targets.

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness and David Cullinane - To discuss transport and connectivity in Waterford.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss provision of reading classes and schools for children with dyslexia and additional literacy needs.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the implications for rail connectivity in the north west if planned greenway developments go ahead.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss school places for children with additional needs.

Deputy Paul Lawless - To discuss infrastructure and wastewater issues in County Mayo.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for EV charging infrastructure to be located in developments and the need for action where this is provided for in planning but not adhered to.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss the future of the clean export guarantee, CEG, for microgeneration.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need for reforms of the school meal programme to address the for-profit model and to pilot a not-for-profit community model.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the imminent closure of Unit 1, Sarsfield Court and the vacant units on the site.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the development of intergenerational community hubs alongside childcare and services for older people as part of the expansion of public childcare infrastructure.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul Lawless, Barry Ward, Darren O'Rourke, Rory Hearne, Roderic O'Gorman have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Paul Lawless: I wish to speak on behalf of the residents and businesses in Newport who have endured the most horrendous situation, where untreated wastewater is being pumped into Clew Bay on a daily basis, yet despite this, the businesses of Newport continue to be billed for charges in relation to wastewater from Uisce Éireann. Many constituents have asked me how can the State demand payment for a service when the infrastructure underpinning that service is so incredibly inadequate. In fact, it is non-existent.

If a farmer or any other member of society had such blatant disregard and pumped pollution over a fence, they would be fined and they would go to jail for it. This matter has gone on far too long. It is going on for decades, and that is what is happening. Newport is blessed with one of the most beautiful coastlines in the country. It is a beautiful town overlooking Clew Bay, yet there is a bitter irony for the residents who pay wastewater charges. They cannot enjoy the bay or all of the leisure and economic activities that could come with living in such a beautiful area. It is essentially like a publican charging a customer for an empty pint glass. That is what Uisce Éireann is doing here. It is charging businesses in Newport for wastewater services that are simply not delivered.

I call on the Minister of State to examine the situation and to introduce a temporary reduction or rebate scheme in relation to wastewater charges to residents and the business community until Uisce Éireann delivers on what is far overdue – a wastewater system that is capable of dealing with the demands of the town.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter in relation to Newport and wider infrastructure and wastewater in County Mayo. At the outset, I advise that Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local level. Neither the Minister, Deputy Browne, nor I have operational function in local issues in Mayo to which the Deputy referred.

Both our water and wastewater systems require substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring the system up to the quality and standards required of a modern service to provide for population growth and build resilience in the face of climate change. I acknowledge as a member of Government that we have to sustain the investment we are continuing to put into Uisce Éireann in this respect. It should also be noted that since the establishment of Uisce Éireann, significant improvements have been made in the delivery of water services with the help of contractors and subcontractors. Hundreds of water and wastewater treatment plants have been upgraded along with thousands of kilometres of new or rehabilitated water mains installed. The national leakage rate has been reduced and the overall quality of drinking water remains very high in this country.

Uisce Éireann has steadily grown its capital investment in our water infrastructure, from €300 million in 2014 to €1.4 billion as part of budget 2026. This investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area, making a significant contribution to addressing Ireland's needs.

That being said, I have made inquiries in relation to the items raised by the Deputy. It is worth noting that significant progress is being made on projects across County Mayo with investment of €114.8 million in water and wastewater infrastructure planned from 2025 to 2029. Works are continuing at Claremorris Wastewater Treatment Plant, where an €18 million upgrade commenced late last year. An upgrade of Ballyhaunis Wastewater Treatment Plant will provide capacity increase from 4,000 population equivalent, PE, to 6,600 PE. The total estimated cost of that project is €15 million and Uisce Éireann plans to commence its construction next year. Two of the largest drinking water infrastructure projects currently being advanced are the Ballina and Lough Talt water supply upgrade and the €29 million upgrade of the Lough Mask Water Treatment Plant.

Specifically on Newport, the treatment plant is one of the key wastewater projects in the Uisce Éireann programme. A programme of survey and data collection works are currently under way, which will provide essential information to support technical assessments, environmental evaluations and the preparation of a maritime area consent, MAC, application. Securing this consent is a significant project milestone and must be achieved before a planning application for the proposed wastewater treatment plant can be submitted.

My Fine Gael colleagues in Mayo have engaged extensively with me in relation to the delays in the maritime usage licence, MUL, process. The difficulties have been ironed out in that respect, as the Deputy will be aware, and these have been largely resolved at MARA level. It is the intention that this will be progressed to MAC by the end of this year.

Deputy Paul Lawless: My question is a very simple one. It is not whether or not Uisce Éireann has the authority to issue bills but whether it is fair and proportionate. Does the Government believe it is fair to issue bills for wastewater services to a community that cannot avail of those services and which has been so badly treated in relation to the wastewater treatment plant? This is a community that has been given the runaround for far too long. I have worked on this tirelessly since getting elected in meeting MARA, Uisce Éireann and politicians, and pushing this. The responses have been unacceptable for far too long with each agency passing the buck to another and each Government politician passing the buck to someone else. That is what has happened here. I very much welcome that there has been movement finally but at the moment there are businesses being charged for wastewater facilities. It is akin to a waste management company collecting your bin, dumping it in the neighbour's place next door and charging you for it. That is what is happening. Is it fair? Will the Minister of State examine the possibility of a suspension for the businesses affected in Newport?

Deputy John Cummins: It is unacceptable that any wastewater treatment plant in the country is having a negative impact on the environment. That is why we are investing significant sums of money, as I outlined, in County Mayo and right across the country in order to try to address those matters. The Deputy said he has engaged on these items. I can tell him what I have done as Minister of State. I have had a number of engagements with MARA to try to iron out the issues in relation to the MUL system where there were significant backlogs, including the Newport treatment plant MUL applications with MARA. We have ensured that Uisce Éireann is able to progress its applications in terms of MUL and MAC in a much speedier

fashion. That is a really positive thing not just for the Newport wastewater treatment plant but also for wastewater treatment plants right across the country.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Will the Minister of State answer the question?

Deputy John Cummins: It is the intention of Uisce Éireann to ensure it has the MAC application in by the end of quarter 4. It is also important to note that it is simultaneously working on progressing the design in relation to the treatment plant. That is what we want to see as a Government. We want to ensure we have projects that are progressing, not only so that when one stage ends another starts. We want to have simultaneous work ongoing across all of our agencies-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: The question is on wastewater bills.

Deputy John Cummins: ----because you have to do more than one thing at a time. That is what is happening here with Uisce Éireann and its ability to be able to progress the design in relation to this project while awaiting and submitting the documentation in relation to the MAC application.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Will the Minister of State answer the question?

Departmental Schemes

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to deal with this issue. He will be aware that his Department put in place a number of years ago an interim remediation scheme for apartment buildings built during a certain period to deal particularly with fire safety issues. This is right and it is important to put it in place. Most importantly it deals with fire issues. There is an urgency that comes with that, which there might not be with poor upkeep or other structural issues. The idea behind the scheme is that residents have some certainty that they can live in a place that is safe, but we know there are several apartment blocks around the country that suffer from problems with the way the fire systems were constructed when they were built and that have to be repaired to ensure the safety of residents. The scheme is good and I welcome it.

The issue I specifically want to address with the Minister of State is that of The Crofton apartments in Dún Laoghaire. It was once an office block and was built as office accommodation but the McGrath Group transformed it into apartments a number of years ago. There are 25 apartments there, duplex and single storey. It is a very nice building, the people who live in it are very nice and they bought their apartments in good faith. Most importantly, when they bought their apartments they were treated as new buys. They paid all the tax and VAT associated with new builds and new apartments.

They were recorded as new dwellings on the property price register, even though the building was a converted office block. Therefore, assuming they are newbuilds, which is how they have been treated, they should qualify for the interim remediation scheme. So the Minister of State's Department thought as well because in 2024, when the owners applied for funding under the

interim scheme to change the situation they had with their fire systems, they were granted access to the scheme, yet within two years the Department had written back changing its mind, saying, "Actually, no, we are cancelling it". It appears the reason for that is that it was not a newly constructed building, even though the Government took its tax take and took its money from the owners but then, on a different day, told them they were not part of the scheme because the building is not a newbuild, or at least so it appears.

The reality is that in this case, the Government is trying to have its cake and eat it. On the one hand, it takes the tax from them as newbuilds and describes them as newbuilds; on the other hand, when it comes to actually being part of a scheme the Government has rightly put in place to protect exactly this type of building and exactly this type of resident, it tells them they do not qualify. It has to be one or the other. Either the Government gives back the VAT and the tax that these residents paid when they bought their apartments or it admits them into the scheme. It cannot be both. The reality is that the Minister of State's Department initially said they could be in the scheme. It gave them the succour, the confidence and the reassurance that they would be part of the scheme and could access it but now they find they are being excluded from it. It does not make sense. Either they are a newbuild or they are not. If they are not, the Government should give the owners back their money because they paid an awful lot in VAT and tax when they bought their newbuild apartments a number of years ago.

The reality is that there is no clarity in the Minister of State's Department in how it is approaching this particular building, The Crofton apartments, in Dún Laoghaire. It is leaving in the lurch the residents, who through no fault of their own find themselves in a situation where they will have to pay for a remediation that in 2024 was assessed at €1.1 million for 25 apartments. It is a serious amount of money for each apartment holder but it will be more now because over two years since that assessment was made, you can be absolutely sure that the cost of that remediation has gone up. What really puzzles me is that nothing has changed between the time in May 2024 when the Minister of State's Department said they were part of the scheme, they would get the grant and they would get the support of the Department to help them fix the fire regulation and the fire safety systems in their building and March 2026, when suddenly a U-turn was done by the Department of housing through the Housing Agency, which administers the scheme, and they were told sorry but they were out in the cold, the Department was not going to help them and they would have to sort themselves out. Which is it? Can we give these people a little bit of reassurance that they will be looked after by the State when they have paid all their taxes?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this matter and for speaking to me about this item earlier. I know he has also engaged with the Minister, Deputy Browne, on this matter and the concerns it raises for residents and the owner management company of The Crofton apartments, Dún Laoghaire.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government decision of 18 January 2023 approved the development of supports for the remediation of fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose-built apartments, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013. Drafting of the apartment and duplex defects remediation scheme Bill is well advanced. I expect that the Bill will be published before the end of this year and that the statutory scheme will be in place shortly thereafter. It is envisaged that 100% of eligible remediation costs will be funded.

The interim remediation scheme for the funding of emergency fire safety defect works in apartments and duplexes constructed between 1991 and 2013 opened to applications from owners' management companies in December 2023. The scheme is administered by the Housing Agency on a nationwide basis. The scheme provides for the full funding of interim measures in order to provide an acceptable level of fire safety in buildings, pending completion of the full remedial works. Full remedial works, which will include all necessary fire safety measures, as well as those related to water ingress and structural damage, will be funded under the statutory scheme. The Housing Agency has committed its knowledge and resources to helping to design and now operate this scheme. Its experience of dealing with, for example, the pyrite remediation scheme and the enhanced defective concrete blocks scheme has been particularly useful in this regard. The scheme is shaped following a significant period of consultation with homeowner representatives. Their insights have been an essential element that has allowed my Department, the Housing Agency and local authority fire services to put together this scheme.

Appropriate pathfinder projects within the scheme were identified in April 2024. These pathfinder projects have allowed the mapping of the application and remediation process into simple steps, to identify pinch points and their solutions and to provide consistency across submissions and related workings. Three of the pathfinder projects are situated in the Dublin area, involving three local authorities, and one in Kildare. These projects vary in size and complexity and provide valuable insights for both this interim and the forthcoming statutory scheme.

As of the end of August 2026, 293 applications to the scheme have been validated, having met the required eligibility criteria. These applications represent over 25,000 residential units, with circa 75% in the Dublin region. Of the 293 validated applications, 151 to date have provided documentary evidence confirming the key eligibility requirements.

During the validation process, the Housing Agency established that The Crofton building was originally constructed as an office and was subsequently converted to residential use. This raised a question as to whether it falls within the scope of the scheme, which is intended for purpose-built apartment and duplex developments.

All applications received by the Housing Agency remain subject to verification and validation and their status can change as ongoing data cleansing and due diligence are completed. While this application initially progressed through the process, that did not represent a final determination of eligibility. Eligibility is determined with reference to the scope of the scheme as approved by the Government.

I recognise, however, that developments which were lawfully converted to residential use raise broader policy and equity considerations in the context of apartment defects remediation and the safety and well-being of residents. I have asked my Department officials to examine such developments in the context of their current work in devising this scheme.

Deputy Barry Ward: I really appreciate what the Minister of State said at the end of the answer. I appreciate his positive engagement on this. As he says, we had a conversation about this earlier today. I appreciate his undertaking to raise this with the officials because there is a gap, in fairness, in this situation. I understand what he has said about the validation process but he has to remember that these people, through their OMC, wrote in, applied for the scheme

and were told yes. It took nearly two years before the Housing Agency turned around and said, "Actually, no". There is a terrible unfairness for them there whereby they find themselves initially satisfied that they will be covered and that the State has their back in terms of this remediation and then being told the rug has essentially been pulled from under their feet. Maybe that is a bureaucratic situation that is beyond help but the reality is that the finalisation of this scheme is not beyond help. The legislation has not passed yet. There is an opportunity for the Minister of State and his officials in respect of this type of building, which, as he notes himself in the response, was legitimately, properly and validly transformed from an office block into residential apartments, and with the bona fides of the people who bought those apartments. They paid the full whack of tax as if they were buying a newbuild apartment, and the units are recorded as such on the residential property price register. Whatever you think about the scheme, they must be included in it. If it is the case that the scheme, as currently drafted and operating on an interim basis, does not cover them, let us change it.

I would be very grateful if the Minister of State would assure me that this will be considered for change in the scheme. The owners have written to the Minister's office and sent him statements and briefs about what has happened here but they have not heard back from him yet. I would also be grateful if the Minister of State could commit that they will get an answer and get some succour, some reassurance, from his Department and from the Housing Agency that they will not be left in the lurch, that they will not fall between stools and that, as taxpayers who bought apartments in good faith, they will be supported by the State, as any other owner of a newbuild apartment would have been.

Deputy John Cummins: As Deputy Ward will appreciate, I cannot give a blanket commitment on the floor of the Dáil this evening, but I can give a commitment to engaging with officials in the broader context of the policy issues that have arisen as a result of the Deputy's raising this item with both the Minister, Deputy Browne, and me and in putting this Topical Issue before the Dáil this evening. I thank him for doing that.

It is important to note the significant scale of the remediation scheme, which will be underpinned by legislation, and which is expected to be in the order of between €1.5 billion and €2.5 billion. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, set up the working group to examine this in 2022. When it reported, it estimated that between 50% and 80% of apartments and duplexes that were constructed between 1991 and 2013 may be affected by one or more of the following: fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects.

9 o'clock

It is a significant scheme. Those pathfinder projects have been in place. We are trying to shape a scheme that will operate and will be as smooth as possible. However, as the Deputy will appreciate this is a complex area. Not every owner-management company is equal and there are challenges in that space. On foot of the Deputy raising this matter I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Browne, in the context of the broader policy considerations that it raises. Obviously, the intention is for purpose-built apartments and duplex developments. I do not know how many other potential sites could come into the scope that are similar to the Crofton building in Dún Laoghaire, but we will examine that.

School Meals Programme

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the senior Minister for being here at this hour to take this. This issue is both topical and important. The school meals programme is one of the most important investments the State makes in children. At €300 million per year, it touches nearly every primary school in the State. Given that the Government's own review revealed that it is falling short, we cannot simply tinker around the edges. The research published yesterday was clear and indicative. The Department of Health's nutritionist found that just 7% of meals met all five basic nutrition standards, and that is not a high bar. Half of all meals contain no fruit or vegetable. Despite the Minister announcing an outright ban on high-fat, high-salt and high-sugar foods in April 2025, 15% of meals still contain them and they are the meals children order and eat most.

We know that 100,000 hot meals per day are going uneaten and the top reason is meal dissatisfaction. Some 87% of teachers say that is why children do not finish their food. The Ipsos survey revealed that just 21% of children eat all of their meal. On waste, one 390-pupil school in Galway estimates 10 tonnes of food waste per year, which is the weight of a small school bus. Across the State, this model could generate 100 million single-use packs annually. Why is this happening? I strongly contend that a large part of the reason is the design of the system and the for-profit model that dominates the scheme. Some 99% of contracts go to the for-profit providers. The largest supplier has more than 600 schools. The next two largest suppliers have in excess of 400 schools. We saw what happened last year when two major suppliers withdrew from 79 mostly small rural schools without notice. The pursuit of profit means quality is squeezed, choice is unlimited but nutritionally hollow, and service is not guaranteed. Children can order chicken goujons every single day of the week or plain pasta every day. This is not a school meals programme. It is a race to the bottom. However, there is a better way, and we do not have to look far to find it. In Duhallow, County Cork, for example, a community-owned not-for-profit food service is delivering 3,000 meals per day to 30 schools. They cook from scratch using fresh, local ingredients, 75% of their ingredients are Irish and 40% come from within the surrounding region. They deliver hot food within 26 minutes. Their waste rate is 1.2% and not 19%. Closer to home for me in Drogheda is St. John's and St. Paul's junior and senior primary schools, which use fresh, local food from local suppliers to feed their approximately 1,000 students daily, employing 31 people. They have been doing it since the 1980s with their breakfast club. This is the power of the community-led model.

We appreciate the hot school meals programme. It is a significant intervention. We support the principle of universality. I say to the Minister that there is a massive opportunity to do much more with it. Both Sinn Féin and I are making the case that we would take this opportunity to pilot those community-led approaches.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta O'Rourke as ucht an t-ábhar sin a ardú. As he has said, the school meals programme is important. That sometimes gets lost from people who maybe think they do not need it, but it is needed in all of the schools. It was rolled out quickly in the context of moving from a pilot programme in 2019 to 3,200 schools in September 2025. I know Deputy O'Rourke looked at some of the more negative responses, but the survey also found that 85% of children liked their

lunch, 81% of parents reported their child avails of the scheme and 63% of teachers and principals believe it had a generally positive aspect. Since we introduced the ban on foods high in salt, fat or sugar we have 82% of meals being served. The Deputy is right that we need to get that to 100%.

Some 3,200 primary schools with 555,000 children are eligible for hot school meals, and the budget for 2026 is €286 million. All schools, as the independent contracting authorities, are responsible for choosing their school meal supplier on the open market in a fair and transparent manner in accordance with public procurement rules. The Department of Education and Youth schools procurement unit provides the guidance to schools for all procurement, including this programme. These rules clearly define the successful tenders' responsibilities and obligations, including adherence to nutritional standards. The primary relationship is between the school and the supplier. I put on record my thanks to school communities and school leadership across the country who are investing enormous time in this. The school meals programme is supported by approximately 300 suppliers, the majority of whom serve between one and three large schools. Providers range from the large national companies, to which Deputy O'Rourke has referred, to local restaurants, food outlets, meals-on-wheels services, social enterprises and the community organisations he has mentioned.

One of the recommendations in the nutrition review report is that food catering systems will be reviewed to see which system meets the nutrition standards we want in a consistent manner. My preferred approach is to have as many local suppliers involved as possible. For instance, there are 11 meals-on-wheels organisations supplying 40 schools. The Deputy's colleague, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, has really pioneered that particular model and the Duhallow model is an example of best practice. The mix of suppliers is helping us to deliver hot school meals to more than 3,200 primary schools every day. That gives an indication of the scale of the operation required five days per week. I absolutely believe that community organisations can play an important part in that, and they already do. The two independent studies the Deputy referred to have been commissioned and published. I acknowledge the work of the Oireachtas joint committee on education for its work earlier in the year, and our colleagues in the Departments of Health and education for their assistance. The nutritional review has found a wide variety of healthy meals on offer, and the accompanying Ipsos survey has found 85% of children like their lunch, 81% of parents report that their children avail of the scheme and 63% of teachers believe it has a generally positive impact.

There are absolutely improvements required. That is where we are now focused on the increased provision of vegetables, fruits, salad and wholegrain foods; improving menu consistency; providing age-appropriate portion sizes that will help to address the waste issue; and strengthening compliance systems. The review has recommended a number of areas, and we are progressing to the implementation phase in partnership with school communities, the Department of Health - we will continue to have our dietitian on board - and food producers around the country.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I appreciate the Minister's comments on his own preference for multiple providers. It is important to expand upon that. I referenced Duhallow. The Minister is aware the education committee has spent a lot of time on this. We have previously discussed this ourselves during Oral Questions. I have talked about Duhallow and St. John's and St. Paul's in Drogheda. This is not a niche experiment. It is a proven, viable, replicable model.

In Finland, 850,000 meals a day are served through a community-led model. In Copenhagen, almost 90% of school food is organic, and its food schools show positive impacts on well-being from dietary diversity. It is the same in Milan and in France. There is really good research from the Trinity Business School and Food Policy Ireland making clear that the community model of school food provision can be socially, economically, and environmentally beneficial and resilient and that it supports local economies. In his follow-up contribution will the Minister expand on that point in terms of whether there is an opportunity now to look at meals on wheels, the community-led sector and the not-for-profit sector, what is working well, and how we can maybe grow that sector or share of the market, for want of a better term?

I have a request for the Minister. I spoke to the principal at St. Paul's in Drogheda. There is an open invite to him to go to see their system operating. As I said, it is absolutely wonderful. It has been funded by the Department since the 1980s. It is incredible what the people are doing there, and they would love to welcome him to Drogheda.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I have an invitation to go up there and I will go. It is important. School meals have been provided in a lot of communities for a long time and we have just ramped up the system. It is also important to note that the debate is often presented as a choice between commercial and not-for-profit community providers. Community involvement is possible within the existing programme and we can work with not-for-profit community organisations, charities, social enterprises and Meals on Wheels.

I would also include community-based for-profit companies as well. They are providing a very important service. Flexibility is the strength of the current programme. Schools can choose from a variety of delivery arrangements that best suit the particular school circumstances, including contracting or commercial suppliers, not-for-profits and social enterprises. Local catering providers are preparing meals on site in those schools where the facilities exist. My Department is saying to schools that they can procure their school meal from any registered food business provider as long as they meet the standards set out in the standard procurement documentation.

The findings of the nutrition review align very closely with those in the independent Ipsos Behaviour and Attitudes evaluation. And as I said, the report indicates a generally very high standard of food provision and a high level of satisfaction, but there is work to do. Through engagement with school communities, suppliers, and our colleagues in the Department of Health, we will achieve progress on that matter in terms of nutritional review, nutritional standards, proteins, vegetables, fruit, and also the provision of different models.

Duhallow is a super model. There are other models similar to it. There is no point in us having the views of 88,000 parents, 7,000 children and school communities all over the country unless we do something about them. I again acknowledge the role of the Oireachtas education committee.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am disappointed the Minister could not be here to take the matter but I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, is. I want to raise the case of a child with additional needs in my constituency who, almost a month into the school year when other

children are in school - almost four weeks now - still does not have an appropriate school place. I also want to raise the issue of promised schools still not delivered completely, notably Finglas Parochial National School, where children are still at home waiting to get their school places and issues increasingly faced that parents have raised with me where children with additional needs are on reduced school hours, which is not an adequate school place.

I raised the case of Roman Slator with the Minister of State with responsibility for special education two weeks ago. As I said, most children are into their fourth week of school, but five-year-old Roman from Finglas still has no school place. Roman has been diagnosed with autism and a global developmental delay. Roman and his mother have been scandalously failed by this Government and by the Department of Education and Youth. Jade, his mother, has had to work night and day alongside her actual employment to try and get Roman a school place, contacting school after school and the NCSE, but to no avail. The lack of a school place for Roman is taking a massive and extremely worrying toll on her and her family. Jade said to me:

I feel it's very important to highlight the effect this has on my life, my family, my mental health. I spend my days constantly emailing, constantly calling, following up, chasing schools, contacting principals, local TDs, having to go the legal route when I am a single mother with two children, one who is autistic and has no school place and another who has just started secondary school.

She is upset all the time, she is stretched thin. This mother is being pushed to the edge, she is actually at breaking point as a result of the failure of the State to provide an appropriate school place for her child. She has had to reduce her work and she is now forced to decide each week which bill will not be paid as she tries to mind her child at home. Her employer has been extremely understanding so far but time is running out for her. Jade asked me to ask the Minister if she has any idea of the effect this has on parents of children with additional needs. She contacted one local school which said it could offer a place in a mainstream class if it was guaranteed resources from the NCSE. Then the NCSE said that it would not provide any guarantee of resources and would review potential resources when the school provides a place for Roman and that it would assess if resources are needed. This is utterly scandalous. As Jade says:

This is a total lack of respect for my Roman, his diagnosis, his education requirements, my family and me. The department and the NCSE won't give the funding for an SNA, so clearly the most vulnerable children, children with disabilities, are being left at home rather than paying for an SNA.

She describes it as more being like special educational needs lettown at this point. She is extremely concerned about Roman's regression, his lack of supports in terms of education and also the lack of social aspect of a school placement. It really is scandalous that this child is left in this situation. I am extremely worried about his mother and the impact on her and the family. This raises the issue of parents having to reduce work hours and the stress that is on them to make up for the State's failure to provide an appropriate education and support to children with additional needs, which it is responsible for.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy. I hear his real concern for his constituent's child and the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. I have

a response here, some of which deals with the issue he raised and some of which is a more general response on what the Government is doing. If he will bear with me, I will give him both.

The Government is committed to the provision of additional special places for children with special educational needs. Budget 2026 has already provided funding for over 400 new special classes and at least 400 new special school places for the 2026-27 school year. It was intended that this would create almost 3,000 new special educational placements for December 2026. In total, there will be over 4,300 special classes operating in mainstream schools next year, an increase of 130% since 2020. In County Dublin, 845 special classes are now in operation, providing capacity for over 5,000 students, and this includes 140 new special classes for the 2026-2027 year.

In addition, 20 new special schools have been established in recent years. Special school capacity has also been expanded across a number of special schools nationwide. A total of 44 of these special schools are in County Dublin, educating approximately 2,700 students with the most complex of special educational needs. These schools are supported by the Department and the NCSE.

As Deputy Hearne is aware, an earlier notification deadline was introduced this year to support forward planning and to earlier equip - and I presume better equip - the NCSE with local information as to what students would be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary specialist places, seeking specialist placement or entering the education system for the first time. This information is critical when examining where provision needs to be placed to meet demand.

The NCSE began sanctioning new special classes earlier this year, which is several months earlier than last year. A total of 587 have been sanctioned for the school year 2026-2027. The earlier sanctioning of new classes provides clarity for parents and allows schools more time for the planning and establishment of new special classes. In regard to the specific matter raised by Deputy Hearne on the modular project for Finglas Parochial National School, the modular building is installed on site. Internal fitting-out works are nearing completion and external works, including soft play works, are taking place in parallel. The project will be completed soon. The assigned project managers are keeping the school authority updated regularly as the project progresses to near completion. This project required planning permission, which was granted on 25 March this year. The Department and its project manager have been working to ensure the project gets delivered as quickly as possible.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I reiterate that it is important that the project is delivered for Finglas Parochial National School as soon as possible. I really do think the parents deserve a very clear date as to when that will happen. My understanding is that it was committed to be delivered in September and we are getting very close to the end of September. It really should be in place.

I want to go back to the specific case I raised, which I also raised with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan. I am really disappointed with the Minister of State's response, which is absolutely inadequate. There is a child who does not have a school place. This is a child with autism who, as I very clearly outlined, has a need which has been identified. His mother is at breaking point. As the Minister of State has set out, the NCSE and the Department are turning

to the 2027-2028 school year but children do not have a place in this current school year. This is absolutely unacceptable. What this mother is being put through is wrong.

It is deeply disappointing that the Minister of State with responsibility is not here and has not provided a satisfactory reply. I really do want a commitment from the Minister of State with responsibility that Roman will be in school within a week and will have a school place. I do not feel it is acceptable that any child is going into October without a school place or any prospect of a school place. It is absolutely wrong and I really think the Minister should accept this situation as being an absolutely dire emergency and act accordingly. I ask the Minister of State to bring this back and raise the issue. I do want answers because it is not clear with regard to children who are on reduced school hours and what they need to ensure they and their parents have adequate supports.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Deputy Hearne. Again, I do hear what he is saying and I will bring his very strong concerns to the Minister of State. I will see that they are on his desk by tomorrow and we will see where we go from there.

Deputy Hearne mentioned Finglas Parochial National School. To be fair, given that planning permission was granted on 26 March 2026, the fact that the Department and the project manager have been doing everything to complete all of the works, and that they will be delivered as quickly as possible, is reasonable progress to say the least. I cannot give Deputy Hearne a date as I do not have one but it does state the project will be completed soon. "Soon" has a meaning and I hope this is the case.

In regard to the overall perspective, by the end of 2026-2027 there will be more than 15,200 special education teachers, with more than 26,000 special needs assistants, in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. This will mean that we will have over 46,000 teachers and SNAs working in our education system, committed to supporting and nurturing students with special educational needs, enabling them to achieve their best outcomes and reach their full potential. For children with more complex needs, special classes or special school places are provided and this is in keeping with the policy of an inclusive education which promotes that children will be supported to receive an education in the most inclusive setting possible. The NCSE remains available to provide advice and support to all families seeking specialist placement and will continue to examine where provision is required in the 2026-2027 school year. As I said at the beginning, I will ensure this request is on the Minister of State's desk tomorrow.

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I wish to raise an issue which I know is causing concern for the thousands of households across Ireland that have invested in solar panels and have embraced the transition to clean energy. Recent media reports have suggested the clean export guarantee, the payment introduced by the Green Party and received by households for excess renewable energy exported back to the grid, could be weakened, reduced or ultimately phased out entirely in the years ahead.

The clean export guarantee recognises a really simple principle, which is that if households export clean electricity to the grid that electricity has a value and households should be paid

fairly for it. Over the past number of years families right across the country have made significant investments in rooftop solar. Many did so because they wanted to reduce their carbon footprint. Many more did so because they wanted to reduce their electricity bills and play an active role in Ireland's transition to clean energy. These households have responded to Government policy. They have responded to national climate objectives. They invested what was often thousands of their own money, often alongside SEAI supports, on the understanding there would be a fair and stable framework for microgeneration. Government policy went even further in encouraging those households. When in government the Green Party encouraged another initiative, the tax exemption for microgeneration of electricity, which is currently valued at €400 per year.

Any change to the rules after people have made this investment would send entirely the wrong signal. It would undermine people's confidence in microgeneration going forward. At a time when we need significantly greater development of rooftop solar, community energy generation and distributed renewable generation, the last thing we should be doing is causing uncertainty. Every unit of electricity exported by a household solar installation reduces demand for fossil fuel generation, contributes to energy security and supports our climate targets.

I believe the existence of the feed-in tariff acts as a real incentive to people looking to install solar. It gives greater security to people making an upfront payment on panels that investment they are making in clean energy is the right one. The electricity exported from a family home does not suddenly become worthless because it is generated on a rooftop panel rather than in a large-scale facility. Suppliers benefit from this electricity and the wider system benefits from it, and consumers who invest in generation infrastructure should receive an equitable return.

I would like confirmation from the Minister of State this evening that there are no plans to wind down the clean export guarantee payment in the coming months and years and that the Government will retain its commitment to it going forward.

To provide greater clarity and reassurance to households that undertake microgeneration, can the Minister of State confirm that the tax exemption for the microgeneration of electricity, currently valued at €400 per year, will be maintained as part of budget 2027?

Deputy Marian Harkin: The microgeneration support scheme, MSS, provides supports to both domestic and non-domestic applicants, in the form of grants for solar PV installations, up to a maximum of €1,800 in 2026 for household installations. The domestic MSS forms part of a wider residential retrofit programme that, in line with eligibility criteria, supports energy-efficiency upgrades and the installation of renewable energy technologies in existing housing stock.

Since its pilot launch in 2018, the domestic solar PV scheme has gone from strength to strength, with over 123,000 homes being supported. Budget 2026 allocated over €67 million to this year's scheme. So far this year, over 21,000 homes have been supported. This high level of demand indicates that the scheme is working well and that not only have citizens recognised the significant benefits of investing in solar PV, but that the solar PV industry and supply chain have adapted to the demands of our citizens. The scheme is kept under review to ensure it is operating effectively and making the best use of Exchequer funding.

The electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. Operating within this overall EU framework, responsibility for the regulation of the electricity and gas markets, including with regard to the clean export guarantee, CEG, is solely a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which was assigned responsibility for the regulation of the Irish electricity and gas markets following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999. In line with long-standing policy on deregulating price setting, the CRU ended its regulation of retail prices in the electricity market in 2011, which was 15 years ago, and in the gas market in 2014, which was 12 years ago. Price-setting by electricity suppliers, including remuneration for microgeneration, is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, published a decision on an interim enabling framework for the CEG on 1 December 2021. This decision outlined the interim arrangements for the implementation of the CEG, including eligibility criteria and remuneration methodology, in line with the requirements of Article 21(2)(d) of the recast renewable energy directive, RED II.

The CRU subsequently published a consultation paper in September 2023 with proposals to update the interim CEG arrangements. In June 2024, the CRU published its decision paper entitled Clean Export Guarantee: Enduring Arrangements to Remunerate Customers for Microgeneration Exports. That paper sets out changes to the interim arrangements that were in place for microgeneration. That decision includes improvements in the level of service for customers with microgeneration, such as: more regular payments to customers for the electricity they export to the grid; clearer information from suppliers on the details of the payments that customers receive for the electricity they export to the grid; and that suppliers will have clear information on their websites about their export tariffs.

In relation to the development of tariffs under the interim CEG arrangements, the CRU set out in its decision paper of June 2024 that it is of the view that the competitive approach, whereby suppliers set their own competitive export tariffs, has functioned well and will continue.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I am not sure if the response from the Department is going to give a huge amount of reassurance. Ireland's energy transition depends on public participation and the success of microgeneration has shown that people are willing to invest their own resources to support climate action when the policy framework is clear and fair. Many people have pointed out their concerns at the pace at which their feed-in tariff is diminishing at exactly the time that the retail cost of electricity is actually skyrocketing. This raises questions of fairness and undermines people's confidence in the system. I think they may look at the ever-widening gap between the feed-in tariff paid for exports and the unit cost of electricity for households, and, again, that raises those questions of fairness.

What we need now is a discussion about strengthening the value proposition for household renewables and not diminishing it. I urge the Government to examine options like a guaranteed minimum clean export guarantee rate; greater transparency and standardisation of export tariffs; and additional protections against any unfair reductions in export payments.

Households generating renewable electricity are making a positive contribution to the grid every day. They should not be treated as passive consumers. They are energy producers, climate actors and partners in the transition to cleaner energy. The Government should be making clear that their contribution will continue to be recognised and rewarded through a fair, transparent and durable clean export guarantee framework and through the continuation of the tax exemption for microgeneration of electricity.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As I set out, the electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime, wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. Responsibility for the regulation of the electricity and gas markets, including with regard to the clean export guarantee, is solely a matter for the CRU.

In relation to the development of tariffs under the CEG arrangements, the CRU is of the view that the competitive approach, whereby suppliers set their own competitive export tariffs, has functioned well and will continue.

Separately, while the microgeneration support scheme does provide for the sale of surplus electricity back to the grid, domestic solar PV systems are generally sized for self-consumption. The main benefit for householders and businesses is in offsetting the need to buy some or even most of their required electricity from a retailer, or, in other words, from the grid. There is no limit to the area of solar panels that can be installed on the rooftops of homes anywhere in the country. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant is capped at €1,800 for up to 4 kWp of solar panels, but householders can install more if they wish to do so.

A typical solar PV installation can meet a large proportion of a home's electricity usage, and the balance can be used through EV charging, diverting it to hot water heating or battery storage. The aim is to maximise the use of solar generation within the home. Using the electricity generated in homes is the most efficient way to get the best return on their investment. The electricity used within the home has a much greater financial value to the homeowner. Every unit of electricity from a PV array used in the home has a value of somewhere between 30 cent and 35 cent, but every unit of electricity exported back to the grid has a value of between 18 cent and 20 cent per unit. Every unit exported, therefore, is worth approximately 12 cent less than if it had been used within the home.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Táimid críochnaithe le hobair an lae uilig. Caithfidh mé rud éigin beag a rá. It was great to see Louth GAA and Louth LGFA in the Oireachtas. I could not let this occasion go without thanking them for the great results across the board that we have had. I thank Sean McLean and his team for delivering what is going to be a top-class stadium. I just hope that Gavin Devlin and his team can go ahead and we can learn from Mayo, get some of that magic and just go a little bit further next time. Go raibh maith agaibh. An Lú abú.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.39 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 23 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.39 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 23 September 2026.